How to Be the Boss without Being the B-word (Bossy)

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Center for Creative Leadership

Contents

Executive Summary

New research from the Center for Creative Leadership shows that just because you are the boss, doesn't mean it's ok to be bossy.

Leaders from a survey panel of 201 leaders from the United States shared their experiences with the word bossy in the workplace and what it's like to have a bossy coworker. Being bossy was seen as showing a lack of interpersonal leadership skills, including:

- Being directive and controlling
- Ignoring others' perspectives
- Being rude and pushy

- Micromanaging
- Focused on power
- Being aggressive

Bossy coworkers were seen as:

- Unlikeable
- Unpopular

- Unlikely to be successful
- At risk for career derailment

Strategies for addressing bossiness in the workplace—both changing your own habits and for dealing with bossy coworkers—are discussed in this paper.

TIME

Imagine working for the World's Worst Boss. What makes them *so* bad?

TIME magazine recently created a list of the worst fictional bosses (Dockterman, 2013). The list included TV mob boss Tony Soprano, who, according to *TIME*, *"berated his employees, expected them to read his mind and made them kill people;"* stockbroker Gordon Gekko from the movie *Wall Street* because *"There's nothing worse than corrupting a young and naïve protégé and manipulating him to your own advantage;"* and Miranda Priestly, the editor-in-chief from the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* who *"demanded insane hours and insane tasks . . . [and] broke her assistants' spirits."*

Clearly, these bosses lack important leadership skills. You might be thinking to yourself, "I hope I never work for that sort of boss," or perhaps, "I hope I never *become* that sort of boss." But what exactly is it about them that makes these bosses so bad? None of *TIME*'s accounts of horrible bosses mention any lack of intelligence, confidence, or expertise. What they all have in common is their problematic interpersonal interactions. According to *TIME*, these bosses berate, manipulate, and demand—or, to put it another way, *they are all bossy*.
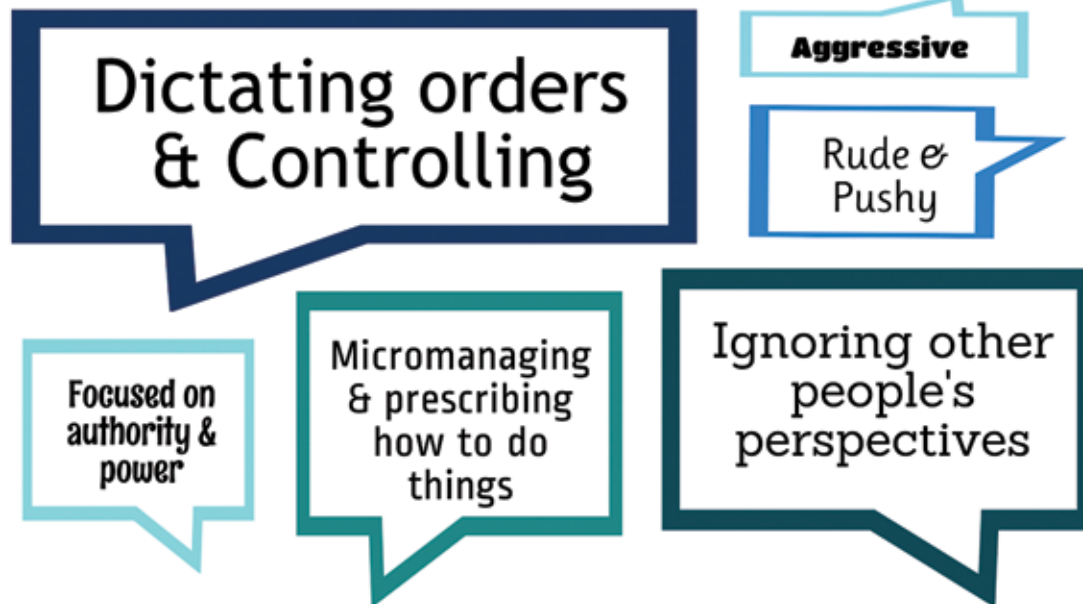
Who's the boss and who's bossy?

Bossy bosses are not limited to these fictional characters. Chances are you know or work alongside bossy bosses and leaders day-in and day-out. In fact, the word bossy derives from the word boss, and both words can be used to describe someone who gives orders in a domineering manner (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000).

