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Preoccupations

From Employer to Employee (It's a Process)

By HOWARD GIVNER

EVERYTHING had changed, and yet nothing had changed. On May 12, I owned my own business. On May 13, I became an employee. The next thing I knew, I had a boss.

After 20 years of running Paint the Town Red, a New York-based event production company I had founded, I was approached by the people at the Global Events Group, an event agency in Europe. They had raised some money from a private equity firm to mount a United States expansion, and we were on their acquisition list. I was ready for a change, and the idea of being part of an international team appealed to me. So I decided to make the leap. All 12 of my employees stayed on, with me as the C.E.O. for North America.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Howard Givner, chief executive for North America at the Global Events Group, used to run his own event production company before Global Events acquired it.

It has not been easy. For one thing, Global Events' management style is quite different from what mine was. Going into the deal, I knew that Fermin Perez — one of the two owners of the parent company, along with a Spanish private equity firm — was a passionate, creative genius and definitely a driver. I tend to be more analytical and strategic and, invariably, slower in making decisions.

On paper, we make a nice complement to each other. But business isn't conducted on paper. After a few weeks he came into my office and said: "We need to move faster. We need to think big." Which was a polite way of saying I was going too slowly with our growth plans. When you're the boss you can set your own pace, but I was no longer the boss. (In fairness, while we're moving faster than I'm used to, we're probably going slower than Fermin would like, so it's an adjustment for him, too.)

During months of talks while we were trying to put the deal together, we'd discuss ideas as equals, and become enthusiastic about all the great things we'd do once we put the companies together. After the deal was done and the Champagne drunk, we were no longer equals; he and Ana Grandia, his business partner, were my bosses. When they gave me their check at closing, they bought that right.

For the most part, I don't mind having a boss after not having one for 20 years. It's sometimes nice not to be alone at the top anymore, and when I have to deliver bad news to an employee, having a manager higher than me does make it easier. I also have much more support now, enabling me to focus more on sales and marketing, which I like.

The headquarters in Madrid hired a new international controller to monitor our finances, and I love having our books more proactively managed. On the flip side, I can't exactly say I look forward to his requests for explanations of various expenses, or his rigid reporting deadlines, though I know these are necessary for us to get ahead. Because of the time change, his e-mails are waiting for me in my inbox when I wake up in the morning. Like little Christmas presents.

Here's the weird thing, though; I can't stop thinking like a business owner. One day, Fermin showed me the new marketing materials he wanted us to get: a polished blue hinged box, with dozens of glossy photo inserts of our event portfolio inside. I told him that I'd price it out and get back to him, but that it looked very expensive to mass-produce. He smiled and said it didn't matter; that this is what we needed to crack open some bigger accounts. I couldn't help but push back as hard as I could. Even though it was no longer my money, it killed me to spend it.

Two hundred of these blue boxes arrived in our office recently, though I was told the expense would not come out of my budget.

It took me a while to find the right balance of knowing when to take a back seat and when to push back. (O.K., so I'm still trying to figure that out.) On the one hand, I know the mind-set of American clients pretty well, at least when it comes to how they approach special events, and that's part of why they bought my company, so I figure I need to speak up when I disagree.

ON the other hand, they got to be a bigger firm in a shorter time than I did, which is part of why I sold the company to them. And when I remember that, I climb into the back seat. I'm not exactly a back-seat kind of guy. But it's not so bad when we come up with a creative idea to pitch a new client and a 3-D visual animation of that idea arrives from Spain the next day, complete with dramatic musical score.

It's now been nine months since I sold the company, and my identity crisis as a former-owner-but-still-in-charge-though-not-the-top-dog is easing up a bit. Though we meandered a bit from side to side in the beginning, we are now clearly moving in a unified direction. I've learned many things from Fermin, the first mentor I've had in ages.

And having a boss also means I get a pat on the back for doing good work. Those pats are in short supply when you're an entrepreneur.