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“Bossy” Is “Bitch” on Training Wheels

by KATHLEEN J. WU

Back in November 2011, I wrote a Texas Lawyer column titled “Banishing the Word ‘Bossy’ From Women’s Vocabularies,” proposing that women think twice before using the word “bossy.” My thinking was that, since people apply the word almost exclusively to females, it punishes us for behavior that is either tolerated or applauded in males.

ON THE LEVEL

In other words, “bossy” is “bitch” on training wheels. “Bossy” discourages young girls from doing anything—speaking up, organizing others, delegating tasks, etc.—that might brand them with the “bossy” label. That propensity for hanging back lingers into adulthood, creating women who tend not to speak up in meetings, negotiate for raises or seek out leadership positions that could advance their careers.

You can see the effects of all that hanging back today in, among other things, the number of major law firms that have women

in top leadership positions. A recent survey by Law360 looked at the nation’s 100 largest firms and found that only seven had a woman chairman, managing partner or co-managing partner. Seven.

Apparently I wasn’t the only one who noticed that the word “bossy” is a problem. Earlier this year, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer, teamed with the Girl Scouts to launch the “Ban Bossy” campaign. Perhaps because Sandberg is a tad higher profile than I am—with her 130,000+ Twitter followers versus my zero followers (seeing as how I don’t actually understand what Twitter is)—Sandberg has gotten far more attention for her declaration that “bossy” is a word we can live without. And she’s gotten way more flak.

Sure, she’s had her share of notable supporters, including Beyoncé, Condoleezza Rice, Jennifer Garner and Jane Lynch. But a whole host of commentators have weighed in with criticism about the campaign. Among their complaints are that “banning” a word violates freedom of speech and that Sandberg and Girl Scouts should focus less on words



and more on the real problems facing women and girls.

On the free speech issue, let me assure First Amendment defenders everywhere that neither Sandberg nor I are literally trying to ban the word “bossy.” That would be silly and counterproductive. (And, yes, I’ve seen the comments that Sandberg’s campaign to ban “bossy” is a bossy thing to do, to which I can only roll my eyes.)

As to the other objection, that we should focus our efforts on changing behavior instead of vocabulary, I’ll just point out that we need to do both. Nobody is suggesting

that simply abolishing sexist language would mean a more equitable world, just like no one's suggesting that eliminating the N-word could make racism go away.

But there's no denying that words matter. Words are an outward expression of what's in our hearts. When people call a young woman "bossy," we send the message that a girl asserting herself is uniquely unattractive.

The word "ladylike" also has come under fire lately for the corset it places on women's behavior. However, unlike "bossy," people mean "ladylike" as a compliment, even if the intent is to limit women—via a carrot rather than a stick. That makes it easier to reclaim and define on our own terms (e.g. "Ambition is ladylike," or something else you'd see on a T-shirt). It's harder to do that with pejorative terms like "bossy."

The "Ban Bossy" campaign's goal is simply to make people think about our language and consider whether the behavior we're condemning would be equally offensive if it were done by a male. And if it is, we should come up with a gender-neutral description of the behavior. Why have a female-specific label for offensive behavior?

Some of the most unintentionally ironic criticism of the "Ban Bossy" campaign came from a March Associated Press story quoting an official from the Child Mind Institute. The institute's Harold Koplewicz surveyed students to see whether the word "bossy" discourages girls from becoming leaders. According to "Some Question Sheryl Sandberg's Ban Bossy Campaign," "Save for a couple of 'outliers,' he found that most didn't love the term bossy, 'but they didn't love the word leader, either.'"

The story continues, "The kids also

told him that acting bossy carries a high risk of not being liked. 'They thought that being liked was better than being a leader,' Koplewicz said."

But let's recognize that little girls are introduced far too soon to the notion that behavior that's good for the gander is alienating, isolating and ultimately career-endangering to the goose.

Think about that: They thought that being liked was better than being a leader. I have a hard time coming up with a statement that more succinctly encapsulates what holds women and girls back from asserting themselves (See the Law360 survey of women managing partners).


In that same AP story, a 26-year-old woman who was critical of the "Ban Bossy" campaign said that being called "bossy" made her question her own behavior: "Was I too forceful? Am I listening to my peers? Am I looking at the big picture? Why is this person challenging me with this label?"

In her attempt to defend the word "bossy," she trips over herself, second- and third-guessing her own actions, walking the needlessly fine line all women walk when being a

leader. And in doing so, she just proves my point: that "bossy" is a sword aimed solely at women.

I can honestly say I have never heard a male colleague wondering if he was too forceful. And, to put it mildly, I have seen male colleagues being too forceful. When they are, we call them jerks. And maybe some other words that aren't used in respectable publications. But I have never, ever heard them called "bossy."

One of the main objections to the "Ban Bossy" campaign is that critics believe it gives girls permission to be bullies. Nobody wants that. Abusive behavior is never acceptable. But let's recognize that little girls are introduced far too soon to the notion that behavior that's good for the gander is alienating, isolating and ultimately career-endangering to the goose.

When people say "Ban Bossy" proponents should focus on the "real problems" women face, they should know that by shining a tiny beam of light on the pernicious double standard women and girls face, that's exactly what Sheryl Sandberg and the Girl Scouts are doing. 



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