THE BOSS DOCTOR

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Photography courtesy of Kerry Sulkowicz
In the business world, Dr. Kerry Sulkowicz is the man to see.

Dr. Kerry Sulkowicz has been a confidant and adviser to CEOs and business leaders for more than two decades. A psychiatrist and psychoanalyst by training, he’s assisted organizations during leadership transitions and changes in their teams or to their organization’s strategy.

Of course, working with company heads and business leaders isn’t normally the first area that comes to mind when thinking about these fields. Psychiatry is the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of mental disorders, and psychoanalysis consists of theories and therapeutic techniques related to the study of the unconscious mind. Those trained in these sciences are usually working with patients dealing with mental health issues. Sulkowicz is using his position to promote the healthy growth of companies and their executives.

Good leaders, he points out, are crucial to an organization’s health and success.

“How effective a CEO is in his or her role and how the organization is doing—I see those two things as inextricably intertwined,” he says. “While the CEO is not the only person who affects the health of the organization, I think the CEO has the greatest impact on it because of the nature of the role.”
Despite this, he’s not focused on appointing a successor for the consulting firm he founded, the Boswell Group. Sulkowicz admits he’s “obsessed” with bringing more younger people to the field of applying psychoanalysis to leadership and organizations, but he’s not as concerned with ensuring that his personal legacy survives.

“I don’t think that much about legacy,” Sulkowicz confesses, although planning proper succession is important. “If the Boswell Group goes on past me, I’d be very happy about that. But I don’t think it’s the end of the world if it doesn’t. For me, it’s much more about living in the present and trying to make the world a better place, instead of looking into the future, which is so hard to control anyway.”
He doesn’t have any “grand illusions” about the firm—unlike many of its clients, the Boswell Group is not a large, public company. Sulkowicz founded the New York-based consulting firm in 1998. Along with more than a dozen consultants located throughout the United States, he provides leadership advice to large and small organizations. The company describes its approach as “psychodynamic management consulting.”

However, its consultants are not primarily experts on organizational structure or management and leadership techniques. Instead, their expertise is in understanding human behavior and motivation. They use these insights to help CEOs and leaders develop healthy organizations.

The approach “helps leaders think about the underlying emotional core and the interpersonal dynamics of their organization,” says Sulkowicz, adding that this makes them better leaders.

That means focusing on the needs of his clients. Sulkowicz spends a lot of time with business executives, but he considers an entire organization to be his client, not just the person at the top. This approach, he says, gives him greater access to the entire company and allows him to have a better perspective on its culture as a whole.

More CEOs recognize the importance of having a consultant, an objective third-party person they can tell about their concerns and goals, notes Sulkowicz. These relationships often begin with good intentions. But if the consultant only spends time with the CEO, the two “risk being in something of a vacuum,” Sulkowicz explains.

CEOs contact him for a variety of reasons: helping with succession planning or leadership transitions; navigating difficult team dynamics; responding to changes in the company’s strategy; or simply recognizing the inherent isolation of the leadership role and wanting someone to talk to in confidence. He spends most of his time with the CEO, although he often meets with senior executives and board members as well.

Many of his referrals come from board members, says Sulkowicz, because they often sit on multiple boards. He typically works with an organization for the duration of a CEO’s tenure, although some individuals have used his services after moving to different organizations.

Sulkowicz usually meets with CEOs at least once a month. Often, he acts as a sounding board. Leaders face a lot of pressure, he says. People watch everything they do, but they often don’t have anyone who can listen to or support them.

“The saying, ‘It’s lonely at the top’ is entirely true,” he says. “It’s one of the things that keeps me in business.”

But Sulkowicz is quick to differentiate his consulting from “executive coaching.” To him, that vague term conjures up images of encouraging athletes on a team.

“There’s something that sounds a little too booster-y or motivational about the whole notion of an ‘executive coach’ or a ‘leadership coach,’” he says. “I don’t see that as my role at all. Hopefully, I’m encouraging and optimistic. But it’s not a rah-rah type of experience, it’s more of a reflective type of experience.

“There’s nothing fancy about it,” he continues. “We really just talk, with me bringing a deeper psychological perspective to bear, and hopefully they do more talking than I do.”

In fact, it was listening to an executive talk that got Sulkowicz interested in applying his professional training to business leaders. At a cocktail party in the mid-1990s, he had a conversation with the head of an internet startup. Sulkowicz began giving advice about what he calls the “soft” parts of a company, like culture management and team dynamics.

“I found myself really enjoying it and finding it to be a really interesting way of applying the clinical perspective outside of the traditional doctor-patient relationship,” he recalls. “One thing
led to another. I’ve been extremely fortunate and saw that there was really an opportunity to change the direction of my career in the direction of serving as an adviser to leaders, boards, and management teams.

After a few years of operating a private practice and a business consulting practice, he closed the former.

While his consulting career may have begun in an almost accidental fashion, Sulkowicz has spent his lifetime investigating how leaders motivate others to do good—and bad. As a child, he read biographies of world leaders. The pursuit wasn’t academic.

“My curiosity about that was very personal,” he says.

The child of two Holocaust survivors, he saw the devastating impact of bad leaders. While his parents, now deceased, didn’t talk about their experiences much, “it kind of cast a long shadow,” Sulkowicz relates.

Seeking to understand how leaders influence large groups of people has “been a thread throughout my whole life,” he says. Sulkowicz acknowledges his bias is toward “moral leadership,” which he notes is “informed first and foremost by a moral core about doing what is right, treating people well.”

When CEOs treat their staff well, they not only create a culture where employees want to work, but also benefit the greater society. “Healthy organizations are more productive. They tend to do better by the traditional measures, including economic performance and creative output,” he explains.

Sulkowicz is in a unique place to see the impact of good CEOs. Narcissistic and authoritarian executives aren’t likely to contact him because they often don’t think they need help, he says, adding, “There’s a certain amount of self-selection that goes on in terms of the kinds of CEOs who hire me to serve as advisers to them and their companies.”

These individuals tend to be more self-reflective and self-aware. Sometimes, they call him because they’ve inherited a difficult work environment and know they can’t do a good job alone.

“Some of the best leaders I’ve worked with are deeply humanitarian,” he states, noting how these leaders will notice and care about their employees’ lives.

By seeking out Sulkowicz for advice, they also teach him how to be a good leader.

“CEOs are some of my best teachers. I’ve learned so much from them,” he says. “That’s one of the secret pleasures of getting to do what I do: I get to be a student for the rest of my life.”