However, there is little empirical evidence about the role of bossiness in leadership and the workplace. In this white paper, we address three key issues about bossiness in the workplace:

1. What does it really mean to be a bossy leader?

2. Does being bossy hurt you and your career?

3. What can you do about bossiness in the workplace?

The 6 Indicators of Bossiness

- Dictating orders & Controlling
- Aggressive
- Rude & Pushy
- Focused on authority & power
- Micromanaging & prescribing how to do things
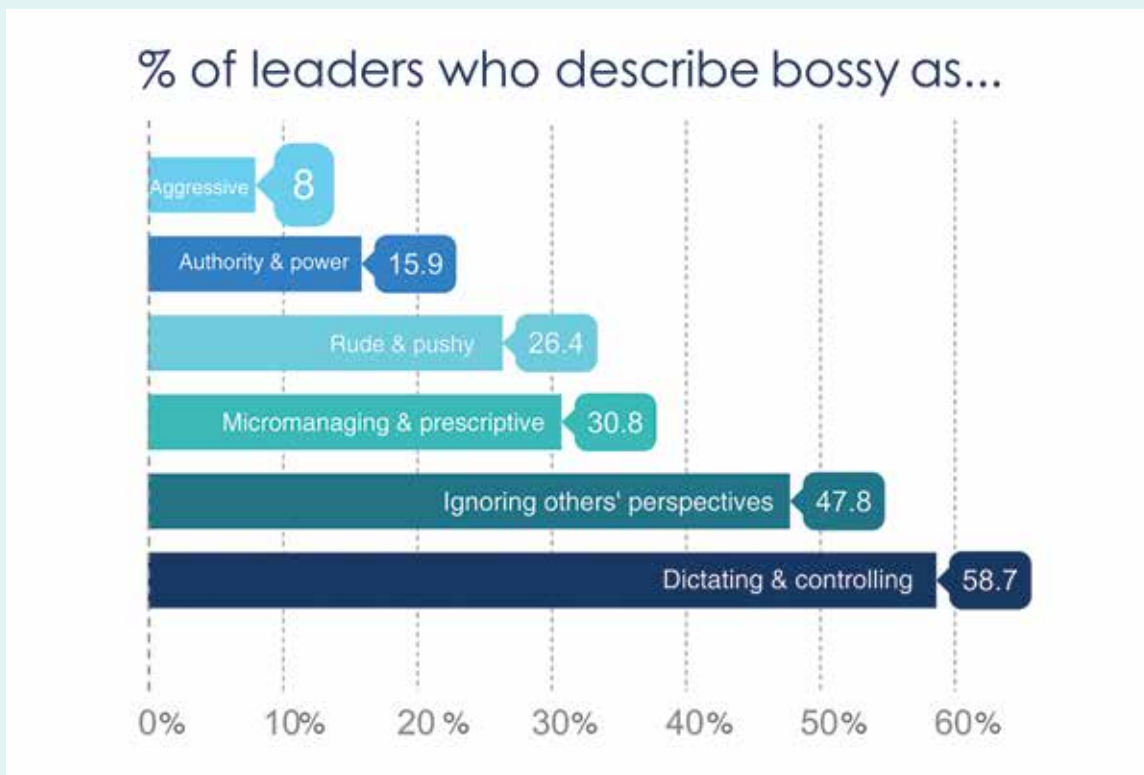- Ignoring other people's perspectives

What does it really mean to be a bossy leader?

We surveyed 201 US leaders about their experiences with the term bossy in the workplace (For more information about how this research was conducted, please see the *About the Research* section at the end of this paper). Leaders were asked to define the word bossy in their own words. We found substantial agreement among the 201 leaders about what the word "bossy" means, and very few thought the word was positive. Overall, six key indicators of bossiness emerged in the definitions.

Figure 1 shows how often each of these indicators appeared.[i] Dictating and controlling was the most commonly used indicator to define bossy (58.70% of leaders surveyed mentioned it), closely followed by ignoring others' perspectives (47.80%). Taken together, the six indicators show a fairly negative portrait of what it means to be bossy and clearly suggests that being bossy is at odds with being a good leader.

Figure 1

% of leaders who describe bossy as...

Indicator	%
Aggressive	8
Authority & power	15.9
Rude & pushy	26.4
Micromanaging & prescriptive	30.8
Ignoring others' perspectives	47.8
Dictating & controlling	58.7

0%   10%   20 %   30%   40%   50%   60%

We also found that bossiness is a common issue in the workplace:

- **25% of the leaders surveyed said they've been called bossy at work.**

- **92% of the leaders surveyed said they've worked with someone bossy.**

We also asked our survey panel to describe one real-life situation working with a bossy coworker. The majority recalled the bossy coworker as having a higher status in the organization (71%), and they were equally likely to describe a man (48%) or a woman (52%) coworker as bossy.

