



s w i p e

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After losing his job as CEO of **Tinder**, Sean Rad is back atop the controversial dating-app company. This time, will it be a better match?



# i g h t

BY  
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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“t h e s e a r e  
t h e h o t t e s t  
g i r l s I ’ v e  
e v e r s e e n !”

Sean Rad—29 and recently single—is bowed over his iPhone, eyes inches from the screen, totally enamored with the latest version of his groundbreaking dating app, Tinder. It’s a Monday evening in mid-October at Craig’s, a dimly lit West Hollywood hot spot where paparazzi track every arriving Uber, and Rad can’t believe how attractive the women in his Tinder feed are. He swipes through endless photos while sipping his usual dirty martini, grinning like a kid. “What the fuck?!” he says. “This is nuts!”

The deliciously addictive Tinder is as much cultural phenomenon as dating app—a strikingly simple tool that lets you flick through photos of nearby users. Swipe right to register a “like” or left to skip ahead to the next one. If the other person swipes right on your picture too, the app alerts both of you to a match, and from there, either party can initiate a conversation—and possibly more. It’s a transformational interaction model that now leads to 1.3 million dates per week. Rad is especially pumped tonight because he’s testing out a new algorithm that’s designed to make more matches, and so far it’s performing in overdrive. Rad himself worked to refine these changes, which may explain why, as I open Tinder on my own phone and start swiping, he critiques my every flip. “Yup, yup, yup,” he says approvingly as I like a series of profiles, but then I swipe left on one, and Rad’s elbows jump off the table.

“What!?! She was hot!” he yells. “Oh, my God, how did you say no to her?” He grabs my phone and starts shuffling through photos on my behalf—picture after picture, complete with running commentary. “Have you ever seen this many hot girls?” he says. “It’s like five hot girls in a row!” He finally stops on one. “Wow, she’s gorgeous. She’s a DJ! This might be your wife.”

Tinder has ballooned to 9.6 million daily active users, accounting for some 1.4 billion swipes per day. And these aren’t just teens looking for a hookup: A recent Tinder survey found that 80% of users are seeking more than a one-night

After Sean Rad was removed as CEO of Tinder in early 2015, “I was incredibly upset,” he says. “But I was a big boy about it.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY **David Black**

Previous spread: Hair: Katsumi Matsuo at Artmix Creative; Makeup: Yuko Mizuno at Rona Represents. This spread: Grooming: David Stanwell for Wella Professionals at Solo Artists



stand—a highly engaged, advertiser-friendly audience. Tinder is part of Match Group, which was created as a division of Barry Diller's IAC and includes other dating sites, such as OkCupid and Match.com. In November, IAC spun off Match Group as part of an initial public offering that raised around \$400 million at a roughly \$3 billion valuation. Tinder is key to Match Group's appeal; as the S-1 SEC prospectus notes, Rad's app has "risen to scale and popularity faster than any other product in the dating category" and particularly appeals to young users. If Tinder were a freestanding operation, according to one recent estimate, its valuation could be more than \$1 billion.

Despite his company's fast success, Rad has endured an unusually bumpy few years, including reams of skeptical press, a sexual harassment lawsuit, and even his temporary ouster as Tinder's CEO. Public scrutiny has been intense, and a perception lingers that the business is some kind of glorified frat house that's solely devoted to the promotion of casual sex. To Rad, this kind of criticism is "total bullshit."

Rad insists that his vision for Tinder is much grander than merely facilitating romantic connections. He plans to build it into a robust advertising vehicle and subscription service, and also believes it has applications beyond dating. He envisions a "social discovery" platform that will connect people in ways other services cannot. "We have the potential to grab a massive audience as big as Instagram's or Snapchat's, but the value we're giving is so much greater than any of these social apps," he says. "The matches made on Tinder can change lives. The Snapchat photo from two hours ago—who gives a fuck?"

It's jolting to hear the CEO of a major company speak so bluntly, but Rad is always this unfiltered. In some ways, it's what makes him a perfect ambassador for Tinder: his youth, his energy, his intuitive grasp of the app's core audience. It's also, in the eyes of some critics, what makes him a liability. What colleagues describe as Rad's "raw" leadership style has gotten him into trouble at a company where professional and personal lines are often blurred. But it has also helped him build Tinder into a phenomenon, and rather than try to recalibrate his personality as his company matures, Rad has decided to embrace his ram-bunctious approach.

