WHITE PAPER

Bossy: What's Gender Got to Do with It?

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Center for Creative Leadership®

Contents

Executive Summary

In light of the recent interest in the word "bossy" and the *Ban Bossy* campaign, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) conducted research on the role of the word bossy in the workplace. We discovered:

- Bossy is not a synonym for assertiveness, or other positive executive leadership skills.
- Women are called bossy in the workplace more often than men are.
- Bossy coworkers are described as unpopular and unlikely to be successful in the future, and bossy women coworkers are seen as more unpopular and less successful compared to bossy men coworkers.
- When we look at bossy behaviors—without the bossy label—men are just as likely as women to *act bossy* in the workplace.
- Acting bossy is related to being seen as less promotable by bosses for both men and women. However, the relationship was stronger for women.

Altogether, our results show a consistent trend that being bossy in the workplace has negative consequences, and those consequences are particularly harsh for women.

This photo is reprinted courtesy of Ban Bossy and LeanIn.Org.

Why the Buzz about Bossy?

The word bossy and its link to leadership has been heavily discussed lately due to the *Ban Bossy* campaign founded by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and backed by world renowned women leaders and luminaries such as Condoleezza Rice, Anna Maria Chávez, Michelle Obama, and Beyoncé. The campaign argues that from a young age, girls are trained to be quiet and submissive, and when they break these gender norms, they are often criticized, disliked, and called bossy—a word that can discourage girls from growing up to be leaders. Indeed, there is evidence that by middle school, girls are already less interested in leadership, and one of the reasons that girls give for avoiding leadership roles is that they are worried about being called bossy (banbossy.com).

The *Ban Bossy* website sums up this research by proclaiming: *"When a little boy asserts himself, he's called a 'leader.' Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded 'bossy.'"* The campaign concludes that banning bossy is important because we cannot expect women to grow up to lead if we *"discourage the very traits that get them there"* and advocates correcting others by saying, *"That girl's not bossy. She has executive leadership skills."* (Sandberg & Chavez, 2014).

Does the bossy label follow women from the playground to the workplace?

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Sheryl Sandberg and Ann Maria Chávez (2014) argue that the word bossy is not just a playground insult. They state:

- The earliest citation of bossy in the Oxford English dictionary refers to a sentence from 1882 stating *"There was a lady manager who was dreadfully bossy."*
- Use of the word bossy peaked in the 1930s (when women were often accused of "stealing" male jobs) and in the 1970s (when the women's movement led to an increase of women in the workplace).
- When Sandberg visited Howard University and asked women whether they were called bossy as children, one woman answered, "During my childhood? How about last week!".

Yet little empirical research has been conducted about the word bossy as it pertains to women leaders in workplace. In this white paper, we set out to answer five questions based on the *Ban Bossy* campaign,

When it comes to the workplace . . .

1. Is bossy a label for assertiveness and executive leadership skills?
2. Are women ***called*** bossy more often than men?
3. Does being seen as bossy affect men and women's reputations?
4. Do women ***act*** bossier than men do?
5. Is there a penalty for acting bossy? And if so, are only women punished?

Understanding the B-word

Two hundred and one US leaders (100 men, 101 women) from a survey panel shared their experiences with the word bossy in the workplace (For more information about how this research was conducted, please see the *About the Research* section at the end of this paper).

Is bossy a label for assertiveness and executive leadership skills?

In order to determine whether the word bossy is code for assertiveness and leadership skills or whether it really means something else, we asked leaders to define bossy in their own words. There was substantial agreement about what the word means. Overall, the six key indicators of bossiness were:[i]