Unsurprisingly, reported encounters with bossy coworkers were described as negative and unpleasant, and were highly aligned with the six indicators of bossiness.

"In the situation I am thinking of, the coworker challenges everyone else's ideas and essentially demanded the team go with her idea on a project. Nothing anyone else proposed was considered or even vetted through the group. She shot everything down without any consideration that their ideas may have worked better. Because she's Bossy, and essentially combative, everyone else just gave in."

Many stories included poignant descriptions of how bossy behavior created problems in the workplace. For example, micromanagement often compromised success and performance.

"I worked for a 'micromanager.' She told me exactly what to do and how to do it. I was not allowed to try and improve or change the process to fit my style."

Abusing authority and dictating orders led to feelings of injustice. In particular, leaders felt that bossy people disrespected their performance and expertise.

"I had been handling a project for multiple years, each year improving it and advancing it. I would get many accolades. He asserted his authority and insisted I do a piece of it in a very different way, a way that would compromise my ability to be successful. He came in my office and instructed me to do it that way. He did not listen to reason, logic, or data."

Being bossy also damaged collegial relationships and caused negative emotions.

"My feelings weren't taken into consideration; they told me what to do rather than giving me options of things that needed to be done. There was no compromising and little communication. Mostly barking orders and (me) being afraid if I didn't comply."
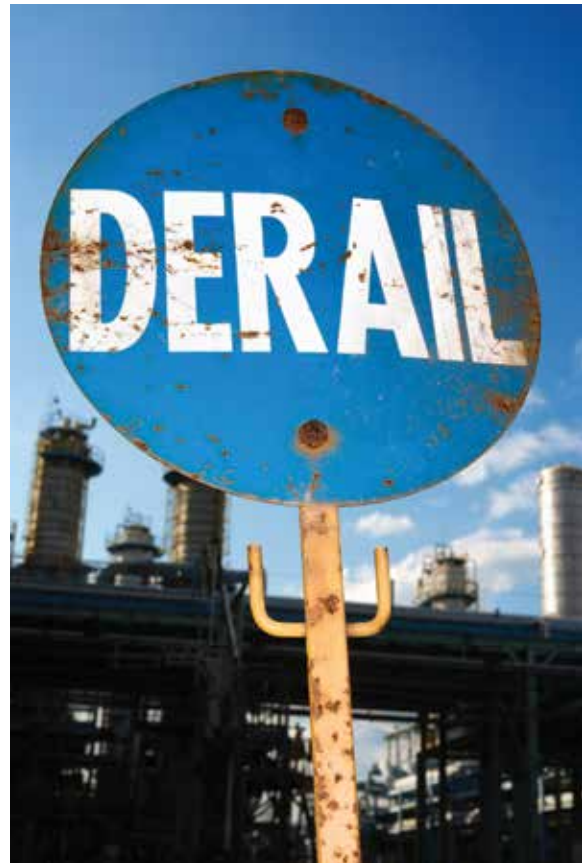
The Gender Gap

The word bossy is a highly gendered word in US culture. Some have argued that the word bossy is used to put down women who take on leadership roles. With this in mind, we also examined gender differences in our research. We found that *both men and women are bossy*, and being bossy at work *hurts both men and women*. Thus, bossiness is not just a "women's issue." However, we also found evidence that bossiness is *disproportionately damaging for women leaders*. For more about our findings regarding the bossiness gender gap, please see our accompanying CCL white paper: *Bossy: What's Gender Got to Do with It?*.

Does being bossy hurt you and your career?