As we're swiping over our drinks, Rad shows

me his Tinder profile, which includes a bio that reads "founder and CEO of Tinder—yes, the app you're using." By being so open about his high-profile identity, he knows he's taking a risk, since his private conversations could end up getting leaked. But Rad is repelled by the idea of hiding who he is. "I can't stand fake people," he says. "I'm allergic to people who don't speak their minds and aren't true to themselves. As Tinder has grown, I've learned that I can be myself."

But can he? Or will he need to rein in his controversial personality to rocket Tinder to the next stratosphere of growth?

▶ **Early one afternoon** at Tinder's Los Angeles headquarters, Rad and three other executives are gathered around a table in a small, stuffy room with bare white walls and a fake plant. On a piece of paper precariously taped to the door, somebody has scrawled CEO OFFICE in blue Sharpie. The depressing setting is temporary. The company has just moved into this space in one of IAC's L.A. buildings, on the Sunset Strip across from notorious former celeb hangout the Viper Room, and right now decor is not a priority. The vibe is pure startup: Tinder T-shirts and hats abound, and there are two types of kombucha on tap in the kitchen.

Rad is wearing light-washed denim, a striped blue button-down, and a pair of tan high-tops—a departure from his regular dark James Perse T-shirts. His assistant brings him a Coke as he settles in to watch his team spar. On the agenda for today's product meeting are five potential new features, which Rad wants to narrow down to one. They go down the list, with execs arguing the pros and cons. Rad cuts in every 45 seconds, offering blunt feedback. "This isn't 10x better," he says of one messaging feature; "this is a game changer!" he exclaims of another. "These meetings can get heated," cofounder and product VP Jonathan Badeen tells me afterward. "While I'm head of product, Sean's very much the head of product. He's the big-idea guy."

An hour later, the group has nixed only one of the five options. But that's progress: Rad tells me later the meeting was "more creative" than usual, and that the focus is normally on the "million and one things we have to urgently get done" in the short term. Though Tinder's swipe-to-like concept

seems almost ludicrously simple, "You'd be shocked if you knew how much time we still spend on the swiping physics," he says.

At the moment, Rad's focus isn't just on improving Tinder's core functionality, it's on how to broaden the app's appeal and generate revenues that match its outsize cultural influence. Launching new features is a big part of that strategy. Three weeks prior to today's meeting, Tinder introduced Super Like, which enables you to push-notify people that you've liked them—a virtual, flirty nudge. Early tests have been promising. Users are three times more likely to match with someone they Super Liked, and on average those conversations last 70% longer.

Super Like is included as part of Tinder Plus, the company's premium subscription service, which is a key element of its monetization strategy. The basic app is free, but for a monthly fee, Tinder Plus gives members unlimited swipes and five Super Likes per day (nonsubscribers get only one Super Like and a finite number of swipes every 24 hours), the option of undoing an accidental swipe, and other features. Rates begin at \$9.99 per month, and Tinder is bra-

zen enough to charge \$19.99 for anyone 30 or older, like surge pricing for finding your soul mate. "How much would you pay me to meet your wife?" Rad says, justifying the value proposition. "Ten thousand dollars? Twenty thousand dollars? Some people would probably give me their entire net worth." Tinder also makes money from advertising, of course, with companies such as Bud Light paying more than \$1 million per campaign for placement in users' feeds.

In addition to Super Like, Rad spearheaded a major overhaul of the app that rolled out in November and includes the new algorithm. Users can now create handles and web-based profiles, and also add education and career info to profiles. Tinder uses that data to pair couples based on compatibility rather than just spitting out photos at random. It's all part of a push toward making Tinder a full-featured social network. Rad and Badeen say more tools are on the way that will help facilitate conversation and in-person experiences.

Currently no other app is as successful at helping strangers meet in the real world, and it's easy

**"HOW MUCH WOULD YOU PAY ME TO MEET YOUR WIFE?" RAD SAYS. "TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS? TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS? SOME PEOPLE WOULD PROBABLY GIVE ME THEIR ENTIRE NET WORTH."**



# game of thrones

Six CEOs who—like Tinder's Sean Rad—returned to their jobs after previously moving out of the top slot.

