

THE ROLE OF THE
CEO ASSISTANT—
PART THERAPIST,
PART GATEKEEPER—
IS A SOLITARY ONE



{CORNER OFFICE CONFIDENTIAL}

An inside look at the Seraphic Society, the secretive club of assistants to high-profile CEOs. In a bad economy, the society and a growing number of support groups like it are more relevant than ever.

By Jennifer Reingold

SOCIAL HUMILIATION LOOMED. IT WAS JUST moments before the dinner was to begin, and a senior executive at real estate firm Tishman Speyer realized that he had no idea which titles to use to properly introduce his guests, a group of American diplomats. Flummoxed, he called Carole Karpel, executive assistant to Jerry Speyer, Tishman's chairman and co-CEO. Karpel didn't know either, but she had a secret weapon on her shelf: a small white book with a quill on the outside listing the names and numbers of the 100 or so members of the Seraphic Society, an elite and secretive group of executive assistants to the most powerful people in the New York City area. "I remembered that one of our members was the former assistant to [former Secretary of State] Cyrus Vance," she says. "I just called her, and

within three minutes she gave me the answer." Crisis averted.

The request was nothing out of the ordinary for the Seraphic Society, which has served as a kind of secretarial Skull and Bones for the past 69 years. The term comes from the biblical name for the order of angels, the Seraphim, that stand in the presence of God; its members have included assistants to the heads of Xerox, the New York Stock Exchange, GE, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Bloomingdale's, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the American Museum of Natural History. Its goal: "To establish a bond of cooperation and friendship among secretaries to leaders"—and, by leveraging this network, help both them and their bosses do a better job. "When I find it hard to track someone down," says Speyer, "I can always rely on Carole and her Seraphic Society pals."

In an era of economic turbulence and increased CEO turn-

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over—not to mention the embrace of social networking—it's no wonder that the Seraphic Society and other groups like it are flourishing. Although the Seraphic Society is the oldest and arguably the most exclusive, a similar group, the Silicon Valley Catalyst Association (SVCA), was founded in 1995 for executive assistants, or EAs (the term "secretary" has mostly gone the way of the Dictaphone), to CEOs in the Valley; its members now include aides to the CEOs of Facebook, Cisco, Apple, and Google. There are at least two groups specifically for assistants to celebrities—one on each coast—and dozens of regional organizations for executive assistants have sprouted up on LinkedIn and Facebook. "The networks are a critical aspect for support during these times for all of us," says Leni Miller, president of EASearch, which places top-level executive assistants.

While some 4.2 million people now define themselves as administrative professionals, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics—making it one of the largest single job titles in the country—the men and women tapped to support those in the corner office are in a class by themselves. "If the CEO's job is the loneliest job, the CEO's executive assistant has the next loneliest job," says Xerox chairman and former CEO Anne Mulcahy, whose assistant, Rosemary Clark, has worked with the three most recent CEOs at the company, including Ursula Burns, who took over in July. "You really don't have any peers, the role you play is always under the microscope, and clearly there's got to be a discretion that's pretty demanding."

That's an understatement. An EA to a bigtime CEO is regularly

asked to do everything from booking a constantly shifting 24/7 schedule to finding a pharmacy open in Tokyo at 3 a.m. to, lately, shielding the CEO from an angry mob of paparazzi. Assistants can earn salaries well into the six figures, often manage staffs of their own, and are expected to be on call at any moment of any day—without ever violating the trust and privacy that a top executive depends upon. "There's not a minute when I don't know where he is," says Denise White, EA for the past 10 years to Kenneth Chenault, CEO and chairman of American Express. "He may want to get his shoes shined. That's fine," she says. "I just need to know."

Then there are the special requests many a master of the universe is known to make. Just ask the assistant who had to locate a sheep for a birthday surprise—then arrange for its transport to a farm when it wasn't allowed inside the building for health reasons. The world of celebrity assistants, of course, is famous for such personal tasks, known as "P&Cs" (personal and confidential). "When money is no object," says Bonnie Low-Kramen, founder of New York Celebrity Assistants and the assistant to actress Olympia Dukakis, "it opens up a whole new area of needs."

But no EA can have every answer or fulfill every request. That's the allure of their groups, which allow EAs to network for jobs, share war stories, and, not insignificantly, help smooth the way for their bosses wherever possible. "If I have to call, say, Jamie Dimon's office and set up an appointment," says Clark, Mulcahy's former assistant, "you know that you'll see one of your Seraphic sisters along the line and try to help each other out." (There was a Seraphic brother once, but he left.)



