

# The Promotion Commonotion

Why are women more likely to be offered the top jobs when a company is in a mess? More importantly, why do we take them? Alexandra Carlton investigates

By the time you read this, NSW voters will be around eight months away from electing – or rejecting – their first female premier, Kristina Keneally. Unless something's changed dramatically since the time of writing, she's in big trouble. The polls indicate that people don't mind her too much – but they loathe her government. She was elevated to her current position in late 2009, at a time when the NSW ALP had bumbled its way through years of disasters, centred around everything from hospitals to public transport. Keneally's record since taking office isn't beyond reproach – a scrapped Sydney metro line and a slew of cabinet resignations spring to mind – but the bulk of her woes were inherited from the ranks of ineffective male premiers that came before her.

Which begs more than a few questions: why was a woman put in charge of the *Titanic* that is the NSW ALP? Was she best qualified? Was she meant to be a shining symbol of change? Or was she an expendable scapegoat that could be sacrificed as the ailing ship sinks beneath the waves at the next election?

Any or all of those explanations may be at play, but the result is the same. Keneally, according to proponents of a controversial theory, is a perfect example of a woman perched precariously atop a "glass cliff". The theory goes that businesses or political parties are more likely to put a woman at the top when everything else is going south. It says that even when women do storm up the corporate ladder and smash through the glass ceiling, they're likely to find themselves imperilled on a ledge that's metaphorically transparent and therefore unrecognised by others. At first, the theory sounds like a beat-up – after all, plenty of male leaders have contested and lost unwinnable elections and plenty of women have steered healthy businesses to further triumph. But dig deeper and the evidence checks out.

A 2005 study of the top 100 companies in the UK conducted by University of Exeter researchers Professor Michelle Ryan and Professor Alexander Haslam revealed that women were overwhelmingly more likely to be appointed to board positions during times of financial downturn, while men

were far more likely to take the wheel when things were going well. Follow-up studies show the landscapes of political parties are littered with glass cliffs. Ryan and Haslam also studied the UK general election in 2005 and found women typically contested seats that were harder to win than the ones given to their male counterparts. Kristina Keneally – and, for that matter Joan Kirner in Victoria and Carmen Lawrence in Western Australia, who were both elevated to heads of their parties after scandals and went on to lose already unwinnable state elections – would have to know the feeling. As would the chief financial officer of the now-bankrupt Lehman Brothers, 44-year-old Erin Callan, who was handed the top job in December 2007 just as the global economy was starting to go seriously sour. Within three months she watched as other banks on Wall Street began collapsing. Lehman Brothers followed, and by June 2008 she'd quit. Her next role will be explaining herself in front of federal investigators.

So why are women served up for these positions and why do they take them? The answers are, of course, complex. In some cases, according to Ryan, the reasons are quite positive. Other times, they're more discouraging. If a position is particularly risky, she says, "Men sort of say, 'thank you, no, I'm not going to take that', and leave women to fill the void." And in response, empirical research says women may well rush to plug the hole – as they're conscious that the opportunity mightn't reappear once things are rosier and the men are putting their hands up again.

This was the case for Jennifer Dalitz, 37. In 2005, she was consulting for a major financial services organisation when she was offered a role heading up their corporate superannuation division. "It was a part of the organisation that had grown over the years to \$9 billion in assets, but without any clear leadership or strategic management from the male manager I took over from. Much of the system and product development that was required had been put on the backburner, there were huge backlogs of work in almost every area and the regulators had plenty to say about this," she says. "Customers had given the company an →



"If a position is particularly risky, men sort of say 'thank you, no, I'm not going to take that', and leave women to fill the void"



ultimatum – fix it or they u... I w... the role of a lifetime in terms of its s... B t w b p... from hell in terms of what it entailed. Employees were... faster than they could be rehired and morale had fallen through the floor. “I was given,” remembers Dalitz, “a hospital pass.”

Despite the shambles she was handed, Dalitz managed to turn the business around and put it back on top. But the role itself was so hard and came with so little guidance, she isn't sure how she survived. “If the role had been around during an easier time, I don't believe I would have been offered it. There would have been men wanting to do it,” she says. “I knew it was a tough thing to go into, but I thought, I'd better take this opportunity because I don't know when I'll get offered anything like this again.” Against the odds, she made it. But it's telling she now runs her own business, Sphinx, which focuses on helping women navigate their way into leadership roles.

