



# The B-Word: An empirical analysis of how being bossy disproportionately punishes women in the workplace



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## Introduction

The word bossy and its link to women’s leadership have been discussed recently due to mass media attention such as the *Ban Bossy* campaign, which claims that “When a little boy asserts himself, he’s called a ‘leader.’ Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded ‘bossy’” (banbossy.com). The campaign also states that “bossy” is not just a playground insult, but a word leveled against women who take on leadership roles and who act confident or assertive (Sandberg & Chavez (2014).

However, little research has empirically examined how bossy name-calling may impact women in the workplace. This is concerning as the hype--but lack of science--about “bossy” may misguide practitioners seeking to help women leaders, as well as women leaders themselves.

## Objective

The current research aims to provide preliminary empirical evidence regarding ‘bossy’ as it pertains to women’s leadership. Specifically:

1. **What is ‘bossy’?** Does it really mean assertive? Is it a sign of leadership?
2. **Who gets called bossy?** Are women called bossy more than men?
3. **Who gets punished/rewarded for being bossy?** Does acting bossy hold women back in the workplace? Does it help men get ahead?

## Methodology

We examined our research questions across two datasets.

### Dataset one:

201 U.S. leaders (100 women; 101 men) filled out an online survey about their definition of the word bossy, their experiences with the word bossy and bossy coworkers.

### Dataset two:

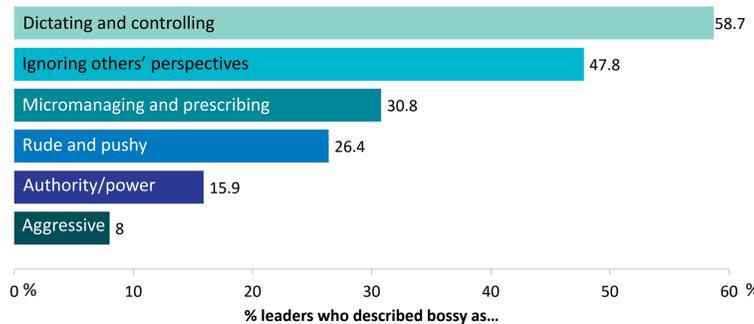
Archival 360 degree feedback data from 100,968 leaders (between 1993 and 2013) was analyzed for bossiness and promotability.

- **Bossiness** was assessed based on leaders, direct reports, and supervisors agreements to two statements: *‘is arrogant - e.g., devalues the contribution of others’* and *‘adopts a bullying style under stress’*.
- **Promotability** was calculated based on supervisors’ agreement the statement that the leader was ready for *“being promoted in the same function or division (moving a level up)”*.

## Results and Discussion

### What is Bossy?

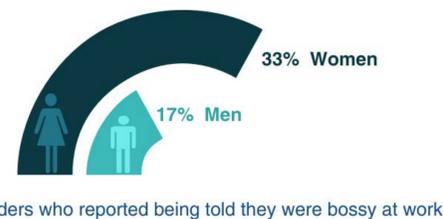
Six main indicators emerged as the most common descriptors for the definition of the word bossy (dataset one):



Only 2 out of 201 definitions included the word ‘assertive. Thus, it seems that bossy is not really another word for assertiveness.

### Who gets called Bossy?

Twice as many women reported that they have been called bossy at work compared to men (dataset one).



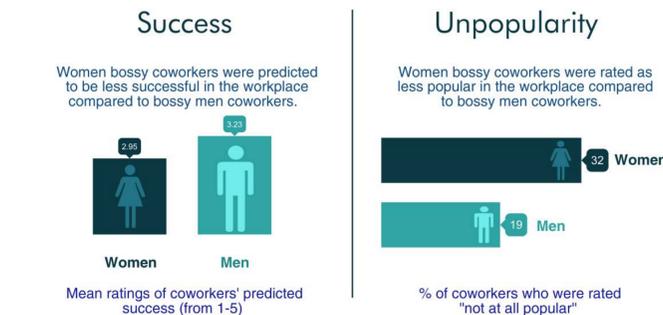
Yet, the results of archival data (dataset two) showed that **men were rated as acting slightly more bossy than women for the past 20 years** (all t-tests were statistically significant) regardless of rater source.



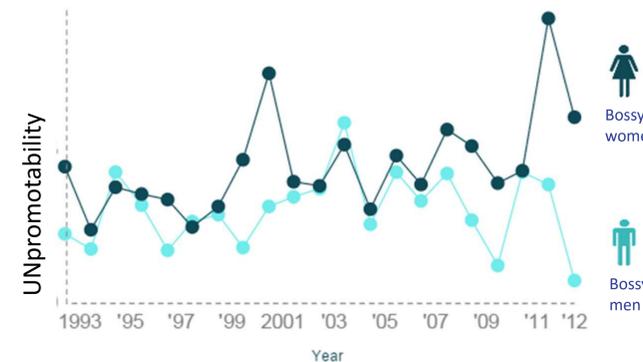
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### Who gets punished/rewarded for being bossy?

Participants rated their bossy coworkers as unpopular and unlikely to be successful. However, women bossy coworkers were rated significantly less popular than men coworkers ( $t(199) = 1.97, p = .05$ ) and less likely to succeed, controlling for competence ( $F(3, 197) = 4.10, p = .04$ ) (dataset one).



Additionally, across 20 years of archival data (dataset two) we found a negative relationship between bossy and promotability for both men and women: leaders who were more bossy were seen as less promotable. However, being bossy was more strongly correlated with unpromotability for women. Moreover, this bossy-promotability gender gap appears to be increasing with time.



Therefore, it seems that both men and women are punished for being bossy in the workplace. However, women are punished more harshly for the same actions and behaviors.

## Conclusions

These studies show mixed support for the Ban Bossy campaign. Consistent with the campaign, women were more likely to be called ‘bossy’ in the workplace and were punished more harshly for bossy-behaviors. Inconsistent with the campaign, bossy is not synonymous with assertiveness or leadership and men are also punished for being bossy (although to a lesser extent than women).

This research has important implications. While we strongly support women’s leadership, we caution that acting bossy in the workplace is likely to have negative effects for women leaders.

Moreover, while traditional leadership standards might evoke notions of ‘bossy bosses’, research increasingly shows that participative and transformational leadership styles are more effective—and are also ones that women tend to excel at (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Thus, **rather than encouraging women to be bossy because men get away with it, our research suggests that we should encourage men to take on more feminine styles of leadership because it leads to better results.**

## References / Recommended Reading

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## Poster Contact

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