Sir Howard Stringer: A Career of Crossing Cultures

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Published: March 7, 2005

Sir Howard Stringer's ascension to the top job at the Sony Corporation, making him the first non-Japanese executive to run the company, is the culmination of a career largely built on a special talent for making cross-cultural connections.

He had already made other formidable leaps: from Welshman to American grunt in Vietnam; from CBS newsman to CBS chairman; and from Japanese corporate warrior to British knight of the realm.

If the pattern of his other successes holds, the future for Sony may involve a tectonic shift in its own culture, away from pre-eminence for its technology-based businesses and toward its media holdings. There has been recent speculation that Sir Howard may even seek a public offering to spin off the entertainment properties - including Sony's filmed entertainment division, its music division, and the newly acquired MGM studio - as a separate entity from Sony's business in electronics.

Friends and colleagues of Mr. Stringer have long described him as a hugely gifted manager of people, both those above and below him. He has used those skills on a full range of personalities: from Dan Rather, whose CBS newscast he once produced; to stars of television and film, like David Letterman and Candice Bergen, whom he brought to CBS entertainment; to Laurence A. Tisch, the notoriously tight-fisted CBS owner, whose frequently stormy course at the network Sir Howard was compelled to steer; and finally to the Japanese leadership at Sony, whom he increasingly won over with his revamping of the company's American division.
Much of that division is centered in media properties, including Sony's film studio and music division, both of which have undergone some drastic belt-tightening under Sir Howard in the past 22 months.

That is a role Sir Howard has had long experience with. He presided over several waves of staff cuts at CBS, especially in the news division, where more than 200 staff members were laid off in the late 1980's. According to many of those who survived that purge, only to see CBS News fall to a distant third among the broadcast networks in ratings and influence, it was a blow from which the news division has never fully recovered.

But, characteristically, Sir Howard was never widely blamed for all that bloodletting; Mr. Tisch was. The main explanation for that accomplishment, cited by associates of Sir Howard, then and now, is his most outstanding management skill: his personal charm.

Certainly few network newspeople had ever been told they were losing their jobs with so much sensitivity - and in such an elegant British accent.

As Mr. Rather put it in a 2003 interview: "He recognizes it is traumatic for people. They long remember not only what is done, but how it's done."

Asked for reaction to Sir Howard's potential move to the top position at Sony yesterday, several executives inevitably used the word charm to describe Sir Howard. David Geffen, one of the founders of the DreamWorks studio, said: "Howard is one of the most charming and dignified executives in the entertainment business."

CBS's entertainment division, which all but collapsed in the late 1980's, recovered under Sir Howard to lead the industry again in the early 1990's. That is when Sir Howard successfully wooed Mr. Letterman to the network, a coup that has been worth hundreds of millions of dollars to CBS over the past decade.

He arrived at Sony after a brief stint running an ill-starred effort by a consortium of former Bell phone companies to enter the entertainment business.

At Sony, Sir Howard has been compelled to reshape a reeling Sony Music division, which he did by forcing out its longtime and legendary chief executive, Thomas D. Mottola. Taking a page from his own experience, he reached across corporate cultures at that point, replacing Mr. Mottola in early 2003 with a complete outsider to the music industry, Andrew Lack, one of Sir Howard's closest friends from his CBS News days. (Mr. Lack had himself risen out of news to become the No. 2 executive at NBC under Bob Wright.)

Mr. Lack started a restructuring that eliminated thousands of jobs at Sony Music and led first to a turnaround in profits - $175 million last year - and then to a merger with Bertelsmann's music division, BMG. Having succeeded with that move, Sir Howard repeated the formula a year later, installing a figure completely outside the Hollywood culture, Michael Lynton, to oversee Sony's entertainment business in Los Angeles, particularly film. Mr. Lynton had been the head of AOL Europe and a chief executive at Penguin Books.

The movie studios had suffered from years of infighting and from expensive duds like "Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle." But Sony ended 2004 with the largest domestic market share: $1.3 billion in ticket sales. It had the No. 2 movie, "Spider-Man 2," and an unexpected hit in "The Grudge," which cost it $10 million and made $124 million
worldwide. One weak spot was a poor performance at the Oscars.

Now 63, Sir Howard has built his long record of success on shrewd adaptation to circumstances. That ability was clear early on. As a young Oxford-educated employee of CBS News in the 1960's, he was stunned to find himself, still a British citizen, eligible for the American draft. Faced with a choice of serving in Vietnam or returning to England, and forever giving up a career in American television, Sir Howard shipped out.

He did not exactly belong there, but Sir Howard found a way to make it work. He eventually won a medal for meritorious achievement.

Laura M. Holson contributed reporting for this article.

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