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# Jill Abramson firing points up strength of glass ceiling

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By **Thomas Lee** 2014

20



Photo: Evan Agostini / Evan Agostini / Associated Press

Former New York Times Executive Editor Jill Abramson in 2010.



The decision by the **New York Times** to dismiss **Jill Abramson**, the venerable paper's first female executive editor, has stirred the familiar brew of corporate intrigue and gender politics.

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allege? Was Abramson kept on a short leash compared with male editors given her brief tenure at the Times, as others claim? Or was it Abramson's supposedly abrasive management style that led to her undoing?

We may never know the answers, but Abramson's exit demonstrates a rarely spoken but highly intuitive truth about C-level turnover: When a woman leader leaves the top job, she is almost always replaced by a man. (Dean Baquet is the new Times editor.)

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Put another way, at major businesses, women have little chance of succeeding a departing female leader. In fact, it's only happened once in the history of the Fortune 500, according to Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that tracks data on women in business. In 2009, Ursula Burns replaced **Anne Mulcahy** as CEO of Xerox Corp.

In addition, there are only three other Fortune 500 companies that ever hired more than one female CEO, two of them in the Bay Area: Yahoo (**Carol Bartz** and **Marissa Mayer**), Hewlett-Packard (**Carly Fiorina** and **Meg Whitman**), and Avon (**Andrea Jung** and **Sheri McCoy**).

Canning a female leader like Abramson gets attention - especially when another woman doesn't get the job. Yet, we don't give it a second thought when a man replaces another man in a high-profile position.

Just because a woman manages to shatter the glass ceiling doesn't mean there's another woman on the rung below her.

Despite some effort in corporate America in recent years, the pool of potential CEO candidates who are women remains thin. Across the globe, women hold only 24 percent of senior management roles, the obvious stepping stone to CEO positions, according to a recent report by Grant Thornton.

"Gender diversity is a very hot topic right now," said **Patricia Lenkov**, founder of executive recruiting firm Agility Executive Search in New York. "Many companies

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have a strategic imperative to produce women leaders where they can. But will it work? That's a whole other question."

The lack of potential female successors means the spotlight shines even harsher on women who actually run large companies, especially when things go wrong. In Abramson's case, the veteran Times staffer has been criticized in the media as an abrasive, divisive personality. Sulzberger said as much when he told the newsroom that Abramson was gone because of "an issue with management in the newsroom."

If true, Abramson would be neither the first nor the last leader to have such a personality. Considering the cutthroat nature of the industry, an executive editor probably didn't get the position because he or she was warm and fuzzy.

"What? Abramson was supposed to be nice?" said a veteran Times reporter who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. "This is the New York Times! Time to put on your **Big Boy** and Big Girl pants."

Citing "management style" as the reason for dismissal can be problematic because the charge is so subjective. Abrasive to whom? Dismissing a CEO for incompetence or poor performance is one thing, because numbers don't lie: a tanking stock price, shrinking sales and profit, inferior products and services. Under Abramson's tenure, the Times won eight Pulitzer Prizes.

To many people, the late Apple founder and CEO **Steve Jobs** was first and foremost a jerk, but he is widely celebrated as a visionary leader because of the success of his company.

But again, none of this would really matter - or at least would matter less - if the Times named a woman as its new editor. Such a move would have helped take gender bias out of the equation and place the attention where it should be: the ability of its next leader to get results.

**Thomas Lee** is a **San Francisco Chronicle** business editor and columnist. In December, **Palgrave Macmillan** will publish "Rebuilding Empires," his book on the future of big-box retail. E-mail: [tlee@sfchronicle.com](mailto:tlee@sfchronicle.com). Twitter: [@ByTomLee](https://twitter.com/ByTomLee)

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