Our survey panel of 201 leaders also shared their perceptions of their bossy coworker and made predictions about the bossy coworker's future career:[ii]
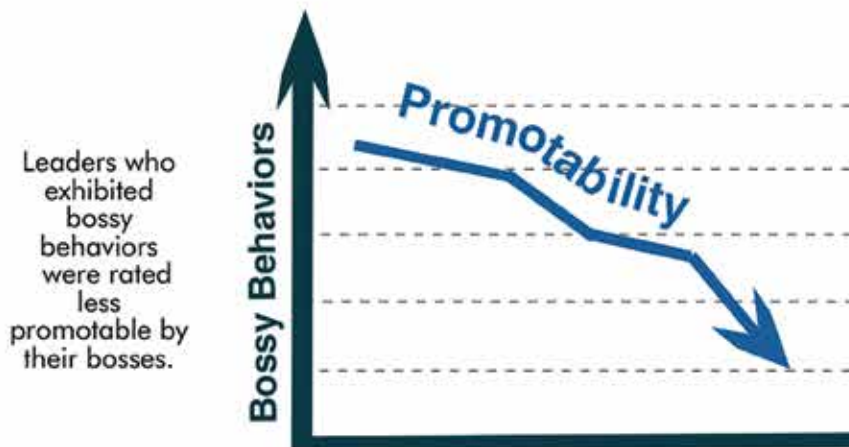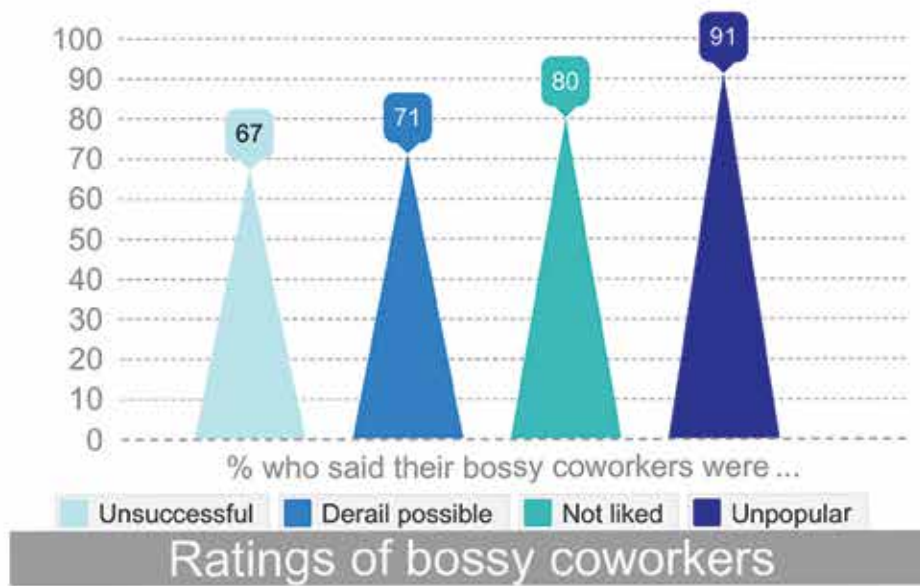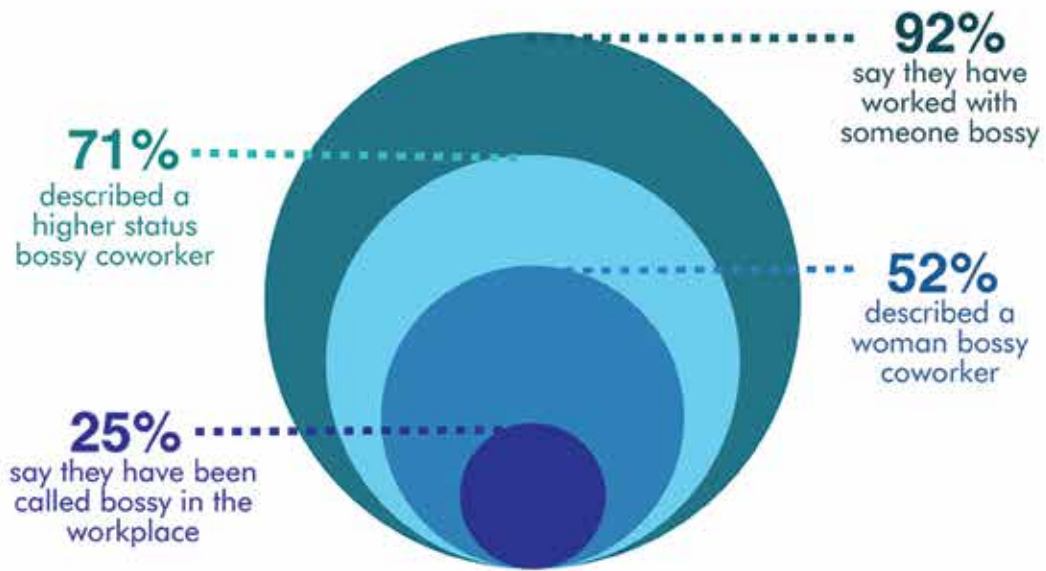
- Around **80%** said they **didn't like** the bossy coworker.

- **91%** said the bossy coworker was **unpopular** at work.

- **71%** agreed that the bossy coworker would **derail** in the future due to their bossiness.

- **67%** said the bossy coworker would likely **not have a successful career**.

