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I spend most of my time talking and thinking and writing about women's experiences in UK and US workplaces, particularly, Black women's experiences. And so for me, understanding the glass cliff -- the situation that underrepresented leaders find themselves in when they take on leadership positions, only to find that their chances of success have been limited before they even begin -- really was an eye-opener.

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Now, I'm aware that for a lot of people, this might be the first time you're hearing about the glass cliff. And so I think the easiest way into the conversation is by starting with the glass ceiling, that invisible but seemingly impossible-to-break-through barrier that sits above the heads of women in business and stops them from reaching the absolute pinnacles of their professional capabilities. We talk a lot about the glass ceiling being there and what it's like to live and to work underneath it. But we don't really talk about what happens to those people who do manage to break through. I feel like we maybe have this shared imagination that if someone were able to break through the glass ceiling, it would be onwards and upwards from there, the sky's the limit. But in reality, that's not what often happens, because all too often, when somebody does break through the glass ceiling, they find themselves in a new, dangerous position. They find themselves teetering on the edge of the glass cliff.

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So I'm going to talk about underrepresented people a lot in this, and that can mean so many different things to different people in different moments and different contexts. But I'm talking about those people who are most underrepresented at the most senior levels of business. So that is women, and that's racially marginalized people -- essentially, anybody who's not both white and male.

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And so the story often goes that when underrepresented people take over a business, that business seems to start to fail. And that's really strange, and if that's true, that's worth looking into. And so "The Times" newspaper did look into it. And they released an article with the headline, "Women on the Board: A Help or a Hindrance?" And they said what I've just told you, that when women take over businesses at those most senior levels -- board member, CEO -- that those businesses seem to find themselves in a moment of trouble. And so, they concluded that women on the board were, in fact, bad for business. And they were right. But just in one small way. In 100 other, much bigger, much more important ways, they were absolutely wrong. But we can start with where they were right.

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They were right that the research does show that when underrepresented people do take on those most senior roles, that businesses do seem to be in a moment of trouble. But it's not like they want you to think -- It's not that we've, you know, stomped our way into boardrooms, only to look around and think, "Oh, God, I don't know what I'm doing here." It's not that at all. But the reason you might think that is that they haven't told you the beginning of the story. And the beginning of the story is what we need to understand if we want to see what's stopping more people who aren't both white and male from being successful when they take on leadership roles.

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So, there's a piece of research from the University of Exeter. They looked at FTSE 100 companies, and when they appointed female leaders, those businesses were much more likely than average to have already been in a consistent period of five months of poor performance. And that poor performance can look like all kinds of things. It could be a reputational scandal where the tarnish is likely to be passed on to the new leader. It could be a hit to market valuations or to profit. But whatever that was, these businesses were all much more likely than average to have already been in a consistent period of poor performance before that new leader was appointed.

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And this isn't a single piece of research, and it's not even limited to a single country. Researchers at the University of Utah did a really similar thing, but they didn't just look at the appointment of women. They looked at the appointment of women and racially marginalized men. And they looked at Fortune 500 companies over a 15-year period -- so, a huge data set -- and they found exactly the same. Those businesses that appointed underrepresented leaders were much more likely than average to already be in a period of poor performance.

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So maybe you're listening to this and you're thinking, "Well, so what? So long as these people are getting an opportunity, why does it matter if the businesses aren't in perfect condition before these people arrive?" Well, one of the reasons it matters is the narrative that that pushes back to us. If an underrepresented person takes on a role and their chances of being successful are limited before they even begin, if they do fail, if they do fall off that cliff, the message that we get back is: "Well, of course they did. Someone like that -- that's not the right kind of person to run a successful business." And so that message compounds, and we just internalize it.

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So I think all of this logically leads us to two questions, the first of which is: Why is this happening? Why are businesses that are in trouble more likely to appoint an underrepresented leader? Well, it could be that, in patriarchal societies, women are viewed as caregivers, as nurturers, and so research has shown that when a business is in trouble, women are often appointed to lead, not for their ability to make transformational change, but because of their perceived soft skills, for their ability to reengage that workforce and to get them back motivated again. But importantly, because she's not hired for her ability to make transformational change, research shows that she's often not given the tools or the time necessary to make that change. And so her chances of falling off that cliff are increased before she even begins because of the limitations of the imaginations of the people who have brought her in.