**Michael Bloomberg**  
CEO, Bloomberg LP

1981–2001  
2014–PRESENT



**RISE** In 1981, Bloomberg founded Innovative Market Systems, which quickly became known for its terminal system. Renamed Bloomberg LP in 1986, it made its founder a billionaire and expanded into TV, radio, and business journalism. Bloomberg stepped down as CEO in 2001 to run for mayor of New York.

**RETURN** While Bloomberg was serving his three terms as mayor, his company wrestled with the same complicated prospects as other media companies in the Internet era. He returned as CEO at the end of 2014 and quickly took steps to streamline the business, cutting newsroom jobs and strengthening the company's terminal business.

**Leah Busque**  
CEO, TaskRabbit

2008–2011  
2012–PRESENT



**RISE** Busque and her husband dreamed up TaskRabbit after running out of dog food one day in 2008. Three years later, the gig-economy platform was responsible for \$4 million in transactions per month. Eventually Busque decided to move into a chief product officer role, replacing herself with Hotwire cofounder Eric Grosse.

**RETURN** As a wave of specialized on-demand services blossomed that might eclipse TaskRabbit, the company decided to refine its efforts and reinstalled Busque as CEO in 2012. She has narrowed TaskRabbit's focus and tweaked its job-matching system, and is also looking to help task-doers earn a fairer wage.

**Jack Dorsey**  
CEO, Twitter

2007–2008  
2015–PRESENT



**RISE** Dorsey served as the first CEO when he, Biz Stone, Ev Williams, and Noah Glass started Twitter. His managerial inexperience led to soaring costs while reportedly alienating some of the team. He was pushed out in 2008, only to return in a part-time role in 2010, when his successor, Williams, was replaced as CEO by Dick Costolo.

**RETURN** In 2015, after Costolo's ouster, Dorsey came back as CEO to tackle Twitter's chronic issues around user growth and product development. After having the interim tag removed from his CEO-ship, he's made changes in an attempt to lure new users, launching Moments and ditching "favorites" for "likes."

**Steve Huffman**  
CEO, Reddit

2005–2009  
2015–PRESENT



**RISE** Huffman cofounded Reddit with Alexis Ohanian in 2005 and sold it to Condé Nast in 2006. Three years later they both left the company, and Huffman went on to found the travel site Hipmunk.

**RETURN** After months of controversy surrounding interim CEO Ellen Pao's leadership and efforts to rein in some offensive content, Huffman came back to help stabilize (and monetize) the platform. Now he's trying to make the interface more appealing to newbies—while not alienating Reddit's passionate core users.

**Mark Pincus**  
CEO, Zynga

2007–2013  
2015–PRESENT



**RISE** Pincus cofounded social-gaming company Zynga in 2007, and two years later it bloomed with mega-hit *FarmVille*. But by 2013, Zynga's fields had grown fallow. Pincus stepped down as CEO and became chairman and chief product officer, making way for long-time gaming executive Don Mattrick.

**RETURN** Mattrick couldn't develop another hit game or figure out Zynga's mobile strategy either, and in April 2015, the company reinstalled Pincus. He has also been focusing on mobile, as well as reviving the company's interest in casino games, with mixed results.

**Howard Schultz**  
CEO, Starbucks

1987–2000  
2008–PRESENT



**RISE** Hired as Starbucks's director of operations and marketing in 1982, Schultz ascended to CEO in 1987 and guided the sleepy brand to total latte dominance. In 2000, he stepped down to become chief global strategist while also staying on as chairman, a sort of retirement that he later called a mistake.

**RETURN** Starbucks had lost its buzz by 2008 after expanding too fast and letting quality slip. Schultz returned as CEO, cut costs, and upgraded the coffee and food while also expanding into juice. His return gave Starbucks another kick in the macchiato, boosting its market cap from \$5 billion in 2008 to \$57 billion in 2014. —*Claire Dodson*

to think of ways that Tinder's interface could be helpful. LinkedIn has built a business valued at \$32 billion out of connections and communication, yet as Rad points out, "LinkedIn sucks for meeting new people. It's actually impossible to meet people on LinkedIn." Imagine a Tinder for business, where you could network with a simple swipe. Rad ticks off a list of other applications Tinder could go after, including local recommendations and event-discovery tools.