Being Bossy ≠ Being Promotable

Our results from the survey panel clearly show that people view bossy coworkers in a pretty negative light. To find out more about how bossiness limits a leader's career success, we also examined CCL's archival BENCHMARKS® database (a 360-degree feedback instrument) of more than 100,000 leaders over the past 20 years. We looked at bossy behaviors (based on ratings of leaders' arrogance, discounting others' contributions, and bullying) and perceptions of promotability from a leader's boss—the person most likely to have a hand in promotion decisions. We consistently found a negative correlation between bossy behaviors and promotability across all 20 years. In other words, **the bossier you are, the less promotable you are in the eyes of your own boss.** This is another piece of evidence of the negative repercussions of being bossy in the workplace.

Bossy by the Numbers

92% say they have worked with someone bossy

71% described a higher status bossy coworker

52% described a woman bossy coworker

25% say they have been called bossy in the workplace

Ratings of bossy coworkers

% who said their bossy coworkers were ...

- 67 Unsuccessful
- 71 Derail possible
- 80 Not liked
- 91 Unpopular

Leaders who exhibited bossy behaviors were rated less promotable by their bosses.

Bossy Behaviors

Promotability

Summary of Research

Our findings shed light on what it means to be bossy and suggest that bossiness can hinder promotion and success. Based on our research, we have two conclusions for leaders:

1. **Being bossy is not the same as being the boss.** Bossy is a lack of interpersonal leadership skills, including being overly directive and controlling, ignoring others' perspectives, being rude and pushy, micromanaging, focused on power, and being aggressive.

2. **Being bossy can hurt your career.** Regardless of gender or status, if you are being bossy, it is probably harming your career. Bossy coworkers are seen as unlikeable, unpopular, and unsuccessful, have derailment risks, and are rated as less promotable by their bosses.

Here is what leaders had to say about their bossy coworkers...

"Typically micromanaged and gave direction in order to assert their level of authority."

"Told me what I had to do. Did not stop talking to ask or listen for feedback. Gave a hard deadline for results without feedback for a reality check."

"He wanted something done his way and would not listen to other perspectives. Raised tone of voice. Cut off others when they were speaking. Didn't seek to understand."

"Team leader - had the plan, must be performed his way, rarely accepted input from others. We reached our production goals, but with average success instead of harnessing the potential of the team."

"Was not open to discussion of the possible outcomes, and as a result the task failed. It was the attitude that other points of view held no value and that any concerns were not important. This person was more interested in their own voice than the outcomes."

What can you do about bossiness in the workplace?

Considering that one out of four people have been called bossy and nearly everyone has worked with someone they would consider bossy, chances are that bossiness is an issue in your workplace as well. Given the negative outcomes associated with being bossy, the following section offers tips and advice for how to be less bossy in the workplace, and how to deal with bossy coworkers.

Are you bossy?

You probably do not want to be bossy in the workplace, but sometimes it is hard to tell when you are coming across as bossy to others. This is because there is a separation between *intentions* and *impact*. Intentions are usually good. You might feel that you can increase the outcomes of your team if you do everything yourself. Or that providing detailed instructions on how you want others to do their jobs is part of being a good leader. You might feel that you are not ignoring others, you are just trying to save time.

However, these intentions might be lost on other people. Instead, they might feel that you do not trust them to do their job well, or that you think they are incompetent. They might feel that their opinions are not heard or valued, and may become insecure about speaking up or performing their jobs. This can create a threatening and uncomfortable work environment.

How To: Use this exercise to gain some insight on how people see you at work.

1. Write down how you would describe yourself and your actions in the workplace (e.g., a teamplayer, task-focused, punctual, knows how to get things done, helpful, an idea person, extraverted, disorganized). Come up with as many descriptors as possible.

2. Ask several of your colleagues to write down how they would describe you and your actions in the workplace. Encourage them to be completely honest. If possible, make this exercise anonymous. If anonymity is not possible, tell them to write down how people at work see you in general, so that they feel less "on the spot."

3. Compare your list to your colleagues' lists, paying attention to differences. Items that are **only on your list** suggest *intentions* that are not clear to others. Items that are **only on others' lists** suggest ways that you are unintentionally *impacting* others.

If you are unaware of how you are impacting others, you might not realize how people see you. Look at your lists. Do others describe you as being demanding, a micromanager, inattentive, pushy, bossy, or other similar terms? If so, you might have a reputation for being bossy at work.

What can you do if you are seen as bossy?