Dalitz is certain part of the reason she was selected for the position was because she was seen as dispensable if it all went wrong. “I was relatively low-risk to the company,” she says. But she's adamant women shouldn't shy away from glass cliff positions, no matter how shaky the reasons may be behind their selection. “Be aware of the risks, go into it with your eyes open, but take the job,” she advises. “You don't know when the next opportunity will come.”

**R**ealistically, it's unlikely that women are always selected for precarious positions because the men in charge of appointing them are consciously throwing them to the lions. A company appointing a woman in a time of upheaval may have its eye on public perception – a woman taking over a traditionally male role can convey a sense of change and new direction that can bolster company, shareholder and public confidence. Another explanation is that women may be perceived to possess the sorts of innate qualities that can rally a company when it's at its lowest ebb. “Women may be particularly suited to dealing with crises,” Ryan says. “They're seen as more understanding or more intuitive or better at working with people.”

Again, the figures make sense. Ryan and her colleagues distributed a questionnaire to 83 businessmen and women in 2007, asking them to select fictional candidates for a desirable senior management position in a financial firm. The participants were also supplied with a newspaper article describing the company's performance – some were shown the company was doing well, others poorly. Then the participants were asked to rate the candidates “applying” for the job on a number of evaluating measures. When the company was going well, the participants believed men possessed marginally more desirable

“Women may be particularly suited to dealing with crises. They're seen as more understanding or intuitive”

## SURVIVING THE GLASS CLIFF

Offered a glass cliff position? It could be a cause for celebration. Karen Colfer, managing director of recruitment company Kelly Services, has some advice for how to scale – but not plunge from – a glass cliff.

- 1 Know what you want from your career, plan for it and work on it. Don't settle for what is being offered – endeavour to make it happen.
- 2 Enlist a mentor from inside or outside the organisation who will help you with inevitable self-doubt, fear, anxiety or stress you incur as your career develops.
- 3 Interact with other women in your workplace to propose a shared venture on how the company can support women in management and leadership roles.
- 4 Don't downplay your competence. Learn how to be assertive (not aggressive) and how to promote yourself.

qualities that would make them good managers. But during a time of crisis, the female candidate was seen as overwhelmingly more suitable for the role. The study revealed people believed a person who could steer an ailing company out of trouble needed to be “sympathetic, tactful, understanding and intuitive” – all traits the participants identified as being typically female. Similar studies have been conducted in the United States, Germany, Japan and China – with consistent outcomes.

Of course, choosing to balance on top of a glass cliff sounds like a fast-track to a shattered, splintered career. And if it goes wrong, it may be. But it could also be an enormous boon – as Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “Women are like tea bags. You don't know how strong they are until you put them in hot water.” Many of the women Ryan spoke to in her research said hauling their way to the top via a glass cliff turned out to be an unexpected bonus. “I am a geologist and have always had great difficulty getting jobs in mining,” said one. “I have found that picking and accepting glass cliff situations has helped me to get jobs... I have proved myself and I now charge accordingly.”

Another says, “I enhanced my reputation within the organisation basically because after I'd [succeeded in a difficult managing job] everyone was saying, ‘Wow! We can't believe you did that!’ It was a good thing – but there was a risk it could have gone completely wrong. I could have been thought of as an idiot. It turned out to be a plus.”

But others warn women against the dangers of focusing on glass obstacles of any description when navigating their careers – whether ceilings, cliffs or anything else. Sharon Williams is the CEO of Taurus Marketing, a leading PR and marketing firm that services ASX-listed companies and entrepreneurs. She believes women are smart and resourceful enough to make anything happen if they want it. “There are enough successful women in the world that it just can't be that hard,” she says. “I got where I am by extraordinary hard work, but I don't think my success has had anything to do with me being a woman or because I've been held back or catapulted forward. No one has paved the way for me and no one has stopped me.” She doesn't believe women are intentionally put into difficult positions or being set up for failure, but rather that they're put forward because they're damned good at what they do.

Kristina Keneally will probably lose the NSW state election in 2011. But perhaps she'd do well to keep that in mind. **m**