

BUSINESS INSIDER

Women CEOs are more likely to be dismissed, even when the company is doing well

SHANA LEBOWITZ
JAN. 25, 2019, 9:00 AM



Implicit biases about women and leadership can be powerful. Marissa Mayer pictured.

AP Photo/Lionel Cironneau

- **Women CEOs are 45% more likely to be dismissed than men CEOs, a new study finds.**
- **Even when a firm is performing well, women are more likely to be dismissed from the CEO position.**

- **The researchers think that may be the result of implicit gender bias.**

Women who sit at the top of the corporate hierarchy have, presumably, shattered a piece of the proverbial glass ceiling.

But research suggests that even women CEOs may still face obstacles to success.

According to a [new study](#) — by Vishal K. Gupta at the University of Alabama, Sandra C. Mortal at the University of Alabama, Sabatino Silveri at the University of Memphis, Minxing Sun at Clemson University, and Daniel B. Turban at the University of Missouri — CEOs who are women are more likely to be dismissed than CEOs who are men.

For the study, which was published in the *Journal of Management*, the researchers looked at 641 CEO dismissals between 2000 and 2014. "Dismissal" is tricky to define, since company leadership may obscure the real reason a CEO is leaving. But the researchers scoured media reports and identified "dismissals" when the CEO was younger than 60 years old and didn't leave the firm because of poor health or because they had accepted another position.

Results showed that women CEOs were 45% more likely to be dismissed than men CEOs. Interestingly, men and women were equally likely to be fired when the firm was performing poorly; but women CEOs were more likely than men CEOs to be dismissed when the company was performing well.

To Gupta, that second finding was surprising. "We know that when performance is bad, the board has a lot of pressure to dismiss the CEO," he said. "But I would have expected that, when performance improves, male and female CEOs are both protected from dismissal."

Implicit biases about women and leadership could be to blame

Previous research suggests that women executives are viewed as less likable than men executives, as Business Insider's [Rachel Gillett reported](#).

As Facebook COO and Lean In founder Sheryl Sandberg wrote in [The Wall Street Journal](#): "We *expect* men to be assertive, look out for themselves, and lobby for more — so there's little downside when they do it. But women must be communal and collaborative, nurturing and giving, focused on the team and not themselves, lest they be viewed as self-absorbed. So when a woman advocates for herself, people often see her unfavorably."

Read more: [When people are asked to draw what a leader looks like, almost everyone draws the same thing — and it's a disturbing picture of how little progress we've made](#)

Gupta and Mortal said the new results could possibly be explained by subconscious biases on the part of company boards and shareholders.

An [earlier study](#) (authored by some of the researchers on the current paper) found no evidence of a gender gap in CEO compensation. Mortal suspects that's because compensation is widely published, whereas the reasons for a CEO's dismissal aren't always made clear. "It's easier for there to be biases," she said.

