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Inside Wexner's machine: *power, insulation and silence*



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This undated photo of disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, with Ohio's Abigail Wexner and Limited founder Leslie Wexner, was in a trove of documents released by the Department of Justice in December 2025. U.S. Department of Justice

As Leslie Wexner faces renewed scrutiny over his long association with Jeffrey Epstein, the public conversation focuses on what he knew.

From inside his retail empire during its rapid rise, what struck me was not secrecy. It was structure.

In the early 1990s, I was recruited into Structure, a fast-growing division of The Limited, and relocated to Columbus for training at headquarters. The company was expanding at extraordinary speed. Stores opened rapidly. Sales climbed aggressively. Discipline was exact.

Employees often referred to it simply as "the machine." From the outside, it looked like opportunity. From the inside, it operated with control.

Managers were reminded that Wexner could walk into any store at any time. That possibility shaped behavior. Displays were precise. Folding was measured to the inch. Layouts designed at headquarters were replicated nationwide without deviation.

Uniformity was not branding. It was enforcement.

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After training in Columbus, I was promoted to manage the Structure store at the Galleria in downtown Cleveland. The expectations followed us there. Floor sets ran late into the night. Managers were required to purchase and wear current merchandise from our own pay. Performance metrics were relentless.

Execution was expected. Context was not provided.

When Wexner visited stores in Ohio, he often arrived with his mother. On more than one occasion, Jeffrey Epstein accompanied him. They entered together and moved through the store without explanation.

Epstein was never introduced to managers at my level as a financial adviser or business associate. No context was offered. Whatever their formal relationship, it did not resemble a distant professional arrangement.

From the sales floor, familiarity was visible. Authority required no clarification.

Founder-led enterprises operate in tiers. At the top are capital, counsel and private relationships. Beneath them are managers trained to execute, not question. Access narrows as authority rises.

Belonging required alignment — in appearance, behavior and presentation. That alignment felt secure until I stepped outside of it.

After the death of a close friend from AIDS, I disclosed at work that I was gay. Within days, my district manager made an unannounced visit. I was asked whether I was certain I wanted that information shared. When I confirmed I did, the tone shifted.

The following morning, corporate security met me at the Galleria store before opening. I was taken behind a closed door and accused of theft. I was told evidence existed but was never shown any. My keys were taken. I was told not to return until I was ready to "admit" something.

There was nothing to admit.

I cannot prove motive. I can describe sequence. Until that disclosure, my performance had not been questioned. Afterward, it was.

In a culture built on conformity and controlled image, deviation carried consequences.

The Limited reshaped Ohio's retail economy. It generated wealth and philanthropy. It projected power outward from this state.

But systems built around concentrated authority do not rely on overt secrecy. They rely on insulation — narrowing information, controlling proximity and reinforcing loyalty through immersion.

Lawmakers are asking how a relationship like Wexner's with Epstein could endure for so long without scrutiny. From inside the machine, the answer may be less about ignorance than design.

Distance was engineered into the structure — between authority and accountability, between visibility and explanation.

Ohio helped build that system.

And systems built on insulation do not dissolve easily. They endure.

Stephen Terrell is a marketing executive and journalism graduate of Kent State University. He began his career in management at The Limited's Structure division during its rapid expansion in Ohio and has since led executive brand strategy and growth initiatives in financial services and consumer markets.

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