

Recording Academy President Placed on Administrative Leave a Week Before Grammys

7:27 PM PST 1/16/2020 by Melinda Newman, Billboard, THR Staff



Mindy Small/FilmMagic
Deborah Dugan

In a statement, Deborah Dugan's attorney Bryan Freedman said, "What has been reported is not nearly the story that needs to be told. When our ability to speak is not restrained by a 28-page contract and legal threats, we will expose what happens when you 'step up' at the Recording Academy, a public nonprofit."

Deborah Dugan, who took over as Recording Academy president/CEO on Aug. 1, has been placed on administrative leave just over a week before the 2020 Grammy Awards due to "serious concerns" brought to the board of trustees' attention.

"In light of concerns raised to the Recording Academy Board of Trustees, including a formal allegation of misconduct by a senior female member of the Recording Academy team, the Board has placed Recording Academy President and CEO Deborah Dugan on administrative leave, effective immediately," a statement provided to *Billboard* Thursday night (Jan. 16) reads. "The Board has also retained two independent third-party investigators to conduct independent investigations of the allegations."

"The Board determined this action to be necessary in order to restore the confidence of the Recording Academy's Membership, repair Recording Academy employee morale, and allow the Recording Academy to focus on its mission of serving all music creators," the statement continues. "Board Chair Harvey Mason Jr. will serve as interim President and CEO pending the conclusion of the investigation."

Sources contacted by *Billboard* would not address the specific allegation of misconduct, but allege that, despite a thorough and months-long search for a new CEO, Dugan had not been a good fit almost from the start.

Sources say Dugan is working with prominent litigator Bryan Freedman and more information is likely going to be disclosed in the coming days.

"It's heartbreaking for people who care deeply about the organization that someone they trusted to fill that position would so quickly become so at odds with the organization," said a source close to the Recording Academy.

Her relationships within the organization deteriorated rapidly. "Once there were some indications that she was not cooperating with the staff and the board, everything unraveled surprisingly quickly and in a very complex way," the source says. "It wasn't like a single incident. It was a series of issues. I think it goes way beyond not just being a good fit."

Another source concurs, adding that "when you go in any job, you educate yourself in the past, as well as where you're at to know how to move forward and I don't think any of that was done appropriately by her." Academy insiders met with Dugan a number of times to try to "hit the reset button and get on the same page," a source says, but to no avail.

Though the statement stresses that Dugan, who relocated from New York to Los Angeles to take the job, is on administrative leave and had not departed, when asked if there was an expectation that Dugan might return following the investigation, a source replied "no."

However, another source says that the staff, many of them loyal to Dugan's predecessor, Neil Portnow, and the board were so entrenched in their way of thinking that Dugan was met with resistance at every turn and was unable to move forward.

"She was a huge source of discomfort for everyone there because she believed she was coming to be an agent of change, but they don't really want change at all," the source says. "They had entrenched ways of doing business and anything she tried to change was met with 'That's not the how we do it.'"

"On the one hand, you think this might be good to shake up a place that needs to be shook up, but apparently it wasn't right or she went too far with it too quickly," another source says.

Dugan ruffled feathers within the industry by not courting executives and going straight to talent. "Instead of trying to make inroads [with] heads of labels and publishers, she would go around them to artists and managers," a source alleges. "That political side of the role should be more to do with label heads and publishing heads and not cutting those people out. Those are the relationships that you want to build and people were noticing that she wasn't doing it."

The New York Times reported, citing a source, that Dugan had been removed after a complaint was filed by Portnow's assistant, who worked for Dugan temporarily, in which Dugan was accused of a bullying management style, which contributed to the assistant taking a leave of absence.

Less than three weeks ago, the Times reported, Dugan sent a memo to the Academy's head of human resources detailing her concerns about the governance and practices of the organization, leading her to conclude "something was seriously amiss at the Academy."

Dugan could not be immediately reached for comment.

The move continues the tremendous upheaval the Recording Academy has experienced starting nearly two years ago after Portnow told reporters backstage after the 2018 Grammy Awards ceremony, when only one woman won an award during the televised portion of the show, that women artists should "step up."

His remarks, which he later walked back, ignited a firestorm including calls for his resignation. In May 2018, the Recording Academy announced that after leading the organization for 17 years, he would leave in July 2019 at the end of his contract.

The search for a replacement began with the mission for someone who would increase the Academy's diversity and inclusivity. Dugan, the Academy's first female president/CEO, was officially announced in May 2019 as Portnow's successor.

Up to the end, there was no outside evidence of discord, despite whatever turmoil may have been occurring at the Recording Academy's Santa Monica offices. On Wednesday, an upbeat profile of Dugan, the former chief executive at non-profit AIDS-advocacy group RED, ran in the *Los Angeles Times* and sources say she was working on the Grammy show as usual. The 62nd annual Grammy Awards take place Jan. 26, in Los Angeles.

While the news will be industry scuttlebutt, a source says it will not affect the Grammy telecast since the news is too inside baseball to concern fans of the show. Additionally, Dugan had decided weeks ago that she would not address the audience during the show, as Portnow always did, so there will be no gap to fill in that regard.

Late Thursday night, Mason sent a letter to all members of the Recording Academy, alerting them of the change and of the investigation, but added, "we are unable to share the details of the concerns to protect employee privacy," and that Recording Academy Industry, Government Affairs & Member Relations Officer Daryl Friedman and VP of membership and industry relations Laura Segura Mueller will share additional information" when available and appropriate.

In a statement Friday morning, Freedman said, "What has been reported is not nearly the story that needs to be told. When our ability to speak is not restrained by a 28-page contract and legal threats, we will expose what happens when you 'step up' at the Recording Academy, a public nonprofit."

Katie Atkinson and Gail Mitchell contributed to this report.

A version of this story first appeared on [Billboard.com](#).

Jan. 17, 6 a.m.: This story has been updated with a statement from Freedman.

Jan. 17, 6:12 a.m.: This story has been updated with additional reporting from *The New York Times*.