THE MYTH OF THE #GIRLBOSS

NAOMI DESAI

MILL-ENNI-heirs

A Project by
THOUGHTMATTER

EXCHANGE
CREATES
CHANGE

senator
Zuzana Licko

Combine
Julie Patard

Vertikal
Stéphanie Brusick

Tangly lines
Zuzana Licko

HI, I'M NAOMI DESAI

I'm a Gen Z design intern at ThoughtMatter, a branding and design studio centered on work worth doing. I was born and raised in the Bay Area, and when I'm not thinking about art and design, I'm reading, baking or smashing the patriarchy. I'm currently a student at Pratt Institute, and my graphic design classes are teaching me how to make cool stuff, and my social justice classes are teaching me how to think critically. I want to marry the two. My goal is eye-catching activism.

MY DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Krona One
Yvonne Schüttler

I design to make an impact. I want to help people and inspire them to make change. As a woman of color, working to right the wrongs in the world is a matter of life and death. My activism stretches beyond my work through writing, donating, protesting and whatever I can do to not just show my support, but act on it. You have to be in the movement to design it.

A #GIRLBOSS ZINE... WHY?

Artigo
Joana Correia

I want to explore intergenerational female leadership. The tension between the "working girl" mentality of the past, the myth of the #girlboss in the present and all the stereotypes and cutesy names created over time to categorize women in positions of power. Women have had to "hack" the corporate system to achieve success, which in some cases has led to them emulating the toxic behavior of male bosses. I want to know how the female leaders of today are rewriting the script and what kind of legacy they want to leave behind.

Millenniheirs is an ongoing project by ThoughtMatter that hosts intergenerational conversations about hot cultural topics.

BEFORE YOU READ MY INTERVIEWS WITH FEMALE LEADERS...

There aren't many transparent conversations between Gen Z'ers like me and leading women in the professional world. The idea of speaking with these accomplished, impressive and aspirational women is inherently intimidating, but it's important to learn about their experiences and share what the next generation of designers are looking for when they enter the workforce.

Exchange creates change.

INTERVIEWS:

elizabeth talerman

PIPER HICKMAN

ROANNE ADAMS

elizabeth talerman

Elizabeth is a graduate-level teacher, four-time entrepreneur, corporate board member and MacArthur Foundation grantee. As founding partner and CEO of The Nucleus Group, Elizabeth works with organizations around the world to empower leaders, accelerate growth and catalyze change.

What is your connection to the phrase "#girlboss"?

It's such a funny phrase. The first time I heard it, I was watching "Ted Lasso," and the woman who comes to own the soccer team is this girlboss. She seems like a woman to me, so girl is a funny term. Who made that term? Is this men making a term for us? When I think of this person, I think of someone who leads with heart and empathy. Someone who is fierce in every way—beautiful, tall, courageous. I'm all in. But the other side of me says I don't read the women's version of The Wall Street Journal. I'm a woman. I'm a boss. I'm a leader. Gender plays a role in our experience with the work, but I don't need that to be the identifier before the term "boss."

How has your idea of what it takes to be a leader evolved over time, and what considerations have contributed to this evolution?

I did it wrong before I did it right. I thought a leader was keeping track of everything and everyone and that it happened my way. But what I learned is that my job as a leader has evolved, and for me is in part understanding where we as a team want to go and removing the barriers between where we are and achieving that ambition. I don't have to tell people how to do it. I can help mentor and support their capacity to do those things. I think the other important lesson is there are four words a leader can utter: "I believe in you." When people get the sense that you believe they're capable of doing what they're charged to do, they rise beyond their expectations, and that's magic to watch.

What besides your education makes you a good leader, and what have you done outside of your career that has helped you grow?

