

RECORDING ACADEMY

Grammy Chaos Continues With a Flurry of Reports About Deborah Dugan's Exit

With less than a week to go before this year's ceremony, attention has been diverted to the Recording Academy's org chart.

BY DAN ADLER

JANUARY 21, 2020



BY SLAVEN VLASIC/GETTY IMAGES.

With the Grammys approaching on Sunday, the circumstances surrounding **Deborah Dugan's sudden removal** from her position as chief executive and president of the Recording Academy remain unclear—though the reporting has at least brought some attention to the issues Dugan talked about before her exit.

In a **letter** addressed to the “Academy Family” and published on the Grammy website on Monday, Dugan's interim replacement, **Harvey Mason Jr.**, wrote, “In November of 2019, the Executive Committee became aware of abusive work environment complaints alleged against Ms. Dugan.” (This, according to the academy, was the reason she was placed on leave.)

Mason Jr. went on to claim that Dugan's own allegations against the Academy—which reportedly addressed issues with the organization's governance and financial management, and constituted, according to Dugan attorney **Bryan Freedman**, the real reason she was pushed out—were only made after those complaints were lodged against her. “Ms. Dugan's attorney then informed the Executive Committee that if Ms. Dugan was paid millions of dollars, she would ‘withdraw’ her allegations and resign,” he added.

On Saturday the *Hollywood Reporter* **reported** two immediate consequences of Dugan's removal. Freedman told the trade that he hired a security detail for her after a threat was made Friday night, saying, “Based upon credible and extremely disturbing information, Deborah Dugan now has 24-hour, round-the-clock security.” And Champagne Billecart-Salmon dropped its Grammy sponsorship over the conflict. “I have worked with Deb Dugan for many years going back to when she was CEO of (Red),” the brand's Americas director, **Geoffrey Loisel**, told *THR*. “She is a person with high ethical standards and has always been the utmost professional in our business dealings.”

And Showbiz411 **reported** that **Claudine Little**, a longtime assistant to Dugan predecessor **Neil Portnow** who also worked for Dugan, plans to file a lawsuit alleging that “Dugan caused an untenable situation in the executive offices that included verbal abuse and mistreatment.” Little has retained attorney **Patty Glaser**, who, as *Variety* **pointed out**, previously represented **Harvey Weinstein** and **Charlie Walk**, as well as Kirk Kerkorian, **Keith Olbermann**, and **Conan O'Brien**. (There's no official news that Little is the “senior female executive” who the academy said had accused Dugan of misconduct, but *Variety's* sources said as much, and the *New York Times* reported on Thursday that an assistant had made such an accusation against Dugan. On Tuesday, Dugan's lawyer didn't immediately respond to a request for comment about this potential lawsuit or Dugan's security concerns.)

One upshot of all this chaos is an invigorated focus on the types of changes Dugan had said she was trying to make at the academy. The memo she sent to the organization's human resources department, according to the *Times*, made allegations about “voting irregularities, financial mismanagement, ‘exorbitant and unnecessary’ legal bills, and conflicts of interest involving members of the academy's board, executive committee, and outside lawyers.” *Variety* **noted** that the academy's tax records show that between 2013 and 2017, the nonprofit paid almost \$15 million to two outside law firms whose leaders have worked with Portnow for decades and represented academy executives and trustees, including Mason Jr.

“We're also going out very soon for an in-house lawyer,” Dugan **told *Variety*** last month. “They have not had one, which is mind-boggling to me.”

In that same interview, Dugan gestured toward some other changes she was interested in making, such as improving the academy's much-criticized record on diversity and its organizational structure. “Things here are about access to the top,” she said. “But I operate with agile teams and I could give a fuck about hierarchy. It shouldn't be about access to me. It should be ‘I'm going to empower you. Here's your team and here's your money.’”

The examination of the academy has continued in other corners too. On Instagram, the Public Enemy rapper **Chuck D** **wrote**, “I salute Deborah Dugan for her truth and courage to try and effect change. As always, a bunch of ignorant, testosterone-fueled, usually old white men stop progress and screw it up,” and recalled the group's boycott of the 1989 Grammys over its treatment of hip-hop.

Amid the flurry of accusations and reports, the timing of the academy's decision to remove Dugan remains especially head-scratching. As Mason Jr.'s letter noted, the complaint against her was made back in November. There's likely much more to be found out about what happened between then and Thursday, when Dugan's removal was made known 10 days before this year's Grammy Awards.