It's a seductive pitch; it's also unclear how serious Rad is about diversification given how much room for growth still exists in the dating market. He boasts that he could dream up 5,000 ideas that he could "guarantee at least 100,000 users" would adopt, but "that's pointless. The hard thing is figuring out what works for 90% of our audience." For Sam Yagan—who served as Match Group CEO after selling OkCupid to Diller for \$90 million in 2011 and is on Tinder's board—it's about staying focused. "Should we do Tinder for business, Tinder for enterprise?" he says. "I don't wake up every morning thinking that this dating thing is too small."

▶ **Those close to Rad** describe a magnetic quality that seems as if it has an on/off switch. It can be discomfiting if you don't know him. Rad, who has dark eyes and an intense look resembling a young David Blaine, is prone to disappearing into his phone if you don't keep his attention, even during a one-on-one conversation. But he can also turn on a rakish charm. At one point, Rad describes a recent interaction he had at New York's Soho House. After overhearing four young women discussing Tinder, he slid over to chat. At first, he didn't even ID himself as the company's CEO. "Everyone is nervous to talk to a girl or a guy," Rad tells me. "I never had a problem with it."

Rad's off-kilter charisma traces back to Bel Air, California, where he grew up in a large, wealthy family. His parents, Iranian immigrants, own an electronics manufacturing company that works with behemoths like Samsung. Rad recalls raucous Friday night dinners with aunts and uncles and cousins and their "big egos and voices. You had to speak up—nobody was afraid to call bullshit on something you said. There wasn't always room for my voice." He studied business at the University of Southern California but dropped out after two and a half years, in 2006. Rather than join his family's company, Rad headed out on his own. "I wanted to be master of my own fate," he says. He created two successive startups, one of which, a social media marketing company called Adly that helps celebrities and influencers monetize their brands, became a minor success (Rad has since sold his stake in the business).

# web of relationships

Tinder has fundamentally altered how people meet, but it's not the only dating game changer. A history of online hookups.

1995

**Match.com** **KEY INNOVATION** Taking dating digital

One of the very first online dating platforms, Match popularized the concept of custom online profiles, which it used to, yes, match potential couples. Match is still the biggest player in the dating industry, raking in nearly \$50 million in profit in the first half of 2015.

2000

**eHarmony.com** **KEY INNOVATION** Tapping data to find love

When eHarmony launched, online dating was popular but technologically unsophisticated. The company's personality-based algorithm brought a measure of science to the pairing process. Three million users signed on by the end of 2003.

2004

**OkCupid.com** **KEY INNOVATION** Upping the fun

This people-connector's quirky personality questions enlivened profiles and enticed younger users. Previously, such services had a bit of a stigma, but OkCupid—which, unlike predecessors, was free—suddenly made web dating cool.

2009

**Grindr** **KEY INNOVATION** Enabling instant connections through geolocation

The most popular dating app for gay men let users connect quickly with people nearby. Now used by more than 5 million people in some 190 countries, it's particularly valuable in places where homosexuality is illegal or looked down upon.

2014

**Bumble** **KEY INNOVATION** Cutting down the creep factor

Created by former Tinder executive Whitney Wolfe, Bumble tackles one of the biggest issues surrounding Internet dating: harassment. Only female users can initiate contact, giving women control of the process.

2015

**High There** **KEY INNOVATION** Firing up the niche-dating scene

Based in Denver, where pot is legal, High There pairs singles with a mutual interest in a very specific activity. It's one of a growing number of apps that target slices of the population, including Wingman, for air-travel hookups, and Salad Match, for fans of leafy lunches. —CD

In early 2012, he landed as a general manager at Hatch Labs, a New York-based incubator funded in part by IAC. Hatch cofounder Adam Huie remembers Rad's sly confidence during his interview. When Huie asked Rad how he would build out one of the incubator's products, "Sean was just like, 'I'll figure it out.' Wait, what? But what technology would you use? 'Don't worry! I'll get it done.'" Huie recalls Rad as being "half pompous, but 100% super-convincing." He got the job.

In his first week, Rad learned he'd be competing in an incubator-wide hackathon. In a reply-all message responding to an email welcoming him to the incubator, Rad wrote, "Can't wait to meet you all at the hackathon—after I destroy you guys! I'm gonna win this thing!" He was right: Rad and his partner in the competition, Hatch engineer Joe Munoz, triumphed with an idea for a service that would let users click through photos of potential matches—a rough version of what would eventually become Tinder.