I'm not sure my education made me a good leader. It gave me technical understanding and skills. Assuming I am a good leader, what makes me a good leader is having the privilege of working with brilliant people. What makes me a great leader is having a good mentor. If you have a leader, you have followers. The people that have given me the opportunity to lead have made me a good leader—the ones that have asked me to improve or show up in a different way. That has been so powerful. It may sound odd, but my partner in life has taught me a great deal about leadership, but he's not a leader. He's very comfortable having leaders over him, and his ability to see the effort and goodwill and honesty is what it takes to see the best in people. By seeing the best in people, you get to see them be their best. That has taught me so much about how to interact and how to engage.

> "I don't read the women's version of The Wall Street Journal."

What is one word that describes what you dislike the most about the design industry?

Hubris. I can deal with misogyny, but there's an arrogance in this field that really bothers me.

What have you learned from younger designers in the industry, and how are they inspiring you to be better?

What haven't I learned? I have learned to embrace how much culture evolves, how there is no one aesthetic, and also I've learned the power of a great brief—something that's not too wide and not too narrow.

What sacrifices, if any, have you had to make to be in a leadership position?

I don't know if I have had to make these sacrifices to be in a leadership position. But I've made a great deal of sacrifices in how I've spent my time in work versus life. Now I will only do work that enriches my life.

What keeps you passionate about your career and leadership role?

I never stop learning. I love a vertical learning curve. This field, this career, becoming a leader. You're always becoming a leader.

Anything else?

The joy of my job of being part of Nucleus is that it is truly intergenerational. We have Gen Z and millennials, and I'm on the cusp of boom, and the Socratic discussion is so rich. The mechanisms we use to solve problems are many. There's not one approach or one way. The responsibility we have to each other to share history and push history out of the way is so important. I could bring up a historical context, and someone could say that history is marginalizing folks. I'm in such a great place to be a learner. We're multiracial and multigendered, and without a diversity of perspectives, I'm not sure how to be in this field successfully.

I notice as a mostly cis women team, we have been trying to break the starting of a sentence with "sorry." I'm going to watch out for whether I see younger colleagues being more forthright. I sense a strength and unapologeticness about calling things out when something isn't right or is inappropriately labeling or subjugating. I'm not sure if we're over the humility aspects of being women in business and women leaders. I am comfortable with humility around leadership. It's very concrete if you have a vertical corporation. I should say I am a leader and a great one, but I've chosen to have a horizontal relationship with my colleagues. I have no use for humility when it comes to 40 years of technical experience, I'm fucking great at that stuff and I don't need anybody to question that. I know what I'm good at. The leader thing. I don't want followers; I want collaborators. That's why I exited the corporate world at 38. I was really unhappy. Screw humility and screw hubris. Let's just do what we do very well.

SCREW HUMILITY AND SCREW HUBRIS. LET'S JUST DO WHAT WE DO VERY WELL.

PIPER

HICKMAN

Piper is an executive creative director who has won awards for her work with brands big and small. After cutting her teeth as a copywriter, she worked as a creative director and ECD for Microsoft, McCann and 360i, and honed her entrepreneurial skills at some of the biggest agencies in New York City. While she's guided the careers of many young creatives, her proudest endeavor is parenthood. She finds motivation in being a role model for her daughter as a happy working mom.

What is your connection to the phrase "#girlboss"?

That term probably started making waves and being utilized midway through my career. I've been doing this for almost 25 years, so I feel like I started hearing it almost ten years ago. At the time, I was a boss, but I wasn't super elevated in a leadership role. So, I probably was part of the rallying cry of "Yeah girlboss!" because it came about in a time when nothing was like it in the vernacular and there weren't a lot of women in leadership roles. Like a lot of things, when they first come into your life you embrace them, but then they start to stale. To me, it's almost repetitive and redundant. Why can't a woman or a girl be a boss? For the last few years, it's been a bit of a head-scratcher as to why we need it. I have a nine-year-old daughter, and she displays copious amounts of leadership skills, and it seems like a no-brainer that a girl can be a boss. I don't think the term should go away, but I don't think it should be our rallying cry anymore. Perhaps we need a new hashtag.

How has your idea of what it takes to be a leader evolved over time, and what considerations have contributed to this evolution?

