

Paper: Chicago Sun-Times  
Title: Why Leo's worth every penny of the \$500,000  
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Date: December 19, 1988  
Section: FINANCIAL  
Page: 46

Leo Melamed soon will make \$500,000 for serving as chairman of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange's executive committee.

Big deal. Melamed, who will tell anyone who will listen that he is the godfather of financial futures, deserves every penny and more. Melamed has earned a brickbat or two for his one-man rule of the Merc, but to underestimate his value to the exchange and to the futures industry is folly.

Mercantile Exchange members who protest Melamed's paycheck should consider his value to the exchange, especially in comparison to his counterparts at other exchanges across the country.

Sources with knowledge of pay levels in similar jobs elsewhere give some indication of Melamed's comparable worth. John Phelan of the New York Stock Exchange tops all exchange officials with a paycheck of between \$1.5 million and \$2 million, according to one knowledgeable source.

Alger B. "Duke" Chapman of the Chicago Board Options Exchange earns an estimated \$500,000, sources said. Tom Bond, the CBOE's top elected member as vice chairman, earns \$150,000.

At the Chicago Board of Trade, Chairman Karsten Mahlmann is not paid for his services, although he continues to draw a paycheck from Stotler & Co., where he is chairman. No estimate could be obtained for the salary earned by Thomas Donovan, the exchange's president.

Other salaries reported by sources include \$850,000 for the head of the American Stock Exchange, \$650,000 for the head of the National Association of Securities Dealers, \$400,000 for the Pacific Stock Exchange chief and around \$350,000 for Charles Dougherty, head of the Midwest Stock Exchange.

Look beyond the price tags. Comparing Leo Melamed to others in similar positions is like comparing H. Ross Perot to Roger Smith.

Perot, like Melamed, is an egocentric visionary willing to take risks, to build on successes and jettison failures. He is not always right, but when he is, he's hard to beat.

Melamed helped create financial futures, pushed for the introduction of currency futures and stock-index futures, which today are the exchange's lifeblood. He also championed the Merc's return to gold trading, which proved an abysmal failure. Today, he is on the verge of introducing a new computerized after-hours trading system that again will challenge the status quo.

GM Chairman Smith, like the executives at many financial exchanges, may be an able manager, but he doesn't inspire, finds it difficult to lead.

Scott Shelton, a partner in Chicago with the executive recruiting firm SpencerStuart, said Melamed's value to the Merc would be hard to estimate. "If they had to pay Leo Melamed \$10 million a year, it would be a bargain. He is the outstanding person in that whole industry," said Shelton, whose firm has placed officials at the Merc and elsewhere in the industry.

Jack Wing, chairman of the Chicago Corp. brokerage firm, said he wouldn't question Melamed's compensation level even "if they paid him twice as much."

Melamed, who could not be reached for comment on the pay levels, probably is less concerned with his paycheck than many might think. The money may be nice, but power is his real pay, and the Merc, where he calls each and every shot, has provided a forum from which he can exercise power throughout the world's financial markets.

"He likes political power more than he likes money," said one veteran industry executive. "He's like Mayor Daley was in that respect. The power is what matters to him."