Rad was by no stretch Tinder's sole creator; a team of designers, engineers, marketers, and business leaders deserve credit for building out the app in the ensuing year, especially Jonathan Badeen, who added the swiping mechanism. Justin Mateen, Rad's best friend, started working with the company later that year (he also began dating Tinder employee Whitney Wolfe). Rad's "undying belief" in Tinder pushed the team forward, says Ryan Ogle, an engineer who later became CTO. "Sean was always like, 'This is going to be the greatest thing ever! We are going to change the world!'" Ogle recalls with a laugh. "Tinder was nothing really at the time, and I was like, 'Okay, Sean, we'll see. You're really excitable.'"

When it began rolling out at college campuses in 2012 and throughout 2013, engagement took off, hitting 100,000 users by February. Rad believes Tinder caught on because it "removed the rejection and fear" from dating—you're only told when you get a match. He likes to say it's akin to locking eyes with someone at a bar. By 2014, Tinder had reached 350 million swipes per day.

Inside the company, though, things were not going as smoothly. Tinder ran into challenges as the staff and product scaled. Spam and bots began to overwhelm the app, and its technical infrastructure struggled to keep up. Meanwhile, IAC, recognizing Tinder's growing influence, was angling for more control. The

phrase bandied about internally was that these were "good problems to have." That is, if the servers crash, that's a good problem, because it means engagement is booming; if IAC is fighting for more ownership, that's also good, because it means Tinder is valuable. But at a certain point, you have to acknowledge that problems are problems and they need to be dealt with. For any startup, says Ogle, "if you don't fix [these kinds of issues], you're going to kill this popular thing you created."

Perhaps Tinder's biggest "good problem" was cultural. The startup has always had a work-hard, play-hard atmosphere. "It was this super-open, beautifully chaotic place where everybody is close," one former employee tells me. "People would hang out after work, drink together, work out together. It had a heartbeat." Arguably, that environment was beneficial given that the company's sole product was built around the idea of connecting people. But it also proved to be an HR nightmare. The relationship between Rad's best friend Mateen and Wolfe (by that point a marketing VP) ended badly, and their breakup spilled over into the office. That spring, Wolfe and Tinder parted ways, and in June she filed a lawsuit against the company accusing executives of denying her role in Tinder's founding and fostering an environment hostile to women. The suit was settled out of court that September for around \$1 million, and not long after, Wolfe started a competing dating app called Bumble.

Today Rad acknowledges that he mishandled what turned into a very public dispute. He says he should have done a better job keeping Mateen and Wolfe's relationship issues out of the workplace, and that being friends with both of them made the situation much more difficult. "In a startup, everyone is close," he says. "It's hard to hold them accountable, because how are you going to tell [friends], 'Hey, you fucked up?'" (Mateen, who resigned last September but remains a close adviser, did not respond to requests for comment; Wolfe says, "There is no bullshit in what I'm about to say: I genuinely do wish Sean well and really hope for his continued success.")

The experience devastated Rad, and it contributed to a growing perception that Tinder's culture was problematic. For a high-profile company trying to establish itself as a serious business-world contender, this was an issue. Around the time Wolfe filed the lawsuit, Tinder's board started talking about bringing in a more

seasoned executive to oversee things. Match Group CEO and Tinder executive chairman Greg Blatt, the former head of Match.com, recalls that Rad was already struggling to set a consistent agenda for his employees, and Blatt says he didn't want to leave Tinder's future up to "complete trial and error" as Rad learned how to lead. "Some CEOs are indecisive and it takes them a while to get to a decision," says one executive who works closely with Rad at Tinder. "Sean's style is the exact opposite: He'll make a very quick decision and then he'll change his mind later. Being the visionary—that's a key component of being CEO. But it's only one piece."

Blatt, Yagan, and Rad talked about the situation over the course of several months. "There were times Sean was good [with bringing in someone to replace him as CEO], and there were times where he wasn't," Blatt says. Rad contemplated quitting, but decided against it because he would have felt guilty abandoning his team. Finally Rad delivered an ultimatum to the Tinder board. "You guys have two choices," he recalls telling them. "You can take a risk on me and teach me to be the leader that I need to become. Or you can say you're not willing to take the risk and commit to that work—and find somebody else."