When I was younger and my bosses would piss me off, I was so naïve and had no idea of the challenges they were grappling with. But my idea then of what a boss or leadership entailed was only what I could see. Making the

The way I've moved against it is kind of being a pit bull. I'm here and I'm not leaving, so figure it out, everbody.

obvious decisions, not the business ones. And the more I rose up—and it took me almost ten years to become a creative director—when I slowly got into more rooms where decisions were being made, I started to see the wider berth that it takes to be a boss and the insane amount that goes into making decisions. I also learned as I saw my bosses more that we're all kind of making it up. I got into advertising because I love being creative, but it is a business. So the more you understand the business, the better you'll be able to contribute to your own career and your community. So now my point of view on being a boss and a leader comes from a less intellectual and decisive place, and it's more about listening and considering. If I can make leaders out of people, then I've become the best leader I can be.

What besides your education makes you a good leader, and what have you done outside of your career that has helped you grow?

Education can make you a horrible leader. Bozoma Saint John said that she doesn't believe in training; she believes in pressure. It means getting into the situation and figuring it out. You can

read about running a marathon, but if you don't put on sneakers, you're never going to be able to do it. I don't know if education will help you become a better leader. It will expose you to more people, yes, but being under leadership, great and shitty, and seeing how the two affect the work is a really good place to start in being a leader. And once you step into the role, you may be good, you may not. Many people aspire to certain positions, and once they get there, they're like, "this is not what I thought it would be." Wanting to lead is huge. It means making hard decisions; it means firing and laying off people; it means taking on work that means someone will work the weekend. It's not all puppies and rainbows.

What is one word that describes what you dislike the most about the design industry?

Exclusive.

As a woman of color in leadership, how do you move against that?

The way I've moved against it is kind of being a pit bull. I'm here and I'm not leaving, so figure it out, everybody. When I was younger, I tried to fit in. I figured out white guy humor. I watched sporting events. It's important to do that as a creative person. You need to pick up all ways of life, but if you're not bringing your own perspective to the table, you're missing out. Your inclinations are the only thing that is going to separate you as a creative. I also got more vocal about what was right and what was not right. But it's easier to do that with a proven track record, job security, and money in the bank. The older I get and the more places I work, and the more leadership positions I

take, I am mindful that I can take this job and do this job, but I can influence more in the organization when I speak my mind.

What have you learned from younger designers in the industry, and how are they inspiring you to be better?

I love working with younger creatives. Love it, love it, love it. I am not as tapped into what's cool. Music, movies, books, movements. So, they're my cultural zeitgeist Google. I have a nine-year-old, so I want to know what's dope before she does. I love helping them grow and nurturing them. I'm kind of floored. Everyone seems way more mature and about their business than I was, so I am often left with the feeling that I wish I was as together as they seem at that age. It's great to be filled with admiration for what's to come. It helps keep me young.

What sacrifices, if any, have you had to make to be in a leadership position?

To grow my career, I made many more sacrifices in the past than I'm trying to make now. Missing birthdays. Missing weddings. I try not to do that anymore. More recently, I've held really high leadership positions. The last one took way too much from me, and I resigned. I couldn't be the kind of creative leader I wanted to be there, and I couldn't live the life I wanted to live. It was the job I thought I always wanted, and when I got there, I was like, this is not for me. It was a shitstorm of "I can't lead the way I want to, and I can't live the way I want to because of this job." Leaving was a tough decision because it went against everything I thought I stood for. Leaving was a sea change moment for me.

What keeps you passionate about your career and leadership role?

Twenty-five years into this, I still can't believe I get paid to be the person to come to the table and be like, "maybe this is funny." It's playing make believe, and I'm getting paid for it. Sure there's pressure and long hours and never seeing the light of day, but I still get jazzed about seeing something I've never seen before and watching it get made. Rob Reilly, Global Chief Creative Officer of WPP, used to say creativity is the only way to survive, and I do believe that both in and outside of work. Reinventing the norm is brain food for me.

Anything else?

