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The New B-Word

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The New B-Word

Abstract

I get all of my career advice from Cosmopolitan magazine.

Okay, maybe not all of it. But sitting in the airport this past weekend, I breezed through articles about Khloé Kardashian and confessions about why guys cheat, and, somewhere in the middle, stumbled on an article called “Like a Boss.” It was written by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and author of *Lean In*, and described an issue I had never really given much thought to: why female leaders are, seemingly more often than male leaders, described as bossy. As a woman with a leadership position on campus, the topic stewed in my mind for a bit. Yeah, I’ve been called bossy, but it hasn’t really bothered me. Should it?

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, women leaders, bossy

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Social Psychology | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THE NEW B-WORD

March 17, 2014

I get all of my career advice from Cosmopolitan magazine.

Okay, maybe not all of it. But sitting in the airport this past weekend, I breezed through articles about Khloé Kardashian and confessions about why guys cheat, and, somewhere in the middle, stumbled on an article called “Like a Boss.” It was written by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and author of Lean In, and described an issue I had never really given much thought to: why female leaders are, seemingly more often than male leaders, described as bossy. As a woman with a leadership position on campus, the topic stewed in my mind for a bit. Yeah, I’ve been called bossy, but it hasn’t really bothered me. Should it?



Sandberg seems to think so. She has partnered with the Girl Scouts of America to form the [Ban Bossy campaign](#), a movement to ban the branding of girls as bossy and to encourage them to be confident leaders. The campaign argues that the labeling of young girls as bossy can prevent girls from pursuing leadership roles.

Sandberg has, through this movement, drawn attention to the detrimental effects that labeling girls as bossy can have on their impressionable minds. The consequences can be seen in the fact that girls are twice as likely as boys to [worry that leadership roles will make them seem “bossy.”](#) Girls are more often described as bossy and [“overly ambitious”](#) than boys, too.

And it isn’t just school-aged girls being labeled as such. Australian feminist Germaine Greer deemed Hilary Clinton, former Secretary of State and prominent politician, [“cold” and “bossy”](#) in 2008. A recent Gallup poll, too, showed that employees, both male and female, tend to view decisive women more negatively than their male colleagues, and 1/3 of those surveyed said they [prefer a male boss to a female one.](#)

The labeling of girls and women as bossy, and doing so negatively, obviously presents a problem. So Sandberg suggests a solution—cut the word from our vocabularies all together and stop using it to describe young girls. Doing so, she says, will encourage girls to lead.

As admirable as Sandberg's efforts are, banning bossy won't solve the systemic problems that young girls and women leaders face. The problem with "bossy" isn't the word itself—it's how the word is used. Today, bossy might be used incorrectly to describe girls who are ambitious or who assert themselves. Peers, teachers, or parents might label girls who lead as girls who are bossy.

If bossy, hypothetically, was entirely banned, though, [other words would quickly fill the void it left](#)—bitchy, aggressive, shrewish, malevolent, or catty, to name a few.

But "bossy" might also be used correctly—to describe children who command without consideration or dictate without sensitivity. Banning bossy as a word used to describe girls fails to address those negative qualities that women, including myself, might have. The problem with banning bossy is this: girls who are bossy might not necessarily be girls who are leaders.

The words "bossy" and "leader" are not synonymous. If a person is bossy, he or she is [domineering, overbearing, and dictatorial](#). If a person is a leader, he or she is empowering, communicative, focused, and passionate. Sandberg herself says, "[Leadership is not bullying and leadership is not aggression.](#)" In other words, good leaders aren't bossy.

As Forbes contributor Micheline Maynard writes, "[There are bosses who are leaders, and bosses who are bossy.](#)" Girls are ambitious. They are brave. They are determined, earnest, energetic, and resourceful. And yes, they can be bossy, pushy, and stubborn.

Banning bossy ignores that girls can, in fact, be bossy. The word is often incorrectly used to describe girls who aren't bossy, but who are ambitious. In that respect, Sandberg's campaign to #banbossy has been successful in igniting a conversation about girls in leadership roles and how to get them there. To achieve that goal, though, girls' leadership skills should be refined and improved. Instead of banning bossy, why don't we encourage strong leadership skills? Why don't we encourage people to dissect why they use that word in the first place? Why don't we show girls how to channel their assertiveness and aspirations to inspiring others? Teaching girls to be effective leaders, and not bossy, will help them to be successful, independent women. Girls will be able to communicate their opinions, be respected by their peers, and enlist others to follow.

Instead of banning a word, let's work to dismantle the underlying issues. We can encourage girls to develop leadership skills. We can fight against the daily messages we internalize about our worth as women and girls. And, we can speak out against unjust and prejudicial treatment of others.

Then, we'd really be able to live [Beyonce's message](#) and teach girls how to not be bossy—but to be the boss.

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