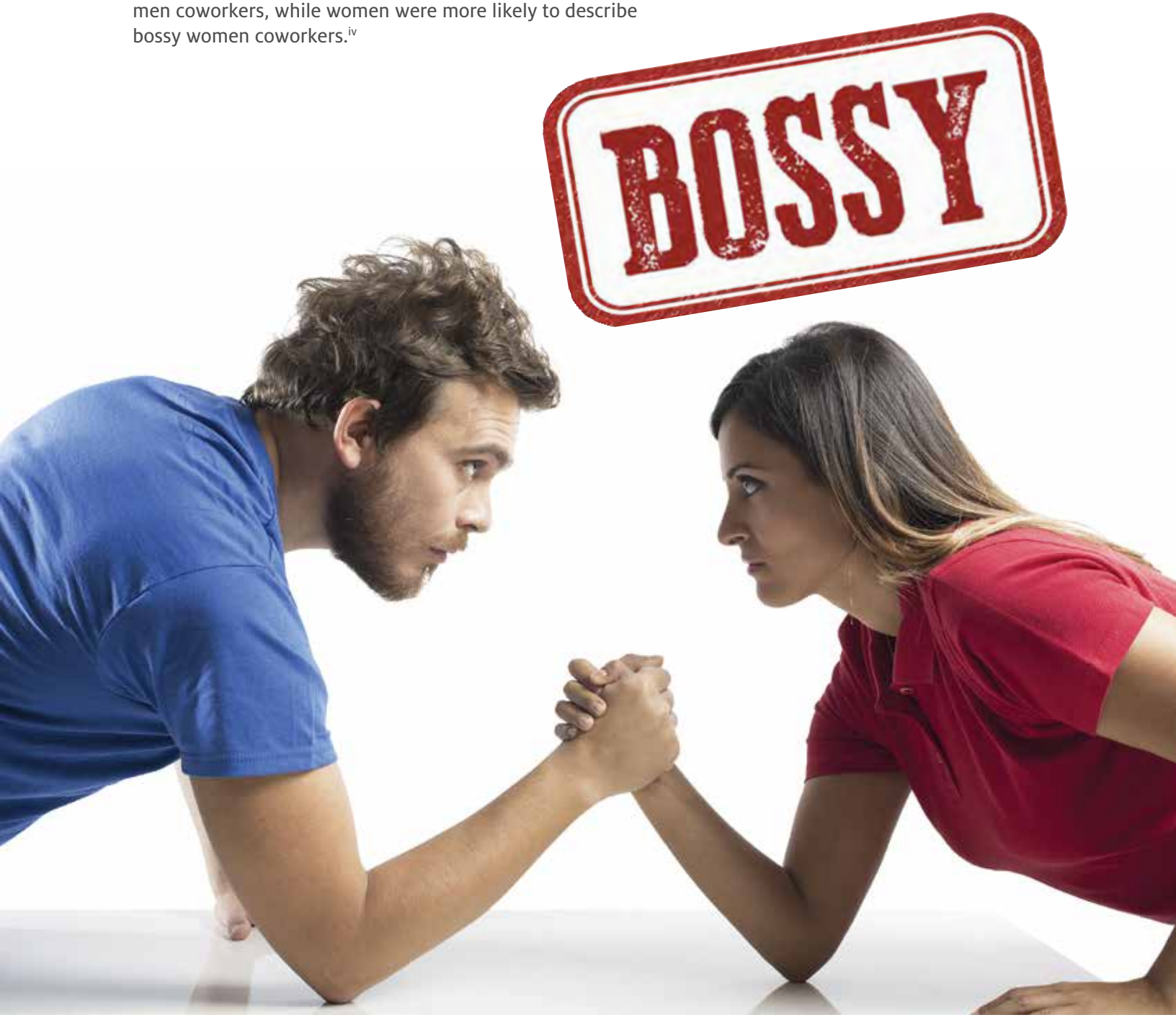
1. *Bossy people control others and dictate orders.*
2. *Bossy people ignore others' perspectives.*
3. *Bossy people are rude and pushy towards others.*
4. *Bossy people micromanage and prescribe specific actions (e.g., saying exactly how or when something should be done).*
5. *Bossy people are focused on authority, power, and status.*
6. *Bossy people interact in aggressive ways.*

The word assertive was notably absent from the definitions given by leaders. It only came up twice in all 201 definitions (that's less than 1%), and both definitions seemed to describe someone who is actually not very successful at being assertive, i.e. *"overly directive, assertive behavior . . ." ". . . micromanagers may think that they are only being assertive . . ."* It seems that **being bossy—at least in the workplace—is not the same as just showing assertiveness**.

