



April 23, 2011

It's Showtime, So Take That Deep Breath

By ADAM BRYANT

*This interview with **Caryl M. Stern**, president and chief executive of the U.S. Fund for Unicef, was conducted and condensed by **Adam Bryant**.*

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. *Was that an easy transition for you into that kind of role?*

A. At that point in my life, it never dawned on me I couldn't do something. I was 22. It was fun. I would go to bars and listen to bands and figure out which would be the best one to teach a course on how you get your band into a bar. So by the time Saturday night rolled around and I'd walk into any club, I knew every musician. I knew artists and I knew athletes. It never dawned on me that I couldn't get access to somebody.

Q. *What about 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.

Q. *Were you on stage or behind the stage?*

A. 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?

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 think I'm a good leader now and I do a decent job of running my organization, and a big part of that is because I've gotten past that lesson. 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. It was a very interesting time in my life. I've taught leadership development at [Manhattanville College](#). So it was a chance to take all of this textbook learning and actually apply it. Can you do it? Can you really have a work team? And 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 nonprofit 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? So it wasn’t only about what will we achieve, but how are we going to get there.

Q. *What other steps did you take?*

A. We hired a coach who worked with us collectively but also coached us individually about process — not skills, process. He actually took us through the process of learning how to work together, and it was the most phenomenal thing I’ve ever been a part of.

We have an entire team really working together now, so the sum is so much greater than its parts. I’ve never sat at a management table before where people will say, “Well, my division really needs this, but I think your division’s needs are bigger, so I’m going to put mine off to the side.” I’m not describing utopia. It’s a competitive environment, but there is a sense of trust and a bond within this group.

Q. *So what would be your lesson to other organizations trying to do something similar?*

A. You have to take time to get to know each other — not to be friends necessarily. If you end up as friends, that’s great. But I need to understand what you need to work, and you need to understand what I need to work. If I understand that time has no meaning for you and time has a lot of meaning for me, then we’d better negotiate how we’re going to handle that. And oftentimes in management experiences, we don’t have those discussions. So you come late to meetings. I show up on time. The meeting now starts 15 minutes late. I’m angry; you’re angry. And this is how we’re going to do our best work? No, this doesn’t really work. So I need to sit down and negotiate with you.

But we are going to honor that the six people on our team are the most important six people to each other. So that means if you expect something from me by 5 o’clock, you’re going to get it. You have to be able to do your work all day and not worry about whether that’s going to be in your in-box by 5. And the moment you have to worry about it, the team doesn’t work.

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. *What else did you do?*

A. We wrote corporate values as an organization. We had never had them before. From the security guard at the front door to me, everybody participated in that exercise, which took several weeks. We all committed to them. We printed them, and put them on everyone’s desk. We changed the evaluation forms so you are not only measured on your productivity and performance but on how you work.

You could be the best fund-raiser in the world, but if I’m hearing from your colleagues or your boss or those who work for you that you don’t treat others respectfully, that you are dismissive, then you’re not going to work for me.

Q. *You’ve thought a lot about the culture you want to create.*

A. The driving motivator behind the workplace I’m trying to create right now is the living proof that the fear factor does not have to be the motivation. You can work in a place and do your best work because you so believe in the cause and because you’re so valued, not because you are always looking for a raise and not because you’re afraid of being fired, but because you truly buy in and really want to succeed. I have to be the kind of boss who creates that environment, and I do believe it starts with me.

Q. *How do you hire? What are you looking for and what questions do you ask? If you were interviewing me for a job, how would that conversation go?*

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?

Q. *What else do you ask about?*

A. I want to get a sense of what your needs are from me. What makes a workplace good for you? Again, I'm interested in the how, not just the what. I want to know who you are. I want to know what makes you tick. 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.