

# The New York Times

CORNER OFFICE

## Want to Talk to the Chief? Book Your Half-Hour

October 3, 2009

This interview of Susan Lyne, chief executive of Gilt Groupe, was conducted, edited and condensed by Adam Bryant.

Any employee can schedule time to meet with Susan Lyne, the C.E.O. of the Gilt Groupe, a members-only, online seller of luxury brand goods at discount prices. Ms. Lyne, who previously led Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, joined Gilt last year.



### Corner Office

Every Sunday, Adam Bryant talks with top executives about the challenges of leading and managing.

Adam Bryant of The New York Times talks with Susan Lyne, CEO of Gilt Groupe, about the leadership lessons she has learned over the years.

*Q. Talk about your learning curve when you first started managing others.*

*A. I think my tendency initially was always to be really nice with my requests or my comments on something. And I would always preface whatever critique I had with, "My opinion, not necessarily right," and I realized pretty quickly that that was not going to get the result that I wanted. So just dropping the preface and saying, "This is*

what I think this needs,” was a big a-ha moment.

*Q. Was that a hard adjustment?*

**A.** I think it has always been. My biggest challenge as a manager over all has always been moving from the nice to the “this is what we’re going to do.” And I still always like to get input, listen to what people have to say. But it’s really clear that the decision has to be made at some point, and I’m a whole lot more comfortable with that now than I was 25 years ago.

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*Q. What are some other important leadership lessons you’ve learned?*

**A.** When I started editing Premiere magazine, it was the first time I had ever been the true leader. When we had our first issue coming out, my instinct was to send my editor’s letter to my boss, who was running Murdoch Magazines. My thinking was, “Let me get some feedback here.” And he called me up and he said, “What is this?” And I said: “It’s my editor’s letter. I just thought you’d like to see it.” He said: “I don’t buy a dog and bark for it. Don’t ever send me your editor’s letter again.”

*Q. What did you take away from that?*

**A.** I’m going to live and die by my own success here, and I’m not going to get away with being the No. 2 anymore. So I’d better get comfortable with my decisions, my voice.

*Q. What other broader lessons have you learned?*

**A.** A defining moment for me was when I was relieved of my job running ABC Entertainment. All the rumors were that I was going to be given a greater role there. So when this happened, I was totally shocked. But it was also one of those moments where I couldn’t hide. There was no, “She’s leaving to explore other opportunities,”

or all the niceties of job changes in the corporate world. And the fact that it was as public and as sudden actually turned out to be liberating, because I didn't have to make things up or try to put a nicer face on it.

And it gave me an ability to really look honestly at my tenure there, and to think really clearly about what I wanted to do next. And I had never in my life taken time off. So I had gone from one job to another, always because someone offered me a job. But I had never been able to direct my own career. It was the first time in my life I was able to do that. So what I thought was the worst thing that could have happened to me actually turned out to be a real opportunity.

*Q. And do you think that changed your sense of risk, in terms of your career?*

*A.* Totally. I think that when you have been successful in business, the great fear is that you're not going to be successful at something, and it's all going to be over. So the worst thing happened — I got fired. And it actually turned out to be a big opportunity, because a number of people who never would have come after me in a job suddenly wanted to sit down and talk. And it gave me far more long-term opportunities than I ever would have had without that. It's counterintuitive. You think that I'm going to end up being damaged by being fired. And point of fact, I've done enough good things over the course of my career that there were plenty of people who were going to be interested.

And it did give me a window to really think, O.K., I'm not going to be reactive anymore. I want to think about what I want to do next.

*Q. How would you say your leadership style has changed or evolved over time?*

*A.* One of the things I do more of is to make sure I can carve out a certain period of time every week to step back and think about the big picture. I think early in my career I was constantly looking at what was coming next week, next month, but

rarely carving out time to really think about the future. It's useful on so many levels, not just because it does give you long-term focus, but because it forces you to reassess all those short-term decisions, too. I need time alone, quiet time alone, to do my job well.

*Q. What else?*

**A.** The other thing that I have done, increasingly, was really triggered by a conversation I had with a young Silicon Valley executive, Marissa Mayer, who mentioned that she did office hours every week. She was a professor before she came to [Google](#), and she kept office hours going, and she said it was a really useful way to kind of access the engineers' real ideas. Not the ideas that come out of a meeting, but, "What are you excited about?" And it sounded like an interesting concept to me. I do it now — I try to do it two hours a week, where anyone from our company can book half an hour with me.

It's turned out to be a fantastic way to find out what's bubbling under the surface and what's not coming across to people. And a surprising number of people will book time with me who are significantly down the food chain. In some cases it's because they want to have a little face time with me so that they can get noticed. But there's always something that's on their mind.