Rather, the word bossy seems to describe a pattern of poor interpersonal skills. This is a serious problem in the workplace, as CCL's research has shown that failing to manage interpersonal relationships at work predicts *leadership derailment*—the situation in which high-potential leaders end up getting fired or barred from promotion (Gentry, 2010; Gentry & Chappelow, 2009; Hogan, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2010). Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that the **word bossy is not indicative of executive leadership skills—at least not positive ones**.

Are women called bossy more often than men?

We found that 33% of women and 17% of men reported that they have received feedback that they are bossy at work.[ii] **In other words, women were twice as likely to be branded bossy in the workplace.** Yet, when leaders were asked to recall a time they worked with someone else whom they considered bossy, they were about equally likely to describe a man (48%) or a woman (52%).[iii] Men were more likely to describe bossy men coworkers, while women were more likely to describe bossy women coworkers.[iv]



Does being bossy affect men's and women's reputations?

Our survey panel of leaders was asked to think of a particular bossy coworker, and keeping them in mind, rate them on a number of work-related attributes and outcomes. In general, people had low opinions of their bossy coworkers, and these opinions were even lower if the coworker was a woman.

- Both women and men bossy coworkers were seen as fairly unlikable, unpopular, and unsuccessful. [For more about these findings, see the CCL white paper *How to Be the Boss without Being the B-word (Bossy)*.]
- **Bossy women coworkers are rated as less popular than bossy men coworkers.** About 32% of bossy women were seen as "not at all popular" while only about 19% of men were rated the same.[v]
- **Bossy women coworkers were rated as less likely to have successful careers in the future compared to bossy men coworkers** (taking into account the baseline competence of the coworker).[vi]

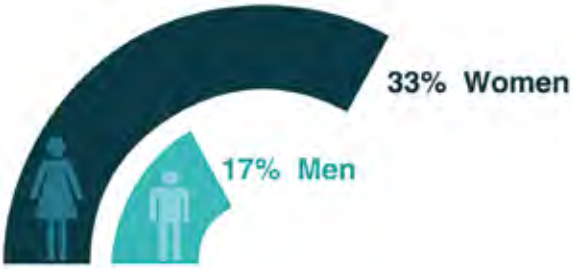
In sum, neither bossy women nor bossy men are seen as superstars in their organizations. **Being bossy damages men's reputations as well as women's reputations; however, it hurts women more**.

Bossy Reputations

Bossy doesn't describe assertiveness or executive leadership skills

"Bossy"

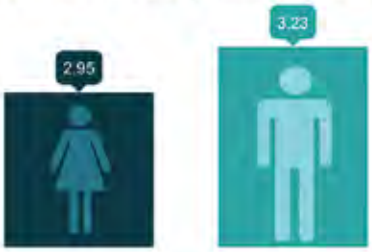
Women leaders were more likely to be branded bossy



% of leaders who reported being told they were bossy at work

Success

Women bossy coworkers were predicted to be less successful in the workplace compared to bossy men coworkers.



Mean ratings of coworkers' predicted success (from 1-5)

Unpopularity

Women bossy coworkers were rated as less popular in the workplace compared to bossy men coworkers.

% of coworkers who were rated "not at all popular"

Bossy by Any Other Name

The results above illustrate how the word bossy may be gendered in the workplace. But do women actually ***act more bossy*** in the workplace? And if they do, does it actually damage their careers? To answer these questions, we looked at CCL's archival BENCHMARKS® data from the past 20 years (See *About the Research* section on page 16).

BENCHMARKS® does not contain questions about the word bossy, but it does include ratings of leaders' arrogance, discounting others' contributions, and bullying—measures similar to the indicators of bossy that we discovered in our research. By examining gender differences in these ratings, we are able to look at *bossy behaviors* without using the *bossy label*. Our archival data also allows us to look at *boss's ratings of promotability* in order to see whether bossy people were actually seen as promotable or not within their organizations.

Do women act bossier than men do?

