

Crushing glass cliffs

Trying to break the self-defeatist attitude isn't all that easy for women

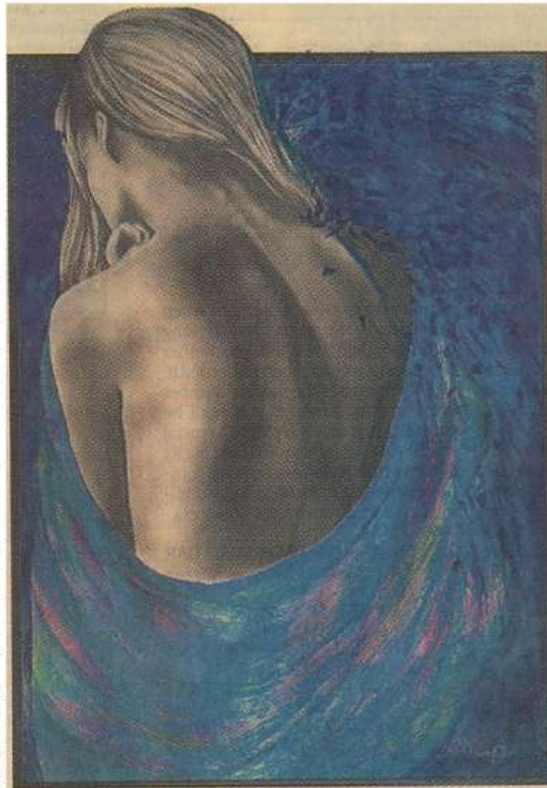
THERE CAN be a brand new challenge that awaits the achievement-oriented women employees in modern day corporations that they must guard themselves against. I call the same the 'glass cliff' phenomenon. Although not a totally new concept, many women employees are probably not very familiar with this. Glass cliff refers to those leadership positions and roles that women employees may get preferentially appointed to that potentially may have higher chances of failure!

Fair enough that there are no clearly designated or identifiable roles or positions that can be regarded or branded as defeating in nature. However, it is not uncommon to come across roles and positions that have over time become 'jinxed' in organisations for a wide variety of reasons. In some cases, this jinxed role may involve being a director on the board of the company or being a senior manager in charge of treasury operations amid volatile foreign exchange market conditions. It could also mean the role of being a project or programme manager for a project that has had a consistently troubled delivery record.

Interestingly enough, there is enough evidence within the management literature which shows that women do get appointed to manage leadership roles under circumstances vastly different than men. Often enough, the different circumstances also happen to be difficult circumstances! What then is the recourse? Definitely not shying away from it or accept failure. Gifted otherwise with talent and tenacity, the willingness to put in what it takes and deliver results, relentlessly and patiently pursuing organisational goals, women employees need to focus on the following five factors.

These are methods to benefit anyone irrespective of gender, but particularly helpful to women employees who are born to succeed but are hurdled by the glass cliff. **Tips to Succeed:** The following factors are by no means exhaustive, but illustrate some key self-defeating factors that need to be paid attention to protect oneself from falling off the cliff — the glass cliff, that is.

Shed the 'learned helplessness' attitude: Psychologist Martin Seligman had researched this phenomenon that could afflict anyone surrounded by huge challenges. The apt example to help understand this phenomenon is what we see when we visit a circus. The huge and mighty elephant is tied to a pole with a thin rope. Common sense tells us that the elephant can free itself almost effortlessly but does not do so. The reason is 'learned helplessness'. As a calf, the little elephant often tried to break free, when it got tied for the first time, but it could not. Over time, it gives up trying. This can also hap-



pen to us as human beings. Early difficulties and occasional failures or 'taught concepts' of what a woman could or could not do may become a driver for suffering from the 'learned helplessness' as a grown-up. The solution here is to break the barriers.

Break the 'skilled incompetence' barrier: This is a powerful concept by celebrated Harvard professor Chris Argyris. This phenomenon explains that under certain circumstances, some of our strengths also become our weaknesses. For example, our interpersonal relations skills might come in the way of confronting a conflict. We may stop asking data or

avoid questioning the disconnects for fear of hurting relationships at work. And this may prove to be the recipe for disaster for an otherwise successful manager. The solution here is to reduce the defensive routines.

Shun 'active non-action': A powerful concept from Prof Sumantra Ghoshal, this represents an unconscious choice not to act decisively despite a strong desire to succeed. This can happen when one experiences what seems like an unbearable constraint or overwhelming demand. If it was not for this active non-action, one would have explored unexplored choices and managed the challenging situation well. The solution here is to strengthen the need for action.

TALENT TRACK

Drop the Alpha Female behaviour: Alpha females are those who are very bright, intelligent, hard working and result-oriented, but thanks to the success they enjoy while climbing the corporate ladder, they have become top dogs — they want to have the final say in everything! If they are not calling the shots, they feel uncomfortable. If this is not addressed, they tend to annoy others at work, refuse to recognise and reward others, become hyper-critical of even small goof-ups and in the bargain, end up making enemies in the organisation. The solution here is to reflect on what success has done to defeat relationships at work and enhance the positive behaviour of being an Alpha female.

Conquer the summit syndrome: Summit Syndrome refers to stopping or failing to perceive challenges as one reaches the senior levels in an organisation. As one climbed up the hierarchy, and there are still rungs left in the ladder, challenges are perceived. But in the absence of further steps to climb as you are already at the summit, you suddenly lose sight of the challenges and as a consequence the performance begins to flag and so does enthusiasm. The solution here is to hone one's perceptive abilities to look around and seek challenges and muster the energy to face up to these challenges. In a nutshell, as glass ceilings and walls become a rarity, glass cliffs may begin to manifest itself.

Resolute and determined avoidance of the five pitfalls discussed above will help the talented women employees to continue their winning spree.

(Concluded)
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