

# Why Are We So Hard on Women Bosses?

BY TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER



# No manager can be Mary Poppins, Miranda Priestly, and your mom all wrapped up in one—a reality check for women in charge and the workers who want to love them.



## If Nicole

McWhirter is one thing, it's a feminist. "I think that women are amazing, powerful beings who have every right to do everything that men do and that they should be paid the same," says McWhirter, who is 36, lives in Denver, and attended all-women's Barnard College.

Yet if McWhirter had her way, she'd never work for another woman again. Back when she was in communications, she worked for a woman in her 40s who treated her pretty poorly. It seemed like she'd sacrificed a lot to become a vice president at her company, and McWhirter's best guess is that she resented how easily McWhirter, just out of school at the time, had it. "Every time I came to her with an idea, she would end up saying, 'No, that's not good enough,'" says McWhirter. "She'd throw things on my desk and say, 'This is crap! Do it again!'"

Her next boss was in her 30s, and she wasn't the ally McWhirter was looking for either, especially when McWhirter was caught planning her wedding on company time. "You want your boss to be like 'What's your wedding dress like?'" she recalls. "I'd get, 'Are you freaking doing that again?'"

Her four male bosses, meanwhile—they were great. "They were never resentful, they didn't hold on to stuff, and they didn't micromanage," she says. (No word on whether they weighed in on her wedding.) She had been hoping to find a female mentor. But she says, "I ended up getting the opposite."

McWhirter joins a chorus of critics of women bosses. A 2013 Gallup poll found that Americans of all education levels and of both sexes prefer a male boss by an average of 33 percent. "People seeking executives ask for a particular gender all the

time," says Donny Kanovsky, managing director of Windsor Resources, a staffing and recruiting firm in New York City. "Mostly, they ask for men. It's not legal and they know that and I remind them. I send them qualified candidates of both genders, but they often go with the one they wanted in the first place."

Let's start with the obvious: There are still relatively few women in power. In that Gallup poll, a majority of people who said they prefer a male boss had never had a female one. With such a small sample to go on, we look at each woman under a microscope, each gesture indicative of the quality of every single female boss from now until forever. If a man's a bad boss, it's because he's a jerk. But if a woman's a bad boss? It's because she's a woman. The fact that pollsters ask this question seems like part of the problem.

So just because polls show people prefer a male boss doesn't mean women are *actually worse bosses*. In the poll, people who did have female bosses preferred them! But it doesn't really matter if women can be great bosses if we're saying the opposite so often and so loudly. If women are perceived as lesser bosses, that affects your chances of ever becoming one.

## Women in

leadership roles are held to a near-impossible standard that male bosses aren't, says Leora Tanenbaum, author of *Catfight*, which explores the cultural expectation that women compete with one another. She must be a perfect balance of direct, assertive, and professional as well as supportive, selfless, and fully invested in your wedding plans. "On top of being perfect, women feel they have to act like they're not trying," she says, citing the Duke University Women's Initiative of 2002, which analyzed the pressures on high-achieving women in college. "If you're in a leadership role, you're working



really hard. And to follow the script, you have to act like you got lucky or you were in the right place at the right time. The pressure to conceal all that effort while trying to mentor people and be a leader—you're in this pressure cooker."

Girls learn early to downplay their own achievements.

"Boys grow up in groups; girls grow up in pairs," explains Ashley Merryman, coauthor of *Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing*. So much so that by age 6, boys are engaged in group activities 74 percent of the time and girls just 16 percent. It's okay for boys to advocate, argue, and brag ("Pass the ball! I can make the shot!"), because it's all in the service of the group. But when girls get together with a best friend, says Merryman, "the goal is to find sameness and equality. I constantly have to anticipate if something will make you uncomfortable." In that case, bragging and competing aren't good; they're friendship killers.

Now bring these fragile, emotion-based relationships to the workplace. By this point, calling attention to their talents is something that women aren't used to seeing other women do. And what is a boss but a person whose very position is a constant demonstration of her achievements? Women in senior leadership may be punished if they don't sugarcoat their messages, says career and leadership expert Lindsey Pollak, author of *Getting From College to Career*, "because some people find a powerful woman intimidating."

But the catch is that you can't be too nice, because then you come off as wishy-washy. Instead of "I need you to make some copies," some women might say, "How about you make those copies?" In meetings, women often write a note or whisper to someone what their plans are before actually speaking. It seems so polite. But workers want clear direction, not vague requests made to maintain an illusion of shared authority.