Contrary to what some might believe, we found women *do not act bossier* than men; this is true whether we look at self-report ratings of bossiness, or those reported by direct reports or bosses.[vii] This supports the *Ban Bossy* argument that women get called bossy for doing the same behaviors as men. In other words, **even though women are twice as likely to be called bossy at work, they are not more likely to *act* bossy.** This shows that exhibiting bossy behaviors is not a feminine trait. If anything, the data showed that men actually exhibited slightly more bossy behaviors compared to women.

Is there a penalty for acting bossy? And if so, are only women punished?

For both men and women, bossy behaviors were related to being seen as less promotable by one's boss.[viii] In other words, **both genders are punished for acting bossy in the workplace**. However, the link between being bossy and being unpromotable was stronger for women. This means that, **when women act bossy in the workplace, it has more serious consequences** than when men do.

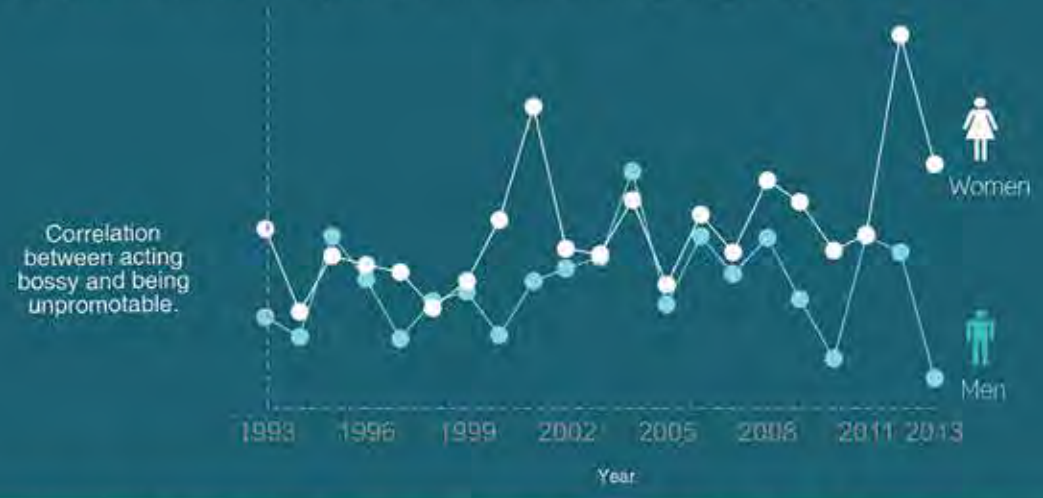
This pattern is consistent across our 20 years of data. In fact, looking at this trend across time, **the gender gap is actually widening**. Twenty years ago, the relationship between being bossy and not being promotable was about the same for men and women.[ix] Today, the relationship between being bossy and not being promotable is significantly stronger for women than it is for men.[x]

Acting Bossy & Promotability

Men exhibit slightly more bossy behaviors in the workplace (no matter who you ask).

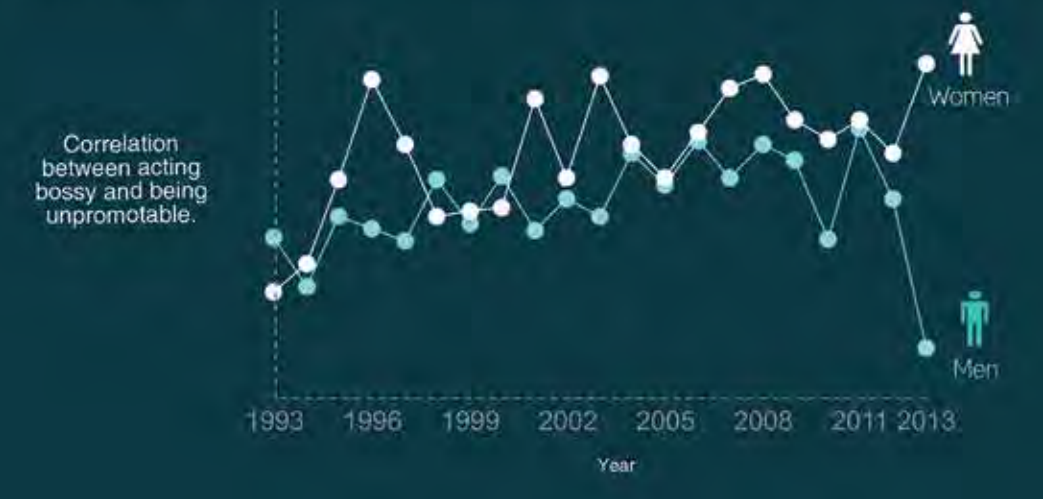
Direct Report Bossy Ratings & UNPromotability Over Time

There is a stronger relationship between bossy behaviors (as rated by direct reports) and being unpromotable for women compared to men—and this trend is growing stronger over time.