The good news is there are things you can do to remedy being seen as bossy. Research at CCL shows that workplace reputations can change, provided that you put in the time and effort (Zinko, Gentry, Hall, & Grant, 2012). Here are some things you can try.

Give to Others

A problem with bossy people is that they are seen as self-involved and unconcerned with others. However, recent research shows that people who give, rather than take, are more successful in the long run (Grant, 2013).

How To: Here are some ways you can give to others, and in turn, be seen as less bossy.

- **Give autonomy and ownership.** Bossy leaders tend to micromanage and control. This can threaten others' sense of autonomy, security, confidence, or trust. To counteract this, make an effort to consider others' work styles. Let others take the lead on projects when appropriate and seek group consensus on work dilemmas. Engaging others in problem-solving allows them to gain ownership of the situation.

- **Give others' ideas a chance.** It is natural to prefer your own ideas. But when you always do things your way, you may miss out on even better solutions. Next time someone suggests a different way of doing something, give the idea serious consideration. Learning to recognize good ideas—even when they come from other people—is an important leadership skill.

- **Give credit where credit is due.** Bossy leaders are often focused on their own outcomes and ideas and forget to credit other people for their contributions. Making a conscious effort to acknowledge others' contributions and praise them for good ideas and good work will go a long way to dispel your reputation for being bossy.

Show Empathy

Those who are bossy tend to ignore others, which can be seen as a lack of empathy. This can damage your career, as research at CCL shows that managers who displayed less empathy to their direct reports were seen as worse performers by their boss (Gentry, Weber & Sadri, 2010; Sadri, Weber & Gentry, 2011).

How To: Use these three steps to practice letting your empathy show.

1. **When people come to you with a problem or issue, put all of your attention on them.** Turn off the cell phone, take your eyes off of your computer, put away the paperwork. Taking a few minutes to pay attention now will likely save you a lot of trouble in the long run.

2. **Practice active listening.** Active listening means focusing on what people are saying, rather than focusing on your own needs or what you want to say next. To show that you are listening actively, be sure to ask follow-up questions to make it clear that you are engaged in the conversation.

3. **Try to put yourself in their shoes.** Oftentimes, we do not consider how our words might be interpreted by others, or how other people's situations might make them see things differently. When others come to you, take a moment to imagine what it must be like to be in their situation before responding.

Coach and Mentor

Those who are bossy tend to dictate and direct people. A more positive way to interact with your direct reports is through coaching and mentoring. Rather than dictating, mentors act as sounding boards and feedback providers who also offer encouragement, emotional support, and counseling. CCL research shows that managers who coach and mentor others are seen as more promotable and better performers by their boss (Gentry & Sosik, 2010; Gentry, Weber & Sadri, 2008).

How To: Here are some tips for being a good coach or mentor.

- **Ask, don't tell.** It may be easy to tell others what they should do; after all, you want to make sure they do their best. But it is usually better to let them ask for help first. To facilitate this, ask them what they need help with, what they are struggling with, or what questions they have for you.

- **Encourage problem-solving.** Good coaches help others learn how to deal with their own problems and come up with their own solutions. Ask others what ideas they have for solving the problem at hand, and then give advice on their solutions rather than giving advice on the problem itself.

- **Offer positive feedback.** Use positive feedback to help guide others and to reinforce positive behaviors. If they are faltering in certain performance issues, encourage them to do better by providing constructive feedback on *how* they can improve, and *why* it needs to be improved.

Get people to notice you've changed.

These are all important steps to changing your bossy reputation, but equally important is making sure that other people notice you've changed (Cartwright, 2009). Let people know you are interested in changing for the better and ask others for feedback as to whether you are coming across as bossy, and if so, how and why. When you get feedback, say thank you. For even more impact, say thank you through a hand-written letter or a public statement at a team meeting.

What can you do if you are working with a bossy person?

Even if being bossy isn't an issue for you, chances are, you work with someone who is bossy. How to work effectively with this person might depend on their role:

If your boss is bossy . . .

It can be tricky if you consider your boss bossy. Your boss has legitimate power over you, and you may feel that you can't disobey or avoid him/her. However, trying to understand your boss's perspective or predicament may make the situation easier to bear.

How To: Here are some tips adapted from *Managing Conflict with your Boss* (Sharpe & Johnson, 2002).

- **Look Forward.** Write down your career goals and how you spend the majority of your time. Ask yourself whether this is aligned with your boss's goals and whether it meets the mission of your organization. If you don't see the connection, consider re-aligning your work goals or seeking out projects or activities that better meet your goals. Refocusing on the benefits of your work can help you feel proud of your accomplishments, even if your boss underappreciates you.