**A secret:** I'm guilty of all this. In my brief time in corporate America, running a series of education programs for journalists, my goal was to have happy underlings, to maybe even be a hero to them. But I did everything the experts say I shouldn't. I may be your boss, I said with every shared eye roll, but I'm in it with you. I'd complain about my boss. I'd do the whole "If you have time, would you mind..." thing when really I meant "Here's what you should do now." Thinking back to my worst offenses—crying on the shoulder of a subordinate; indicating hot and cold as one tried to guess my salary—I'm crushed with embarrassment. What position was I putting them in by comforting myself with the overtures of friendship to defray how uncomfortable leadership made me?

"Coalitions are fine when others' input is genuinely needed, and the research says women are great at that," says Merryman. "But it's a problem when women use others' opinions as a security blanket. At some point, women need to trust themselves. That's what will make them leaders."

No one will find the perfect balance...but only because there

**WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP MAY BE PUNISHED IF THEY DON'T SUGARCOAT THEIR MESSAGES.**

**Pick a Lady-Boss Cliché**



**LADY MACBETH**  
She'll hurt you to help her man.

*House of Cards*

**THE SINGLE WORKAHOLIC**  
She works 24 hours. Why don't you?



*The Proposal*



*Horrible Bosses*

**THE MAN-EATER**  
Watch out, boys.

**THE CRAZY LADY**  
Is she mad with power or PMS?



*America's Next Top Model*



*Mad Men*

**THE UNDERMINER**  
There's room for only one of you.

**THE ICE QUEEN**  
Why so terrified, darling?



*Ugly Betty*

FROM TOP: PATRICK HARBON; EVERETT COLLECTION; ALAMY; EVERETT COLLECTION; CARIN BAER/AMC; MITCH HADDAD/ABC.

isn't one. If you're a little too direct, if you're a little too nice, all that is fine, as long as you own it. "At the end of the day, leadership is about each individual being comfortable with the person they are and developing their own style," Pollak says. "When you try to be too nice or you try to be too strong and it's inauthentic, people see through that and it turns them off."

Once you figure out who you are at work, you can manage tasks and people even better. If you know you're a soft touch, you can ask a colleague to play bad cop to your good cop. Or you can work on eliminating speech hedges—excessive apologizing, for instance—that make you sound tentative, suggests Tara Sophia Mohr, creator of Playing Big, a leadership program for women. If you tend to be brusque, you can run your ideas by someone to help rein you in. But don't spend too much time worrying about how nice you are. Ultimately, says Pollak, "you're not likely going to change. You have to figure out who you are and put yourself in situations that let you be the best at that."

**Just as** quickly as bosses (and recovering bosses) must consider our actions, so too must employees look in the mirror. Because many of those people complaining about women bosses? They're women. In studies, women are even more likely than men to say they prefer a male boss.

Younger women can be pretty tough on their elders in the office, says Cheryl Dellasega, PhD, a professor at Pennsylvania State University's College of Medicine and author of *Mean Girls Grow Up*. They have often had more training in management at a younger age, she says, and can be more critical of women above them who perhaps weren't taught such skills on their way up. Criticism can also be a way of coping with the bias that studies show still exists in the office. When you complain, particularly to male colleagues, you are saying, "Not to worry. I may be a woman, but I'm not one of them."

Ask yourself: Do you really hate your boss because she's a woman? Or do you hate your boss because bosses in general are people with power over your life? Do you maybe hate your boss because she didn't let you plan your wedding at the office?

Ask if you're holding your female boss to the same standards you'd expect of a man—the same respect for your personal life, the same emotional support, the same number of gold stars when you succeed. Your female boss is expected to do more than her male counterparts; she's expected to advocate for women too—just look at the backlash when Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer declared that no one was allowed to work from home. Your female boss didn't necessarily have many role models. You are her mentor, too, somehow.

Show leadership by managing up. "One of the most important parts of your job is figuring out that relationship with your boss," Pollak says. "People have different styles. If your boss is harsh, that's a unique type of person and you have to figure it out." The best advice for employees is the same as it is for bosses. Be who you are. Let your boss be who she is. How is she supposed to accept you before you accept her?

**More Bad-Boss Clichés!**

**YOUR NEW BFF**  
She really, really, really wants you to like her.

*The Carrie Diaries*



*The Office*

**THE PRETENDER**  
Poised on the outside, hot mess inside.

*Vanderpump Rules*

**THE MEDDLER**  
She knows no boundaries.



I've worked for a lot of women, some of whom were good bosses and some of whom were bad. They were all feeling their way. If they didn't give me everything I wanted in a boss, it wasn't because they were women. It's because they weren't perfect. Nobody is. But each of us deserves to be judged on our own merits, not as a stand-in for our entire sex. Yes, complain about your woman boss, if she deserves it. Just don't complain about your boss *because* she's a woman. ■

FIND OUT WHO OUR DREAM BOSSES ARE ON COSMO'S TABLET EDITION!

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