Boss Bossy Ratings & UNpromotability Over Time

The pattern between bossy behavior and being unpromotable is the same when we look at boss' ratings of bossy behaviors.



Double Standards in Women's Leadership

While these results seem unfair, they would not surprise women's leadership scholars. Decades of research shows that there are gender biases in leadership, and women often face a "double-bind" in the workplace (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jamieson, 1995). When people think of leaders, they tend to think of men and stereotypically masculine traits (e.g., independence, aggression, competitiveness). Yet women are generally still expected to conform to stereotypically feminine traits (e.g., nurturing, nice, altruistic) in the workplace. This leads to a "double-bind" in which women who exhibit feminine traits are seen as lacking strong leadership qualities, while women who exhibit masculine traits are seen as unfeminine, mean, and unlikable.

Given this, it seems that bossy might just be yet another way to penalize women who take on leadership positions and/or who act aggressively. For more information about the double standards faced by women leaders, see *Harvard Business Review*'s recent **Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers**.

Comparing Our Findings to the *Ban Bossy* Campaign

The *Ban Bossy* campaign wants to ban the word bossy in order to encourage young girls to lead (banbossy.com). At CCL, we aimed to discover whether the word bossy continues to harm women after they have left the playground. In line with the *Ban Bossy* campaign, we found that the word bossy has a negative connotation, and is disproportionately used against women in the workplace. Specifically:

- Women were more likely to be called bossy in the workplace, even though men were just as likely to display bossy behaviors.
- Women coworkers who were viewed as bossy were seen as less successful and less popular than bossy men coworkers.
- Behaving in bossy ways was more strongly related to being unpromotable for women compared to men.

However, our research also uncovered some results that were inconsistent with the current *Ban Bossy* campaign. *Ban Bossy* states that the word bossy is leveled only against girls who are assertive and show leadership skills, and that girls are punished for these behaviors while boys are not. We found that, at least in the workplace, this is not the case. Specifically:

- The word bossy was used to describe people who show a *lack* of interpersonal leadership skills—e.g., someone who is controlling, dictating, ignores others, micromanaging, prescribing, rude, pushy, authority-focused, and aggressive.
- While the label does seem to be disproportionately aimed towards women, people also considered many men coworkers to be bossy as well.
- Men who are labeled as bossy or who act in bossy ways are not rewarded in the workplace. They too are seen as unpopular, unsuccessful, and unpromotable—just to a lesser extent compared to women.

The Playground vs. The Workplace

BAN BOSSY

Some of our findings are aligned with the Ban Bossy Campaign, and some suggest that bossiness is a little different in the workplace.

Center for Creative Leadership

What does bossy mean?

The word bossy is another word for assertiveness, and is a sign of executive leadership skills.

The word bossy can be summarized by 6 indicators.

It is not a synonym for assertiveness and is not a sign of executive leadership skills.

Who gets called bossy?

Girls are called bossy, boys are not.

Both men and women are called bossy in the workplace.

But women are called bossy twice as often as men.

Who cares if you are bossy?

Girls avoid leadership roles in order to avoid a bossy reputation.

Boys do not.

Being bossy damages both men's and women's reputations (bossy coworkers are unlikeable, unpopular, and unsuccessful), but women coworkers are judged more harshly.

What happens if you act bossy?

Girls are punished for acting bossy, but boys are expected to be bossy and are encouraged to do so.

Acting bossy is punished (being less promotable) for both men and women. However, the relationship between being unpromotable and acting bossy is stronger for women.

What should we do?

We should avoid the word bossy, because it is gendered.