- **Look Backward.** Reflect on your work history. Has your boss always treated you this way? Ask others who have worked for your boss what was expected of them and see if others have had similar experiences. Review how older projects were carried out and see if a pattern emerges. If this behavior is new or inconsistent, it likely means that something in particular is causing your boss to act bossy (A big deadline? A change in power? You?). Discovering the cause of the bossy behavior can help you navigate the situation more successfully.

- **Look Inward.** Reflect on your own performance. Have you missed deadlines, shown up late, or made poor decisions in the past? If so, your boss may think that additional structure, micromanagement, or "tough love" will help your performance. If this is the case, it might be time to work on changing your reputation and proving that you can be reliable and work independently. It's also possible that your boss thinks that you want a lot of structure and feedback. If so, consider telling your boss how you are best managed. Include the reasons behind your work preferences, what exactly you are asking for, and how it will help your performance (also see "SBI feedback" in the following section).

If your coworker is bossy . . .

It also can be challenging to work with a bossy peer or direct report. However, in this situation as well, there are strategies you can use to make the situation less stressful.

Provide Feedback

If a coworker is bossing you around or a direct report is being rude in the workplace, consider having a feedback conversation with him or her. While it probably seems uncomfortable, constructive and objective feedback about how you would prefer to interact and work together in the future is likely to be worth the short-term awkwardness. The goal of feedback should be to explain exactly what the person has done and what impact it has on you and the work environment.

How To: Use CCL's method for providing feedback: Situation, Behavior, Impact (SBI).

1. Describe the **situation** for which you are giving feedback. Be as specific as possible, including the time, place, and context. For instance, "Yesterday afternoon during our sales meeting, when Sarah was presenting her report on prospective buyers . . . " This will help the person remember and understand the specific situation for which you are giving feedback.

2. Describe the specific **behavior** for which you are giving feedback. Be sure to describe observable actions (e.g., something that was said or done). For instance, ". . . you interrupted Sarah and said, *'We should go with my friend's company, because I know the owner.'*" (Do *not* say things like "you were bossy" or "you were rude" because that is your *interpretation* of the events, not the *actual behavior.*)

3. Describe how the behavior **impacted** you and the work environment, including how it made you feel and how you or others might have reacted as a result of the behavior. For instance, "I felt that you were not honoring the group's decision to let Sarah approach the buyers. I also noticed that Sarah looked upset when you interrupted her."

S Situation
Specific time and place

B Behavior
Observable actions

I Impact
Feelings, Thoughts, and/or Consequences

Help them gain awareness.

As mentioned earlier, many people might not realize that they are perceived as bossy, and being told that they are might be hard to hear. To help your peers or direct reports gain awareness about how they are perceived in the workplace, offer to do the intention/impact exercise with them outlined in the "Are You Bossy" section of this paper. Also pay attention to what specific actions, behaviors, or attitudes they are doing that makes them seem bossy and what they could do differently to make them seem less bossy. It is much more helpful to tell someone to practice their active listening skills rather than simply calling them bossy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined what it means to be bossy in the workplace, what the consequences are for doing so, and what can be done about it. Our research shows that bossiness is something that most people encounter in the workplace, that it's viewed negatively, and that it can harm your career.

In closing, take a moment to consider the fates of the worst fictional bosses that opened our paper—Tony Soprano, Gordon Gekko, and Miranda Priestly. These characters built their identities around being the boss, but in the end, they each paid a heavy toll for their bossiness. Some lost their jobs, some their followers, and arguably, their credibility as a leader of others. So remember, it is good to be the boss, just as long as you're not bossy.

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About the Research

Leading Insights Panel

Leaders for our *Bossiness in the Workplace* survey came from the Leading Insights Members Panel of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). Our final sample included 201 members (men=100, women=101) from the United States surveyed in June 2014. These 201 leaders came from various organizational backgrounds with the most being corporate (47.3%) followed by nonprofit (19.9%), government (11.9%), and then education (10.9%). Their ages ranged from 18–65 with the age range and percentages as follows: 18–24 (.5%), 25–34 (4%), 35–44 (18.9%), 45–49 (15.4%), 50–54 (14.9%), 55–64 (15.4%), and 65 and over (2%). Their organizational level was diverse as well, with 7% at the C-level, 13% executive, 26% director, 27% management, 15% staff, and 12% other.

