

# THE OTHER *B' word*

IS BEING CALLED BOSSY ALWAYS SUCH A BAD THING?  
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By Rebecca L Weber



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**d**omineering. Pushy. Overbearing. The thesaurus is laden with synonyms for 'bossy'. Yet, that singular word is almost always associated with girls and women rather than boys and men.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg launched her #BanBossy campaign earlier this year, which gained traction through celebs such as Beyoncé talking about how they had been called 'bossy', but went on to achieve career success. It's an effort to raise awareness of how strong women who model traditionally masculine behaviour in the workplace, and elsewhere, are often perceived negatively. Meanwhile, their male peers may be described as bold or decisive.

**STICKS AND STONES**  
Thought words couldn't hurt you? Well, sometimes, they really can. The campaign cautions that being called 'bossy' can lead to personality modifications at a young age. A study by the Girl Scout Research Institute says that one third of girls say they don't

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”

want to be leaders because they fear being disliked by their peers. Being a leader and being liked don't have to be mutually exclusive.

By banning the word 'bossy', the movement seeks not so much to modify girls' ambitious behaviour on the playground (or, later, in the workplace), but to take a fresh look at these actions and radically recast them if necessary. For example, a child who effortlessly delegates in pursuit of a common goal in a way that maximises other people's talents could instead be recognised as having what is known as 'executive leadership skills'.

**FOLLOW THE LEADER**  
Karen Lithgow, 47, co-owns and runs two postal delivery stores in Joburg with her husband. She has established a management style that encourages her employees to replicate her drive for customer service and respect the supervisors on duty.

Creating a respectful work environment can be easier to do when starting a business from the ground up than it is when going to work at a large corporation with more entrenched gender roles in

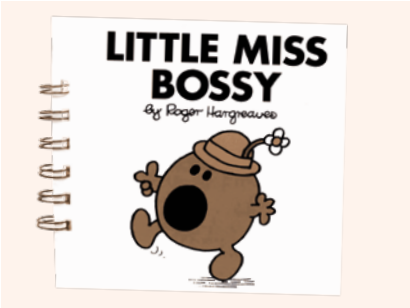
play. 'The men that work here don't have a problem answering to a lady,' Karen says. 'It's not a case of being bossy. I am the boss.'

**A DIRTY WORD?**  
So, what is really the issue: the term 'bossy' or the actions of a bossyboots? Depending on who you ask, being bossy may encompass traits that make for difficult relationships, not just a linguistic mind shift. When #BanBossy launched, a wave of dissent hit the blogosphere.

'How will my daughter recognise the difference between being bossy and being the person with the right stuff to be the boss?' wrote Jennifer Merritt, editor at BBC Capital. 'Isn't it as important for her to know the difference between bossing people around and leading people? Why not teach our daughters how to let the "negative messages" Sandberg is trying to banish simply roll off them instead?' ■

**What's bullying, then?**  
Bossiness can sometimes be confused with bullying, which is psychologically more challenging to deal with – think sabotage, humiliation and intimidation. According to the *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, preliminary research shows that bullying in South African workplaces occurs at a much higher rate than it does in many other Western countries. One study found that 77% of South African workers had experienced some form of bullying at work. In comparison, in Scandinavia, rates ranged from one to five percent; in the US and UK, from 10 to 30%; and in Australia, it was found to be between 50 and 57%.

## Famously bossy women



Children's author Roger Hargreaves' character **Little Miss Bossy** never thinks twice about giving everybody she meets a piece of her mind: 'On Wednesday she met Mr. Happy. He was smiling. As usual. "Take that silly smile off your face!" she said. As you can imagine, Little Miss Bossy wasn't very popular.'



Media activist and co-founder of TOM Pictures **Kgomotso Matsunyane** told Talk Radio 702 she always knew 'that I was going to be successful; at the top of my game, whatever that was. My mom says, even at the age of three I was known as a "bossy-floss", always looking to be the leader!'



In her best-selling book *Bossypants*, writer and comedian **Tina Fey** writes, 'Contrary to what I believed as a little girl, being the boss almost never involves marching around, waving your arms and chanting, "I am the boss! I am the boss!"'



Irish singer **Sinéad O'Connor** has done her own thing since bursting on to the scene in 1990. Instead of bowing to industry pressure to grow her hair long, she shaved it all off. Her new album is titled *I'm Not Bossy, I'm the Boss*.

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