We should NOT discourage girls from being bossy because those are the skills they need to lead.

We should avoid the word bossy because it is gendered.

We SHOULD discourage both men and women from being bossy in the workplace, because it can hurt their careers.

What do these results mean for today's leaders?

Our findings show that being bossy is a sign of bad leadership. Therefore, **leaders should make an effort to avoid being bossy at work regardless of gender.** [For advice on how to avoid being bossy in the workplace, and for tips on how to work with bossy coworkers, please see the CCL white paper *How to Be the Boss without Being the B-word (Bossy)*.]

Our results also show that the word bossy is disproportionately used towards women in the workplace. Therefore, **leaders should be cautious about using the word bossy in the workplace**. When giving feedback about interpersonal issues, try to use other, more descriptive words instead—such as the six bossy indicators included in this paper.

We find that interpersonal skills matter in the workplace, and that leaders who have strong interpersonal skills are more likely to get promoted. Therefore, **it is important for leaders to learn and develop strong interpersonal skills**. For more information about developing interpersonal skills, see CCL's guidebook on *Interpersonal Savvy*.

We find that both men and women are guilty of acting bossy at work, and that being bossy is bad for people's careers regardless of gender. Therefore, while it is tempting to encourage women to be more like men in order to create more women leaders, when it comes to being bossy, being more like men is not likely to get women very far. If anything, **our research suggests that *men* need to focus on not being bossy just as much as women do in order to become more effective, and more promotable, leaders**.

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About the Research

Leading Insights Panel

Leaders for our *Bossiness in the Workplace* survey came from the Leading Insights Members Panel of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). Our final sample included 201 members (men=100, women=101) from the United States surveyed in June 2014. These 201 leaders came from various organizational backgrounds with the most being corporate (47.3%) followed by nonprofit (19.9%), government (11.9%), and then education (10.9%). Their ages ranged from 18–65 with the age range and percentages as follows: 18–24 (.5%), 25–34 (4%), 35–44 (18.9%), 45–49 (15.4%), 50–54 (14.9%), 55–64 (15.4%), and 65 and over (2%). Their organizational level was diverse as well, with 7% at the C-level, 13% executive, 26% director, 27% management, 15% staff, and 12% other.

Procedure & Analysis

Panel members completed an online survey that consisted of questions associated with being bossy in the workplace. Members were asked to define bossy in their own words, whether they have been called bossy in the workplace, and to describe a bossy person in the workplace (Eighteen leaders reported *not* encountering bossiness in the workplace, and therefore were excluded from the analyses). Specifically, leaders rated their bossy coworkers on: 1) How much do you like this person? 2) How popular is this person with colleagues? 3) How likely do you think it is that this person will derail in the future (i.e., hit a plateau and not advance anymore, be demoted, or fired) as a result of their bossiness? 4) How likely is it that this person will have a successful career? Leaders used a 1–5 scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*.

Definitions of bossiness were qualitatively coded by five researchers. Definitions, six main indicators emerged as the most common descriptors for the word bossy. Mentions of indicators were then counted. All quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS.

BENCHMARKS® Archival Data

A second data source was used to measure the relationship between perceptions of bossiness and promotability in the workplace: CCL's archival data from BENCHMARKS®. CCL has been collecting data for decades on how effective managers are as leaders in the workplace through the use of multisource (360-degree) feedback, particularly with the BENCHMARKS® instrument. Data between 1993 and 2013 were included in these analyses, with between 1,450 and 6,000 managers included per year. In total, 35.7% were female and 64.3% were male. Bossiness was assessed based on items regarding leader's arrogance, discounting others' contributions, and bullying from the derailment section of BENCHMARKS®. We measured promotability by assessing bosses' rating of how ready leaders were for "being promoted in the same function or division (moving a level up)" on a 1–5 scale, with 1 = *among the worst* to 5 = *among the best*. This question is part of the research section of BENCHMARKS®. All quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Endnotes

[i] For more information about these six indicators, please refer to the CCL white paper *How to Be the Boss without Being the B-word (Bossy)*.

