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Banishing the Word “Bossy” From Women’s Vocabularies

One of the reasons women seem to hit a wall in their careers goes back to a word they’ve heard consistently since elementary school: bossy.

ON THE LEVEL

There’s something visceral about that word. It’s everything a little girl shouldn’t be, and her friends, parents and teachers all scolded her when they perceived she was being “bossy.” Flash forward 10 years, and either the bossy girl is student council president, head of the lacrosse team and yearbook editor, or she took the criticisms to heart and crawled back into her shell.

While I applaud the girl who ignored the calls not to be bossy, she may find that the success that will most likely come her way exacts a high cost: She probably won’t be very well-liked. Of course, there’s no law against disliking someone, but when the source of that dislike is a woman’s success, it’s the worst kind of sexism — the kind most people aren’t even aware of and are unlikely to outgrow.

The worst part? It’s not just men who dislike successful women. Other women dislike them, too.

We see examples of this all the time, most recently in an October study published in the *ABA Journal*. The study, by Chicago-Kent College of Law professor Felice Batlan, surveyed 142 legal secretaries at larger law firms in 2009, and not one expressed a preference for working with a female partner. (In fairness, 47 percent of the legal secretaries had no opinion, but not a single one said they preferred working for a female partner, versus a male partner, male associate or female associate.)

That finding concurs with at least two others I’ve seen: 2004’s “Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks” and 2005’s “Formal and Informal Discrimination Against Women at Work: The Role of Gender Stereotypes.”

To summarize the two studies, when women who work in professions traditionally held by men (such as the legal profession) are successful, they are less liked than similarly successful men. Furthermore, those successful women are evaluated more harshly and get fewer “organizational rewards” (bonuses, promotions, raises, etc.) than their male counterparts.

What causes this bias? One of the most plausible explanations is that society still tells us that there are women’s roles and men’s

roles, and jobs that cater to the supposedly innate characteristics of each gender. Women are nurses, teachers and mommies — all jobs that require some empathy, nurturing and other, “softer” characteristics. Men are cops, high-powered executives and football players — jobs that require more aggression than compassion.

According to Brian Welle and Madeline E. Heilman, the authors of “Formal and Informal Discrimination at Work,” when women succeed at male gender-typed jobs, they are by design violating society’s rules. When that happens, society disapproves. Such women are “described as being downright interpersonally hostile: abrasive, pushy, manipulative, and generally unlikeable. In contrast, successful men and women who did not violate prescriptive stereotypes were rated as significantly more interpersonally pleasant.”

These stereotypes are every bit as harmful as the more blatant discrimination women used to face. But since they’re subtle and informal, they’re harder to combat.

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The world would be a better place if we could all trade in these stereotypes and let men and women define success by their own terms. As Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg said, “I want my son to have a choice to contribute fully in the workforce or at home. And I want my daughter to have the choice to not just succeed, but to be liked for her accomplishments.”

So, what’s a woman lawyer, bond trader, fire fighter or any other woman in a traditionally male profession to do? One idea is to be patient and wait until society gets past its biases. Of course, if we approached every social injustice that way, women still wouldn’t have the vote, let alone occupy a growing number of leadership positions in the business and political world.

A better approach would be to do as Gandhi recommended: Be the change we wish to see in the world. Men and women alike need to become aware of our own biases and be sure we’re not basing our negative opinions of our



colleagues on outdated and counterproductive stereotypes. Yes, of course, there are some horrible bosses out there, of both sexes. And truly abominable behavior should be acknowledged and receive appropriate consequences. But simply demanding great work and not being all that interested in someone else’s 3-year-old’s birthday party don’t equal abominable behavior. That’s just called being the boss and trying to live up to the responsibilities of that title.

We also need to get over the need to be liked. That doesn’t mean we can be jerks. It just means it’s not the worst thing in the world if our co-workers or subordinates find us arrogant, demanding or bossy. We can’t be liked by everybody, no matter how nice we are, so we might as well ignore those who would prefer their female leaders to be demure, submissive and sweet. Besides, I can’t think of any leaders — male or female — who fit that description.

One final step: It’s the precursor to all the other weighted words applied to women leaders, like “ambitious,” “shrill,” and other PG- and R-rated words. Banish the word “bossy” from our vocabularies. Stop telling the young women in our lives not to be bossy, and if we hear someone telling a girl she’s too bossy, simply pull her aside and tell her, “Don’t worry, sweetie. You’re just being a leader.”



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