And when you are running a company it's very hard to get below a certain level, maybe one level below your direct reports. It does give me a way to get to know people a little better than I pass in the hallway or I see in the Monday all-hands meeting. It's also a great early-warning system for something that may be either misunderstood or a challenge within a department.

*Q. What career advice do you offer people?*

**A.** In my early 20s, I talked my way into a job as the assistant to the editor in chief of

City Magazine. It was a really useful role to be in, being able to watch someone doing the job you wanted was hugely valuable. It's actually something that I have urged a lot of younger people to do. What I always ask is, whose job interests you? Try and get a job as their assistant. Just to have a seat at the table, be able to listen in, listen in on the phone conversations, understand how their day works, what the job really entails.

And one of the interesting things is that many times people discover, "I really don't want to do that." So it's useful on many levels to either allow you to see what kind of skills you'll have to develop and to be imprinted with a good leadership style, or it's going to tell you that you've got to rethink where you're going.

**Q.** *Let's talk about hiring.*

**A.** I do think that the key role for a C.E.O. is recruiting. I mean, you can be the smartest person in your industry, and if you can't attract talent, you're never going to succeed.

Something that I have learned over time — and that I think not enough people recognize — is that when you are trying to recruit somebody, the first thing they are going to do is call someone you've worked with before, usually multiple people. And if they say it was a great experience, then half the job is done. If they say it wasn't a great experience, you've lost them. So making sure that you do take care of the people who work with you along the way is such a great investment.

**Q.** *So once they're in your office, how do you interview job candidates?*

**A.** I usually try to get someone to talk specifically about how they handle different challenges. So, depending on what the role is, I want to understand what their work style is, and I want to understand how they deal with a crisis, a challenge. Because everyone's going to tell you about what they've accomplished, right? That's just part

of the interview. They'll tell you about all the successes, but I want to know what happened when something went badly, and what they would say were the most significant mistakes they've made along the way and what they've done along the way to correct them: What did you learn from it? How would you do it differently, or what would you say was the best thing you did in that moment of crisis?

I ask them how they build their team. What kind of team do you think you're going to need under you? Where are you going to look for those people? That gives you a good sense of whether they really understand where the talent is for that job. And I like to find out what gets them excited about work. Why do you like to do this? You're a C.M.O., you're a C.F.O., you're a — whatever it might be. What do you love about it?

*Q. Anything you have a particularly low tolerance for?*

*A.* Anyone who always talks about “me” instead of “we.” That’s not a good signal. Also, people who are trying to sell me on why they’re good. There are a lot of people who come in with what is clearly a canned speech about their careers. And after a while it’s like Muzak. So that’s why I like to break through and really get them to talk about something specific.

It’s usually the people who have a very well-formed speech they give when they go to a job interview who are incapable of really getting away from that. They’ve practiced the questions that they think they’re going to be asked, and that is a disaster. I actually think that a lot of coaches do a disservice in this area because they get you to over-prepare and get you to think about what are generic questions. That’s really not what someone’s looking for most of the time when you’re recruiting for a senior job.

*Q. How long does it take you to figure out if somebody has been coached?*

**A.** No more than 10 minutes.

**Q.** *Over time, have you changed what you look for in job candidates?*

**A.** I think that now I have a very strong antenna for someone who is going to be poison within a company. I think that early on, I was wowed by talent, and I was willing to set aside the idea that this person might not be a team player. Now, somebody needs to be able to work with people — that's No. 1 on the list.

I need people who are going to be able to build a team, manage a team, recruit well and work well with their peers. And that's another thing that you learn over time. Somebody may be a great manager of a team, but incapable of working across the company to get things done because they're competitive, or because of any number of reasons. But can they manage down? Can they work across the company and get people to want to work with them and to help them succeed? And are they someone who is going to keep you well informed of everything that's going on?

**Q.** *Are you a gadget person?*

**A.** My BlackBerry is my best friend. I honestly don't know how I lived without a BlackBerry because I am not a phone person. I mean, I hate getting calls at home. I've never been someone who liked to chat on the phone. I'd rather not take calls at the office if I don't have to, and a BlackBerry is such an efficient way to communicate. You don't have to do the five minutes of chatter at the beginning. You don't have to make the lunch date. It's just a wonderful thing.

**Q.** *What would you like business schools to teach more, or less, of?*

**A.** There are a lot of great courses on managing or developing a strategic agenda, but there is very little about how to work with your peers where you need to get X done, and you need these other three departments to give you X amount of time in order

to succeed at that.

The people who truly succeed in business are the ones who actually have figured out how to mobilize people who are not their direct reports. Everyone can get their direct reports to work for them, but getting people who do not have to give you their time to engage and to support you and to want you to succeed is something that is sorely missing from B-school courses.