▶ **They found somebody** else. In March 2015, Tinder appointed Christopher Payne CEO, with Rad staying on as president. A veteran of Microsoft and eBay, the new leader was brought in to, as Payne puts it, "ratchet up the level of accountability. The company had gone through a tumultuous period." One would expect Rad to greet Payne with skepticism, but former and current employees (including Payne) say that he could not have been more supportive. "I was incredibly upset," Rad says. "But I was a big boy about it. It was tough for me personally, but I had to agree with the board. It was a decision we made together." At the first all-hands meeting, a source who was there describes Rad as being characteristically enthusiastic: "This is happening! Chris is starting, and you're gonna love him!"

Rad kept his head down working on product and marketing, while Payne tried to set a more structured company strategy. "It's much easier to work in a world where it's more laissez-faire," Payne says.

I DECIDE TO  
JUST COME OUT  
AND ASK RAD  
THE OBVIOUS  
QUESTION:  
IS HE GOING TO  
LOSE HIS JOB AS  
CEO OF TINDER?  
AGAIN? "NO, NO,  
ABSOLUTELY  
NOT," HE SAYS.  
"I PROMISE."



“Like, ‘We’ll do this! We’ll do that!’” Taming Tinder’s freewheeling atmosphere and undisciplined approach proved challenging. Payne, then 46, struggled to fit in, partly because he wasn’t the target demographic. “I was definitely not a user of Tinder [before I joined the company],” Payne says. “I’ve been married 18 years!”

And while many sources tell me they admire Payne, there were conflicts that went deeper. One recalls how when Payne decided to let a handful of employees go, he made Rad do the firing, which strained their relationship. Payne never fully earned the support of the executive team, a situation that was exacerbated, according to a source close to the company, by rumors that he wanted to move Tinder to San Francisco (Payne says he had no intention of relocating). “A new level of discipline was imposed, and that no doubt ruffled some feathers,” says Blatt. By August, five months into Payne’s tenure, the board had ousted him. “It’s not until the actual orchestra is playing that you know whether things are gelling,” Yagan says.

Ultimately the board decided that Tinder’s unique culture needed Rad at the helm. Just months after losing his job, he suddenly found out he was getting it back. “For better or for worse, my identity is tied to this company,” he says. “I have way more to lose [than anyone if Tinder fails], so why would I risk somebody else fucking it up?” On August 12, 2015, Rad once again walked into the Tinder office as the company’s CEO. As he came through the door, employees met him with a standing ovation.

▶ **Two months into** Rad’s comeback, what’s remarkable is how little Tinder’s culture seems to have changed. The co-founder still runs his company with a sort of amped-up kineticism, encouraging what CTO Ryan Ogle describes as the “wild spirit” of the early days and letting things run “just enough [on the edge] without devolving into chaos.” That approach has helped Tinder stay nimble. But multiple company executives tell me that no official policy has been put in place to help prevent another situation like the hostile-workplace lawsuit. (Blatt says parent company IAC already had appropriate HR policies even before the suit.)

And for a company that’s working to move beyond its bro-ish image, Tinder employs surprisingly few women. “Tinder from its very inception was meant to be a female-friendly application,” says Badeen. “We see female users as perhaps our most important.” To get a woman’s perspective, Rad tells me he often calls his female assistant into meetings. And in the four meetings I attend, all of which are filled entirely with men, I notice an almost comical habit they have of citing anecdotes from girlfriends or ex-girlfriends for a female point of view. At the time of my visit, the company employed just one female executive (they have since hired two more). Otherwise, Tinder’s male executive team is on its own. Rad

compares the dynamic to the rom-com *What Women Want*, where Mel Gibson has the ability to read women’s minds.

As bad as all of this looks, Tinder’s defenders argue it’s perfectly normal in startup land, and nearly every current and former female employee I talk to praises Rad’s leadership. Most say they love Tinder’s culture despite its dude-centricity. “Obviously we deal in the business of gender, so people care what the women of Tinder think,” says the company’s female on-staff sociologist, Jess Carbino, whom Rad recruited to do user-behavior research after they matched on Tinder. “It’s a very pro-women culture—we’re not wallflowers cowering in the corner at all. I don’t feel bad ever saying, ‘Hey, I don’t think this is right for women.’”

