

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

Glass cliff or invisible bridge? How intersectional invisibility allows black women executives to turn risk into opportunity

Alexis S. Washington
lex.washington@okstate.edu

Marla B. Watkins
m.baskerville@northeastern.edu

Jamie Ladge
j.ladge@northeastern.edu

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GLASS CLIFF OR INVISIBLE BRIDGE? HOW INTERSECTIONAL INVISIBILITY ALLOWS BLACK WOMEN EXECUTIVES TO TURN RISK INTO OPPORTUNITY

ABSTRACT

The glass cliff phenomenon - in which women and racial minorities are disproportionately appointed to risky positions with a high potential for failure - is often conceptualized negatively. Building on recent theory and research on intersectional invisibility we propose, however, that glass cliff assignments may be critical opportunities for traditionally excluded leaders to gain the credibility and visibility necessary for advancement and success. To shed new light on the role that invisible intersectionality plays in glass cliff perceptions and experiences, we conducted 59 in-depth interviews with Black women who occupy senior-level positions in U.S. corporations. We develop a theoretical model to explain how intersectional invisibility is experienced in 3 distinct phases through the interconnection among one's personal, career and interpersonal context. Further, we find that senior-level Black women adapt to their intersectional invisibility, they balance cognitive invisibility with physical visibility, and thus, they appear to lean into glass cliff assignments to prove to others they have leadership potential. These precarious roles become the invisible bridge that enable them to begin to overcome intersectional invisibility.