Chapter 15
Gendered Technology–Based Organizations:
A View of the Glass Cliff through the Window of the Glass Ceiling

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ABSTRACT

The "glass cliff" is a term coined by Professor Michelle Ryan and Professor Alex Haslam in 2004. Their research demonstrates that once women (or other minority groups) break through the glass ceiling and take on positions of leadership, they often have different experiences from their male counterparts. Specifically, women are more likely to occupy positions that can be described as precarious and thus have a higher risk of failure, either because they are in organizational units that are in crisis, or because they are not given the resources and support needed to thrive. The success of the glass cliff, as a phenomenon, rests on three factors. First, it relies heavily on the quality and quantity of data available, as well as the reliability of the data. Second, it relies heavily on the acceptance, utilization, and application of its existence, for a lack of acknowledgment, acceptance, utilization, and application of any phenomenon, concept, and theory will result in extinction. Third, this phenomenon, in reality, is quite taboo in a male dominated society, regardless of culture. Nevertheless, the glass cliff, as a phenomenon, is quite neoteric, and is typically not spoken of, nor referred to when men communicate, in the same way that men do not usually refer to the glass ceiling, or the glass escalator. The purpose of this chapter is to delve into and explore the concept of the glass cliff faced by women in high-tech corporations, and how the glass cliff affects their career advancement and identity growth through empirical data. The chapter then provides three recommendations on resolving the glass cliff phenomenon, and concludes with whether the glass cliff as a phenomenon is convertible to become a theory.

INTRODUCTION

Although twenty-five years have passed since *The Wall Street Journal* coined the phrase the *glass ceiling* in its 1986 special report on the corporate woman (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hymowitz & Schellard, 1986), it is clear that this metaphor continues to be of great relevance, regardless of how much it has continuously been researched by academicians and used by practitioners. The *glass ceiling* refers to situations where the advancement of a qualified person within the hierarchy of an organization is stopped at a lower level, because of some form of discrimination, most commonly sexism or racism. However, since the term was coined, *glass ceiling* has also come to describe the impeded advancement of the deaf, gays and lesbians, blind, disabled, and aged. Based on the glass ceiling, the under-representation of women in positions of leadership persists, especially in the upper echelons of organizations, and specifically in the high-tech industry. In addition, other research has uncovered a corresponding phenomenon of the *glass escalator*, whereby men are accelerated through the organizational ranks, especially in sectors that are traditionally dominated by women (Williams, 1992). However, the phenomenon of the *glass escalator* only benefits men by accelerating them through the organizational ranks in sectors that are traditionally dominated by women. The phenomenon of the *glass ceiling* only hinders women by setting them up for failure through fulfilling negative gendered stereotypes in sectors that are traditionally dominated by men.

However, despite the continued existence of these subtle barriers, the number of women occupying management positions is greater than it has ever been (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2004; Women and Equality Unit, 2004). In this regard, the past fifteen or so years have seen greater gains in women's representation in leadership roles. For example, recent data from the United States indicates that women represent just over fifty percent of those in management, professional and related occupations (US Department of Labor, 2005). Similarly, in Britain, the number of women executives has doubled in this period (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2002) while, in the past five years, the number of female FTSE 100 directors has almost doubled (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2005). Now that women are increasingly occupying leadership roles, this introduces a new dilemma, the *glass cliff*.

THE GLASS CLIFF

The *glass cliff* is a term coined by Professor Michelle Ryan and Professor Alex Haslam of Exeter University, United Kingdom, in 2004. Their research demonstrates that once women (or other minority groups) break through the glass ceiling and take on positions of leadership, they often have different experiences from their male counterparts. Specifically, women are more likely to occupy positions that can be described as precarious and thus have a higher risk of failure, either because they are in organizational units that are in crisis, or because they are not given the resources and support needed for success. Extending the metaphor of the glass ceiling, the researchers evoked the metaphor of the *glass cliff* to capture the subtlety of the phenomenon and the feeling of teetering on the edge[1]. In other words, the glass cliff is founded on the phenomenon of women being preferentially placed in leadership roles that are associated with an increased risk of negative consequences (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

According to research by Ryan and Haslam (2007), once women manage to break through the glass ceiling, they continue to encounter a range of problems and barriers. For example, Stroh, Brett, and Reilly (1996) found that more women left management positions than men (26% and 14%, respectively). This was not because women had more family commitments, as is often argued, but

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