Ursula Burns, the first female black CEO of a Fortune 500 company, admitted sacrificing time with her kids to grow her career. All these people came out bashing her, but she didn't say, "I shipped them off with a babysitter," she said her father took them. So, while her decisions would be very different than mine, my perspective is, would we be doing this to a dude? If this person was of a different gender, would we be saying the same things? So that's my watch-out for situations, and also I want to get to a place where it isn't even part of the conversation of who someone is or how they do what they do, and we're just looking at what they bring to the table. If everyone was the same and everyone led the same, we wouldn't have all the cool things we have now.

Roanne launched her creative studio RoAndCo in 2006 to create and collaborate with the people who inspired her. Roanne served on the Board of Directors for the AIGA NY chapter and has given numerous talks on her unique branding process and experience as a business owner and leader. Throughout her career, she has dedicated time and design efforts to non-profit initiatives, including the Women's March, Together We Rise, and more. In 2017, she was named a UN Champion of Change for her leadership in advocating for equal pay for women in the creative industry.

ROANNE ADAMS

What is your connection to the phrase "#girlboss"?

I have a somewhat complicated connection to the phrase "#girlboss." I've never considered myself a girlboss, but I appreciate its origin and the role it's played in our generation of female entrepreneurs.

I started RoAndCo around the same time Sophia Amoruso became a known entrepreneur. I admired her style, badass attitude, and hard-working hussle. She was incredible at building her own personal brand and surrounded herself with cool, creative, talented people to help her build Nasty Gal. I watched her meteoric rise with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was in awe, excited to see another woman my age succeeding in the male-dominated startup world. On the other hand, I couldn't imagine the pressure she must have been under. Seeing Sophia on the cover of magazines like Forbes and Entrepreneur was mind-blowing; a young woman near my age, in a creative field gracing the covers of those magazines was unheard of at the time.

Sophia's book really cemented the #girlboss concept. It was a younger, fresher women's empowerment movement. At that time though, I was far enough along in my career that I didn't necessarily relate. To me, it felt like it was geared toward a younger audience, those just embarking on entrepreneurship.

Over the years, I've worked with many startups. This granted me a front-row seat to witness the often unrealistic growth goals that come along with VC funding. The term "#girlboss" applied to a certain niche of female entrepreneur that wasn't afraid of the risk growth and the possible overexposure of social media. And while I felt aligned with these entrepreneurs in some ways, I was never interested in growing my business ultra-rapidly or being the star of the show.

The girlboss generation was swimming upstream against the old capitalistic ways of doing things. Despite this challenge, Sophia Amoruso paved the way for so many women, and she keeps getting back up and starting over, which is truly exceptional.

MY LEADERSHIP APPROACH HAS EVOLVED TO BECOME MORE

CONSCIOUS &
HEART-CENTERED

AS OPPOSED TO FEARLESS AND HEADY.

All things considered, if the #girlboss's path is what was required to make significant strides in a man's world, I'm down with that!

How has your idea of what it takes to be a leader evolved over time, and what considerations have contributed to this evolution?

Early on, my idea of a leader was someone who was self assured, projected fearlessness and was focused on seeing and making their vision come to life. I thought that a good leader followed their instincts and didn't necessarily need to listen to every voice in the room. In the early years of my business, my mantra was "work hard, play hard," but after 10 years of that, I was pretty burned out. So, I needed to find a completely new approach.

Over the past five years I've been cultivating a more conscious and thoughtful approach to leadership. I didn't realize how important it was to be in touch with my emotions and how much I would need to support my team along the way.

I've come to understand that in order to take care of others, as leaders, we need to take care of ourselves first. From personal experience I know that if you're burned out, consistently working beyond your capacity, you simply won't be able to lead as effectively as you otherwise could. As leaders, we need to be self-aware, prioritize our own care and be empathetic to the people who work for us. My leadership approach has evolved to become more conscious and heart-centered as opposed to fearless and heady.

What besides your education makes you a good leader, and what have you done outside of your career that has helped you grow?