CAROLE KARPEIL
HAS BEEN JERRY
SPEYER'S ASSISTANT
FOR 42 YEARS—AND
A SERAPHIC SOCIETY
MEMBER FOR 11

Most of all, such organizations provide a support network for a job that is, in many ways, unique. “When you work at the CEO level, you don’t really have anyone you can share things with,” says Debbie Gross, chief executive assistant to Cisco’s John Chambers for the past 18 years and a founding member of the SVCA. No surprise, then, that these organizations place a premium on exclusivity. The high-end EA world is a small club—and a very selective one. Potential new Seraphics cannot apply, but must be suggested—and vetted—by current members. What’s more, it’s not enough to be great at your job: Aspiring members are judged not only on their own reputation and experience but also on that of their boss. (Lloyd from *Entourage*,

Out of deference to the economic climate, Seraphic president Mary Troy, executive assistant to Harry Hohn, the retired CEO of New York Life, says next year’s bosses’ dinner has been canceled, and the group is focusing its efforts on developing a much-needed website and doing more charity outreach.

Still, the ultimate goal, say Seraphics and their counterparts in other organizations, is to make the connections that help them help their bosses. SVCA has a “best practices” book with tips on how to find a nanny, how to charter a private plane, and who makes the best birthday cakes in New York. The group hosts regular speakers at its meetings (Dave Roux, partner at

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don’t even bother.) The SVCA, aware of the potential impact that any leaks could have on its members’ companies, requires members to sign a nondisclosure agreement before every meeting.

The Seraphic Secretaries of America, as it was originally called, was the brainchild not of an assistant or a boss but of a PR man named Frederick Darius Benham. While trying to get attention from executives, he soon realized he couldn’t get anywhere without building a relationship with their gatekeepers. So in 1938, according to the self-published history of the group, *A Chronicle of the Seraphic Society*, he began to hand out “an award of merit” for “unfailing courtesy, tact, politeness, charm, urbanity, gentility, civility, amiability, good temper, and sweetness” whenever he came upon an assistant who went beyond the call of duty.

In 1940 he invited 12 secretaries to dinner at the Lexington Hotel in Manhattan. (The secretary to Dale Carnegie was among the attendees.) The following year’s highlight was the presentation of the group’s “Secretary of the Year” title, complete with a Remington Rand typewriter, to Phyllis Moir, author of *I Was Winston Churchill’s Private Secretary*. Though not a Seraphic, Moir brought public attention to the group—a boon for Benham, if not for those angels of discretion. Ultimately, the Seraphics split from Benham, holding annual banquets, regular membership meetings, and eventually an elegant “bosses’ dinner” every five years, funded by the companies themselves. Early attendees included the president of the New York Stock Exchange and the head of American Airlines, who in 1948 arranged for a group of Seraphics, many of whom had never flown, to cruise over Manhattan in a brand new DC-6. Bernard Baruch, the financier and government adviser, spoke at the 13th-anniversary dinner in 1953. Five years later it took place on the *Highlander* yacht, owned by Seraphic boss Malcolm Forbes. In the early 1980s a group of Seraphics took a trip to China. And at the society’s 65th-anniversary dinner, an elegant affair at New York City’s Metropolitan Club in 2005, 39 bosses attended.

Of course, in today’s environment of CEO firings and massive layoffs, some of that glamour has melted away, replaced by such practical issues as finding a new job and saving your boss money.

venture capital firm Silver Lake, was a recent guest), as well as compensation experts, recruiters, estate planners, and workshops on using Google more effectively. It is, in many ways, a shadow infrastructure to the famously tight bonds between Silicon Valley CEOs—and one with just as much power when it comes to getting anything done in technology. (Note to readers: If you tick off, say, Cisco’s Gross, good luck getting in the door at Facebook.)

ALTHOUGH IT IS CERTAINLY THRILLING TO BE A MEMBER of a CEO’s or a celebrity’s inner circle—affording invitations to high-end receptions, rides on private jets, and the like—job security is a big issue, especially these days. If a boss falls from grace, so does his or her team. While she says she couldn’t be happier, it can’t have been easy for Shake Nahapetian, a Seraphic who worked with former AIG CEO Hank Greenberg through his rise and fall—and now his attempt to build a new business—or for the Seraphic assistant to former Sotheby’s CEO Diana “Dede” Brooks when she pleaded guilty to price-fixing. Even worse than your boss losing his or her job: the possibility of having to work for—gasp—a vice president. “If you’ve been the queen,” says Cisco’s Gross, “it’s hard to go back to the other population.” The SVCA has helped its members negotiate their own versions of the golden handcuffs their bosses get, and EAs whose bosses have moved or been fired are allowed to stay in the group for a year.

Ultimately such organizations, for all their selectivity, serve as a reminder to CEOs that they probably couldn’t get through a single day without the help of their assistant. “When the partnership is good,” says recruiter Miller, “it’s like a marriage. But if you don’t have the right support, it’s worse than having no support at all.” In the case of Xerox’s Clark, the EA proved to be the common link between new and old leadership when Mulcahy came in during a time of crisis. “In some ways she trains the CEO,” Mulcahy says. “She taught me the protocols and had all of the knowledge about how to respond to things and who needed what. When I made mistakes, it was because I wasn’t listening to her.” Advice for us all. ■

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