

# 9 nasty names I've been called as a female leader ... or were they compliments?

I'm a born leader. At two years old, I was called precocious; at six I was bossy, and by age ten, I had learned that people liked me better when I partially hid my leadership ability. So I began keeping quiet when I had something to say.

When I started work as a doctor, I allowed more of my natural leadership qualities to show. The negative feedback about my "personality" began immediately.

Here are some names (not including the B-word) I've been called in the workplace over the years:

- Aloof
- Arrogant
- Mean
- Entitled
- Negative
- Sensitive
- Insensitive
- Demanding
- Superior

In the early years of my medical career, hearing one of these names would wound and confuse me. How could I be aloof when I cared so much about others? How could I be arrogant when I felt so unsure?

I spent years trying, in vain, to "be nice." I lost confidence and withdrew, trying to avoid offending anyone. I was not being myself, and I was miserable. This self-betrayal was destructive and unsustainable.

Fast-forward a career change and many wise teachers later: I know now that being called those nine names was not the problem. My reaction was the problem. I interpreted those words as criticisms instead of as compliments.

I know describing those hurtful names as compliments might sound ridiculous, but it's all about the context: I'm not just a leader. I'm a female leader in a male-dominated environment. I've observed over the years that my natural leadership behavior is viewed more negatively by my co-workers (men and women) than the same behavior from a man. This is not a feminist rant or a personal pity party. It's just how it is, and this is the context for interpreting the names I've been called.

With this context in mind, here is my reinterpretation, or reframing, of the list of names:

- *Aloof* – Concentrating while being female
- *Arrogant* – Decisive while being female
- *Mean* – Gives negative feedback or correction while being female
- *Entitled*—Advocates for myself while being female

- *Negative*—Picks up on flaws in plans before others do while being female
- *Sensitive*—Calls out others for bad behavior while being female
- *Insensitive*—Results-focused while being female
- *Demanding*—Holds people accountable while being female
- *Superior*—Demonstrates expertise while being female

Does reframing these names mean that I believe I don't ever deserve a bit of negative feedback?

Absolutely not—I have plenty to learn and lots of growing still to do. Figuring out how to interpret this type of feedback is a lifelong project that requires help from trusted mentors and friends. Though I've learned to discern a lot for myself over the years, I still talk with the people in my life who know me well and understand my context. They help me see where I'm just getting a reaction for being my wonderful, powerful self and where I'm crossing a line into true arrogance, insensitivity or something else. I then reframe the context-influenced feedback as a compliment, and I take the rest as fodder for professional growth.

If you find yourself up against these types of names or similar feedback, take a look at your context and consider a reframe.

By the way, I would never have learned to reframe these negative messages alone; in fact, I would never be where I am today if I'd tried to do it alone. If this article has spoken to you, reach out to a trusted friend, mentor, or to me. No one does it alone.

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