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Executive Life

THE BOSS



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The Art of the Gaffe

RECENTLY, I sold my business to the Cendant Corporation. At the closing, I had to sign a 280-page document. One paragraph restricted the role of an employee who had been with me 15 years. I refused to sign; I said the deal was not about money, it was about people. The 40-some people in the room were horrified. They redrafted the paragraph, though.

After the closing, I called the six men who have been most influential in my career to thank them. I had to reach one of them in Asia. In return, he told me that my call was one of the great souvenirs of his career. The real estate field usually has very hard edges, so that meant a lot to me.

My husband, Martin Begun, is a supreme politician. He gives me daily lessons in dealing with powerful and accomplished real estate developers. He'll listen to a phone conversation and then say I should have been more diplomatic, or not so aggressive, or that I talked too much and should have listened more.

He is constantly covering for my faux pas. I'll often leave dinners early, while he stays until the very end. Once, I went to a dinner honoring the Duchess of Kent. After dinner, we retired to the living room, and I went to the powder room and was locked in. In the company of royalty, you should not be the first to leave, but everybody thought that in typical fashion I had gone home early. They

didn't find me until the dinner party was over and they were vacuuming.

When my husband and I toured the gardens at Highgrove, Prince Charles's home outside London, my cellphone rang. You should not have your cellphone on in Prince Charles's garden. As I went back to the parking lot, I took off my shoes because my feet hurt. At dinner that night, the prince came over and asked:

"Weren't you the lady who took her shoes off while she talked on her cellphone? I watched you every step of the way, and I was amused by the whole situation."

My grandfather was Barney Pressman, the founder of Barney's, and he once advised me that if I did nothing else, I should secure phone numbers that are easy to remember. I still remember Barney's old number; it ended in three zeroes. Now all my phone numbers end in "00," and I can't tell one from the other.

I have a King Charles cocker spaniel named Benji and a black-and-white Lowchen named Domino. One or the other is always with me. Recently, I took Benji to a meeting with some clients. After I gave him a chicken-jerky dog treat, the bag fell on the floor. Every time I tried to retrieve it, Benji growled at me and the whole meeting broke up. The men wouldn't go near him, though he's all of 20 pounds. My partner distracted Benji with an envelope and was able to grab the bag. Benji relaxed, and the meeting resumed. □