I learned to be a leader on the job; it wasn't something I was taught in school. Leadership is challenging. It always has been for me, at least. I'm a deeply sensitive person, and I often feel that leadership can be in conflict with that sensitivity. Over the years, I've experienced a lot of ups and downs, and I've questioned my ability

to lead. I often find, though, that the discomfort allows me to grow as an individual and as a leader. Thankfully, I have a support system that I can lean on. My husband and my leadership coach really help me navigate the challenges. As a leader, you often find yourself supporting everyone on your team and not actually getting the support you need. So having someone there to hold you, whether it's a coach or a therapist, someone you trust, can be extraordinarily helpful.

Over the years, meditation has allowed me to get in touch with my inner leader. By simply going inward and listening to all parts of my being—my intellect, my emotional self, my physical form, my spirit—I often come out with the right answers to a problem I'm trying to solve. I like to think that together, those parts of myself are my ultimate boss!

What is one word that describes what you dislike the most about the design industry?

Moral dilemma.

I'm sorry, that's two words. I can't come up with one word! The design industry seems to lack a clear moral compass. We're advertising and selling products and services that are often nonessential, so for people like myself and my team, it sometimes feels like a bit of a catch-22. We want to use our creativity for good. We need clients to keep ourselves employed, but if the clients are not aligned with our core values (i.e. social and environmental responsibility), we have to turn down opportunities or find ways to incorporate these principles into the project scope.

What have you learned from younger designers in the industry, and how are they inspiring you to be better?

They are pushing for purpose-led projects and for us to really embody and live our values. In other words, younger designers are working toward designing a better world and holding us accountable to make it happen.

What sacrifices, if any, have you had to make to be in a leadership position?

I can't creative direct as much as I'd like to. I'm often managing the business, the team and clients and not doing as much of what I love, which is the creative work.

In truth, I haven't spent as much time with my kids as I would have liked over the years. I'm getting better at prioritizing them as I see they are growing up so quickly, but it's hard when your business is also your baby!

What keeps you passionate about your career and leadership role?

I feel inspired to keep evolving the long-term vision for our studio and changing the way we do things. I'm passionate about helping people find their unique purpose and tap into their creative superpowers—it doesn't matter if it's a client who is a new founder that's trying to figure out the "why" of their brand, or one of my team members needs guidance on how to rise into their potential. What keeps me excited about my career (apart from a powerful love for design!) is having the power to use my creative talents for good and to create opportunities for others to do the same.

GIRLBOSS

girlboss

GIRLBOSS

GIRLBOSS

GIRLBOSS

IN CONCLUSION...

The term "girlboss" contains multitudes. It's not good. It's not bad. It's an opportunity. It's an invitation to future designers and leaders to be unapologetic in acknowledging and celebrating our differences.

As a woman of color, leadership, teamwork and life in general are completely different experiences. Elizabeth, Piper, and Roanne have shown me that assimilation isn't the answer. Female leaders are not male leaders, and we don't want to be. We want to do our jobs and do them well. End of story.

Each of the women I spoke with encountered a moment of reflection in their careers where they realized they had to dedicate time to cultivate their personal selves to become better professionally. Looking inward moved and moves them forward. They are confident. They flex with industry and societal changes and are open to the voices of those around them.

There's no one type of leader or one way to lead. There will always be a new hashtag, but there will only ever be one you. Your singular background informs the way you see the world. Your unique perspective is magic. Don't apologize for or sacrifice that magic for what the world is saying you need to be. Don't let terms like "girlboss" mold you. Embrace whatever your inner boss looks like and follow its lead.

Artigo
JOANA CORREIA

VOLTE-FACE
VERTIKAL félicity
STÉPHANIE BRUSICK

KRONA ONE
YVONNE SCHÜTTLER

COMBINE
JULIE PATARD

ANCHO
BEATRIZ LOZANO

SENATOR
ZUZANA LICKO

NAOMI DESAI
X
THOUGHTMATTER