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OPENERS

CORNER OFFICE: CARYL M. STERN

BY ADAM BRYANT

It's Showtime, So Take That Deep Breath

Q. Do you remember the first time you were somebody's boss?

A. My first real job where I supervised people was right after graduate school. I worked for Northwestern University and helped run its noncredit continuing education program. I was the director of it, and it was a really fun job — a little bit like herding cats because I had to hire all of these people to teach who didn't normally teach.

I hired the best artists in town to teach painting classes, and all the best musicians to teach music classes. I hired a bunch of chefs to teach cooking classes. When I took over the program, it was about 50 or 60 courses. By the time I left about two and a half years later, it was closer to 400 courses.

Q. What about important experiences in college?

A. I went to Westchester Community College, where I ended up in a theater group. That experience exposed me to a whole new world. I was the costume designer on a couple of shows, and then I had the lead in a couple of shows, too. But then I went more into the costume design side and ultimately decided I really liked the artwork and became an art major.

Q. You're one of several C.E.O.'s I've interviewed with a background in theater.

A. I'm not surprised. You need to be able to get up and deliver the good news and the bad news. It's just that same feeling before you go on stage, and you take that deep breath. In my organization now, with several hundred people working for me, I have to be that policeman and that show leader at the same time. So what better training is there?



EARL WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Caryl M. Stern, the president and chief executive of the U.S. Fund for Unicef, says that her background in the theater has also helped her as a leader, because "you need to be able to get up and deliver good news and bad news."

Q. *What were some early leadership lessons for you?*

A. I was hired as a dean at Polytechnic University in New York when I was 28 years old, and I didn't know when I was hired that I was the first woman dean they'd ever had. I went into that job thinking I had to be one of the boys and act like the boys. Somewhere in there I learned that if I just stopped trying to be something I wasn't, they were either going to like me or not and that would be O.K.

But the "like me or not" part of it was a big thing for me to learn. I am who I am, and what you see is what you get. I speak up. I say what I think. I tell the people who work for me when I hire them: "If you work for me, you're going to hear what I'm thinking. You can push back, and I'm going to listen when you push back." My staff doesn't have to worry, "Is she angry? Is she happy? Is she contemplating?" They know where they stand. They know what I want. They know what makes me happy. I know what they want. You don't have to like me. It's O.K.

Q. *When you came to the U.S. Fund for Unicef four years ago, what were your goals in terms of building the culture?*

A. I've never worked with a better team than I'm working with right now, and I've never worked in an environment as energized as the one I'm working in right now. And that didn't happen by chance. We hired coaches to help make that happen. We wrote values to help make that happen. We decided we wanted to be the non-profit you'd want to work for.

We had a staff retreat and we did a blowup of a magazine cover with the senior management team on it that said, "U.S. Fund for Unicef Named Charity of the Year Five Years Out." And we spent a weekend holed up in a hotel, and we wrote the article. If we were going to be named five years from now the charity of the year, why? What would we have done? What would we have accomplished? And we spent a lot of time on that, but also, what would we be internally? What would it feel like? What would you as an employee expect? What would I, as a boss, want from you? What's the environment?

Q. *What were some other changes you made early on?*

A. As a new C.E.O., I had breakfast with every single staff person over the course of the first six months. And then I said to every boss, every senior employee: "I want your brightest and your best. Give me a list. Who are your brightest and your best?" I didn't tell them how many names. They all gave me their lists, and I said: "O.K., you've got one year. At the end of the year, either everyone working for you is on this list, or you're telling me how you're getting them there or you're getting rid of them. If we are going to attract the brightest and the best, then we've got to keep only the brightest and the best."

That was one thing we changed immediately. Some people were really good at what they did, but they were really difficult to work with. They're all gone. I can teach people skills. I can't teach them how to play in the sandbox.

Q. *How do you hire?*

A. I'd want you to describe to me not what your management style is, not how you're going to supervise, but how you work in a team. What's your role in a team? What do you usually do? How good are you at giving feedback? How good are you at hearing feedback? Can you work for someone who's going to give it to you between the eyes and is going to expect it back? I want to get a sense of what your needs are from me. What makes a workplace good for you? I want to understand how you're going to fit into the circle of this group.

Q. *What other questions?*

A. I will ask you: So tell me about your career. What's the thing that you're most proud of? Why are you most proud of it? What do you think is the greatest challenge you ever faced before and how did you resolve it? Do you ask for help? Do you offer help? Give me an example of a time you offered help where it wasn't your job to help but you did it anyway. Do you volunteer anywhere? Have you ever volunteered anywhere? What are you passionate about? What do you do with your free time?

Q. *And if you could only ask somebody a couple of questions?*

A. Give me an example of a team you've been a part of. And when you're really stressed out at work, what do you do? How do you handle it? What's your coping mechanism? That really tells me a whole lot about you.