In general, executives seem to believe that Tinder’s uninhibited style is an essential part of its success. “I feel like there’s nothing I can’t say at this company,” says Phil Schwarz, who replaced Mateen as CMO. “The minute that open dialogue goes away, you’re dead.” Rad argues that bluntness is key to how he provides feedback. “For a period of time [following the lawsuit] I felt suffocated, like I couldn’t talk,” he says. “But I am who I am, and I’m proud of that. If people don’t see it, they can go fuck themselves.”

▶ **The afternoon after** Match Group’s IPO, Rad is sitting at a quiet bistro near IAC’s New York headquarters, trying to explain the sudden crazy turn things have taken. “The past 48 hours were honestly the worst two days of my entire life,” he says.

Earlier that morning, Rad was at the Nasdaq to help ring the opening bell. Surrounded by dozens of Match Group colleagues, Rad, wearing a black suit and a big smile, clapped loudly and exchanged a high-five with Badeen as confetti shot into the air. It should’ve been a joyous moment, the culmination of nearly four years of work. Instead it was “bittersweet,” Rad tells me. “What a day today, but what a fucked-up week.”

Rad’s lack of tact had once again landed him in trouble. The day before the IPO, in a now-infamous interview with the London *Evening Standard*, Rad was quoted discussing various un-CEO-like topics, boasting that a supermodel had once begged him for sex and—in one widely mocked moment—misusing the term “sodomy.” “We’re going to be fired,” his publicist jokes in the article. To which Rad replies, “What? Why?”

The piece wasn’t just embarrassing; it risked angering the SEC, which restricts corporate executives from making certain kinds of public statements leading up to an IPO. The article cited engagement figures that dramatically differ from what’s in Match Group’s SEC prospectus. Hours after the article came out, Match Group responded with the highly unusual move of filing a statement with the SEC that disavowed itself of Rad’s comments—and of Rad himself. He “is not a director or executive officer of the

[Match Group] and was not authorized to make statements,” the company wrote. It was a brutal public spanking.

At the restaurant, Rad is unshaven and a bit haggard, having taken a red-eye to make the opening-bell ceremony. He has come directly from a frank meeting with Blatt, who he says has been extremely supportive (the two men stood next to each other for a photo after the ceremony, which could be interpreted as a vote of confidence). Over sugar-loaded coffee and a salad, he tells me he wants to explain what happened.

I decide to just come out and ask Rad the obvious question: Is he going to lose his job as CEO of Tinder? *Again?* “No, no, absolutely not,” he says. “I promise.” Rad, who barely touches his food, is more careful than usual, constantly jumping on and off the record. He clearly feels burned by the recent bad press. “Just please don’t fuck me,” he says at one point. At another he tells me, “I don’t know what I’m allowed to say. I’m learning now.”

Rad insists that in the interview some of his more explosive quotes were taken out of context (an *Evening Standard* editor says the publication stands by its story). “It’s fucked up, because I’m dealing with all of these stereotypes,” he says. “Because I’m a successful guy in tech I must be a douche bag. Because I run a dating app I must be a womanizer. At the same time, I fucked up. I should know better as a CEO.”

That flash of insight suggests he could now adopt an image more in keeping with the top executive of a hot company with big plans and enthusiastic investors. Is Sean Rad finally ready to grow up? Well... maybe. Though he describes the incident as a “wake-up call,” he also says that “it’s not that I’m ever going to stop being myself. It’s that I’ve got to get better at framing what I’m trying to say. My responsibility as a CEO—and to myself—is to continue being myself. I’ve got to do better. Because these fucking last few days were a distraction. What has really sunk in is that I need to leave very little room for misinterpretation of what I’m trying to say.” He says doing that newspaper interview was “irresponsible” and that “I will never put myself in that position again.” When it comes to running his business, Rad seems less certain that things need a rethink. “You saw my style—that is how I always communicated with the team,” he says. “The only thing that’s changed is I am more clear about what I want and who we are as a company.”

Rad takes a last sip of coffee and insists on getting the check (“Greg is paying for it,” he jokes). We walk together to the restaurant’s front door, where he gives me a hug. “Promise me, please, if there’s something [I said that] you think is going to destroy my life, just call me,” he says. “Give me an opportunity to clarify.” The CEO says goodbye, then walks slowly across the street toward the IAC building, his head buried in his phone, his fingers madly tapping. 📱

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