[ii] A chi-square test shows that this difference is statistically significant χ^2 (2, n=201) = 18.52, p = .03

[iii] Notably, most people also described bossy coworkers as having high status in their organizations, and given that there are generally more men in high-status roles, it may be the case that there are simply fewer women in high-status positions to boss others around.

[iv] A chi-square test shows that this differences is statistically significant (χ^2 (1, n=201) = 18.52, p < .01)

[v] Paired t-test, t(1, 199)= 1.97, p =.05

[vi] ANCOVA, F(4, 196)= 4.10, p = .04

[vii] Self-report ratings of bossy behaviors (Mean men = 1.52, SD = .67; Mean women = 1.42, SD = .62); t(100337) = 23.30, p <.01, d = .15; Direct report ratings of bossy behaviors (Mean men = 1.69, SD = .69; Mean women = 1.59, SD = .66); t(88783) = 19.64, p < .01, d = .14; Boss ratings of bossy behaviors (Mean men = 1.57, SD = .81; Mean women = 1.47, SD = .74), t(100337)=20.43, p <.01, d=.13. The degrees of freedom for direct report ratings are different than self- and boss-ratings of bossy behaviors, because some of the managers did not have direct reports to rate them.

[viii] This is true regardless of whether bossy behaviors were rated by direct reports or by bosses.

[ix] The correlations are statistically the same. Boss ratings of bossy behaviors and promotability: (men (r = -.28), women (r = -.25), Fisher z = 0.73, p = 47 (pattern of correlational results is similar for direct report ratings of bossy behaviors with boss ratings of promotability).

[x] The correlations are statistically different. Boss ratings of bossy behaviors and promotability: (women (r = -.37), men (r = -.23), Fisher z = 3.00, p < .01; bossiness explains 13.8% of variance in promotability for women and 5% variance in promotability for men (pattern of correlational results is similar for direct report ratings of bossy behaviors with boss ratings of promotability).

About the Authors

Cathleen Clerkin, PhD, is a research faculty member in Research, Innovation, and Product Development at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). Cathleen's research interests include social identity management and diversity, creativity and innovation, and applied social cognitive neuroscience and leadership. Some of her recent research includes perceptions of nontraditional leaders, holistic leadership development, innovation among women working in male-dominated fields, and the link between national identity and creativity. Cathleen has won multiple awards and honors for her research, including recognition from the National Science Foundation, the American Association of University Women, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. She holds a BA in psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, and MS and PhD degrees in psychology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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Julia Fernando, BSc, is an intern in Research, Innovation and Product Development at CCL. Recently graduating from an undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Surrey, UK, Julia is embarking on a career in research in the hopes of entering onto a postdoctoral program in the near future. She has a background in clinical psychology, having worked at Great Ormond Street Hospital for children in London as an assistant psychologist in neurodisability. Julia's research interests primarily focus on the study of workplace diversity and inclusion, particularly in women or employees with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Julia has received a number of grants and awards from the British Psychological Society for her research and has presented at several conferences both in the United Kingdom and United States.

William A. (Bill) Gentry, PhD, is a senior research scientist and coordinator of internships and postdocs in Research, Innovation, and Product Development at CCL in Greensboro, NC. He also trains CCL's Assessment Certification Workshop and Maximizing Your Leadership Potential programs and has been an adjunct professor at several colleges and universities. In applying his research into practice, Bill's current focus is on helping leaders who are managing for the first time in their lives. Bill has more than 70 academic presentations, has been featured in more than 50 Internet and newspaper outlets, and has published more than 40 peer-reviewed articles on leadership and organizational psychology including the areas of first-time management, multisource (360) research, survey development and analysis, leadership and leadership development across cultures, leader character and integrity, mentoring, managerial derailment, multilevel measurement, and in the area of organizational politics and political skill in the workplace. He also studies nonverbal behavior and its application to effective leadership and communication, particularly in political debates. Bill holds a BA degree in psychology and political science from Emory University and an MS and PhD in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of Georgia. Bill frequently posts written and video blogs about his research in leadership (usually connecting it with sports, music, and pop culture) on CCL's "Leading Effectively" blog. You can follow Bill on twitter: @Lead_Better

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