Procedure & Analysis

Panel members completed an online survey that consisted of questions associated with being bossy in the workplace. Members were asked to define bossy in their own words, whether they have been called bossy in the workplace, and to describe a bossy person in the workplace (Eighteen leaders reported *not* encountering bossiness in the workplace, and therefore were excluded from the analyses). Specifically, leaders rated their bossy coworkers on: 1) How much do you like this person? 2) How popular is this person with colleagues? 3) How likely do you think it is that this person will derail in the future (i.e., hit a plateau and not advance anymore, be demoted, or fired) as a result of their bossiness? 4) How likely is it that this person will have a successful career? Leaders used a 1–5 scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*.

Definitions of bossiness were qualitatively coded by five researchers. Six main indicators emerged as the most common descriptors for the word bossy. Mentions of indicators were then counted. All quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS.

BENCHMARKS® Archival Data

A second data source was used to measure the relationship between perceptions of bossiness and promotability in the workplace: CCL's archival data from BENCHMARKS®. CCL has been collecting data for decades on how effective managers are as leaders in the workplace through the use of multisource (360-degree) feedback, particularly with the BENCHMARKS® instrument. Data between 1993 and 2013 were included in these analyses, with between 1,450 and 6,000 managers included per year. In total, 35.7% were female and 64.3% were male. Bossiness was assessed based on items regarding leader's arrogance, discounting others' contributions, and bullying from the derailment section of BENCHMARKS®. We measured promotability by assessing bosses' rating of how ready leaders were for "being promoted in the same function or division (moving a level up)" on a 1–5 scale, with 1 = *among the worst* to 5 = *among the best*. This question is part of the research section of BENCHMARKS®. All quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Endnotes

[i] Most people used more than one indicator to define the word bossy and therefore, the percentages displayed on the graph exceed 100%.

[ii] Percentages were calculated based on agreement with these statements as indicated by a rating of 3 or more on a 5-point scale.

About the Authors

Cathleen Clerkin, PhD, is a research faculty member in Research, Innovation, and Product Development at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). Cathleen's research interests include social identity management and diversity, creativity and innovation, and applied social cognitive neuroscience and leadership. Some of her recent research includes perceptions of nontraditional leaders, holistic leadership development, innovation among women working in male-dominated fields, and the link between national identity and creativity. Cathleen has won multiple awards and honors for her research, including recognition from the National Science Foundation, the American Association of University Women, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. She holds a BA in psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, and MS and PhD degrees in psychology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Christine A. Crumbacher, PhD, joined CCL in 2013 as a postdoctoral research fellow with a focus on evaluation. She serves as an evaluator for CCL's Leadership Beyond Boundaries program with a concentration in early leadership development projects such as Ravenscroft School and the Golden LEAF Foundation. Christine contributes as an item design and survey developer, as well as champion for youth leadership development. Her primary research interests are single-case designs and Monte Carlo data simulations.

Julia Fernando, BSc, is an intern in Research, Innovation and Product Development at CCL. Recently graduating from an undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Surrey, UK, Julia is embarking on a career in research in the hopes of entering onto a postdoctoral program in the near future. She has a background in clinical psychology, having worked at Great Ormond Street Hospital for children in London as an assistant psychologist in neurodisability. Julia's research interests primarily focus on the study of workplace diversity and inclusion, particularly in women or employees with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Julia has received a number of grants and awards from the British Psychological Society for her research and has presented at several conferences both in the United Kingdom and United States.

William A. (Bill) Gentry, PhD, is a senior research scientist and coordinator of internships and postdocs in Research, Innovation, and Product Development at CCL in Greensboro, NC. He also trains CCL's Assessment Certification Workshop and Maximizing Your Leadership Potential programs and has been an adjunct professor at several colleges and universities. In applying his research into practice, Bill's current focus is on helping leaders who are managing for the first time in their lives. Bill has more than 70 academic presentations, has been featured in more than 50 Internet and newspaper outlets, and has published more than 40 peer-reviewed articles on leadership and organizational psychology including the areas of first-time management, multisource (360) research, survey development and analysis, leadership and leadership development across cultures, leader character and integrity, mentoring, managerial derailment, multilevel measurement, and in the area of organizational politics and political skill in the workplace. He also studies nonverbal behavior and its application to effective leadership and communication, particularly in political debates. Bill holds a BA degree in psychology and political science from Emory University and an MS and PhD in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of Georgia. Bill frequently posts written and video blogs about his research in leadership (usually connecting it with sports, music, and pop culture) on CCL's "Leading Effectively" blog. You can follow Bill on twitter: @Lead_Better

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