



Maureen Chiquet on Work-Life Balance and Purging Her Chanel-Filled Closet

By Alexa Tietjen

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What better way to kick off the work week than a dinner with accomplished businesswomen? And at what has been named the world's best restaurant, no less.

Maureen Chiquet, former chief executive officer of Chanel and author of "Beyond the Label: Women, Leadership and Success on Our Own Terms," held a Q&A with Jaimee Marshall, executive vice president of Kirk Palmer Associates, at Eleven Madison Park on Monday night. Save for Kirk Palmer himself, the room was filled with only women. Among them were Trish Donnelly, global ceo of Urban Outfitters, Blandine Pillot Velin, Chanel's global brand research, media and social media director, Daniella Vitale, ceo of Barneys New York, and Sheree Waterson, ceo of Nasty Gal.

Chiquet took questions from Marshall about a variety of topics, including her new book, work-life balance, being vulnerable in the workplace and finding her post-Chanel look.

On feminine leadership:

"The old paradigm is that we thought we had to act like men. It's not that you let go of quote-unquote masculine qualities of determination and drive and ambition. Those are important, but it's integrating them into your every day. Then more women will feel more comfortable and confident and natural being in the top positions."

On being vulnerable in the workplace:

"I found myself at the head of a table of 10 men, all in their perfectly tailored suits and their little CC logo ties and spit-shine shoes. I know nothing and they have been in the luxury industry, most of them for two decades. What I learned from that experience is that I couldn't act like them because I would have been kicked out, rejected. I had to be who I was, but change the way I thought I should behave by sitting on their side of the table, asking a lot of questions, admitting when I didn't know something."

On attaining a "perfect" work-life balance:

"It's the notion of perfection that makes us feel awful and makes us feel guilty. It makes us feel like there is something we can achieve that's perfect work-life balance. You know what? There isn't. There are only our decisions we manage the very best way we know how. We give to our kids what we best know how to give and that's imperfect. And by the way, even if you're staying home every single day with your kid, trust me, you will be imperfect."

On purging her Chanel-filled closet:

“For 13 years, I wore a uniform. Every day I wore a pair of jeans and a Chanel jacket. Suddenly, I leave Chanel and I said, ‘I think I have to purge my closet.’ It’s a psychological thing. ‘You’re starting over, take the Chanel clothes and put them down in the basement.’ I did that and I had leftover about 10 pairs of jeans — actually more than that, 20 pairs of jeans, my American Apparel tank tops, which is what I wore under my Chanel jackets and a few Hartford shirts. And that was it.”

On finding her post-Chanel look:

“I walk in [to Barneys] and I am scared to death. I’ve got these mannequins looking down at me. I’m like, ‘I don’t know what to look like anymore.’ The sales associates littered the dressing room with lots of beautiful clothes. I would go up to the first thing and it would be a Chanel-like jacket and I’d say, ‘I like this. Wait, that looks like everything I have in my basement.’ They ended up taking things out from me that were things I wouldn’t usually want to wear — wide-legged pants and blouses and dresses. As I start trying things on, I started seeing this person there who I had forgotten I was, actually. It’s a story about clothing, but it’s actually more of a story about identity and what it means when you have to face yourself as no longer having a label, which was a job title, and be who you truly are and make those decisions.”