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The second reason, to paraphrase Kristin Anderson, who's a psychology professor at the University of Houston, is that in business, women might be seen as more disposable, more expendable, and that means they make really good scapegoats. In that case, if your business isn't doing well, bringing in a female leader could be a real win-win scenario. If she comes in and is able to make that transformational change, then great, your business is transformed. But if she's not, all of the blame is able to be put onto her shoulders, and she's able to get pushed out of the business, pushed over that cliff. Importantly, the research then shows that she's more likely than not to be replaced by a white man, a move known as the "savior effect." And that savior effect signals to us, to shareholders, investors, employees, that the business is back in a safe pair of hands. It's back to business as usual. And really importantly, that new white male safe pair of hands is more likely to be given both the tools and the time necessary to succeed where the underrepresented person has failed.

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So up until now, we've been talking about what happens when you are a racially marginalized person or a woman. But as I said, the majority of my work looks at Black women. So what happens when we do take that more intersectional look, when we think about the experiences of people with not just one but two marginalized identities? As you might imagine, it's not the best story.

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If a new Black woman takes over the most senior role in the business -- board member, CEO -- we can safely assume two things. The first thing that we can assume, as we've discussed, is the business might not be in great shape. And the second thing that we can assume is that she's likely to be managing a large team of white men, that leadership layer just below her, her closest

cohort. And we can assume that because in 2019, the Lean In Foundation reported that white men make up about 30 percent of that entry-level junior cohort. But by the time we get to the C-suite, that's actually ballooned up to 68 percent. That means white men are the only group whose representation grows as they become more senior. Or, to put it a different way: they're the only group who experienced the opposite of the glass ceiling. Instead of looking up and not being able to see themselves reflected back at all, they look up and see nothing but themselves at the most senior levels. That is, of course, until they don't, until they have a new boss who's somebody like a Black woman.

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And the reason this matters is there's research from the University of Texas and the University of Michigan, and they looked at what happens to that group of men who are so used to seeing themselves directly mirrored back when they get a new boss who doesn't mirror both their whiteness and their maleness. And what they found was amazing. They found that as soon as they get a boss who doesn't directly mirror them in both of those ways, they report feeling less personally connected to the business, less able to personally identify with it and less personally invested in it. And that means that their work performance suffered; they did worse at their jobs. Now, if a business is already in trouble, even the greatest leader is not going to solve it single-handedly. She needs her team, particularly her senior team. And so if they've stopped doing their jobs properly, all they're doing is continuing to push her towards the edge of that cliff.

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The second thing that same piece of research found was that they stopped doing a really important part of any manager's job, and that's managing their teams. They stopped developing, mentoring, working with the people who was their job to take care of. But they didn't stop doing that equally. No, they mostly stopped helping, working with, developing anyone in that team who was also racially marginalized. And so in that way, the glass cliff bites twice. We're not only pushing the existing leader closer to the edge of their cliff, we're stopping what could be this new cohort of underrepresented leaders from coming up, because we're not giving them the same support, guidance, mentorship, development that the rest of their colleagues are getting.

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So I'm telling you this because I want you to be a part of making this change. And that might sound impossible. You might be thinking, "Well, I can't change businesses or charities, governments, any of the places where we see the glass cliff playing out." But -- and stay with me for a second -- you can, because none of those things are real. Businesses, government, charities -- all of these things are just groups of people who've come together to do something. And we're a group of people who have come together to do something, and so we can make that change.

We can look at our own conscious and unconscious biases, and we can decide that we see the value in all people all of the time, not just some people, when we have a problem that they might be able to solve, or something that we might be able to blame them for.

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So, as Angela Davis says, we have to "... act as though [it's possible to change] the world. And you have to do it all of the time." And so that's what I'm asking you to do. I'm asking you to look at yourself and to decide that you are not going to be part of pushing anybody else closer towards the edge of their own cliff. And I want you to know that I'm going to be right alongside you, trying to do the same.