

The CEO Mindset That Brought Xerox Back to Life

Ursula Burns on the roles that confidence, risk-taking and the joy of crushing her adversaries played in her trajectory from intern to chief executive



‘There’s no such thing as pure luck. I work on preparedness,’ says former Xerox CEO Ursula Burns.

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Illustration by HelloVon for WSJ. Magazine

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Success, they say, is inspiration plus perspiration. But what of sheer universe-vibration? We ask the most successful people we know to tell us what role luck plays in one's career.

AS A COLLEGE INTERN AT XEROX in 1980, [Ursula Burns](#) didn't walk the halls assuming she would run the whole joint one day. Yet less than three decades later, she did just that, becoming CEO in 2009, and the first Black woman to run a Fortune 500 company.

By then, interns were no longer being asked to “Xerox” papers. Turning the juggernaut on a dime, Burns guided Xerox as it shed its photocopier branding to become one of the most diversified business-services companies worldwide. In her third year, back-office IT services to process healthcare claims, retail transactions, E-ZPass and parking fees accounted for more than 50 % of its \$22.2 billion revenue.

As for the role of luck in one's career decisions? Ursula Burns is clear: “There's no such thing as pure luck. I work on preparedness. Besides, luck often comes at you in ugly forms.” It sure can: She started her tenure as CEO just as the country was emerging from a severe recession.



In 2009, Burns became Xerox's CEO and the first Black woman to run a Fortune 500 company. Photo: Lemouton Stephane/ABACA/Shutterstock

Was there this one moment where it all came together?

At unbelievably key points in my life, one person guided me to the better choice: [Vernon Jordan](#). When I'd present to the board, he, as a director, did not miss an opportunity to sum up what was good or bad about what I'd said. I didn't feel as though I was being educated but engaged. Sending me things to read, he'd write, "We were talking about this, read this." And then, when I saw him again, he would test me on it. At first, he told me I talked too fast, but then he changed his mind. "It's who you are; you're in command of the facts. Keep that attribute as it is."

How do you react when people say they did it all alone?

This delusion starts early. College kids I speak to often say they got here independently and paid their own way. And I say, "So the janitor, the person who cooks lunch for you, your parents, one or two of your teachers, had nothing to do with this?" It causes them to think about people around them and, even though incidental, how important they are, even if it's a distant and weak connection to get them to the next step.

People who can't credit others are often insecure about their own abilities. How do you build confidence in yourself?

Confidence comes from knowing that all success doesn't come from me alone. I don't walk into situations and say I am capable of doing anything. I know what I'm good at and what I'm not.

And I approach projects I know less about with a group: I build a team, get advice, whatever the hell it is, differently than if I approached it confidently. And if we don't engage others, then we probably are mitigating that situation. Men, in particular, don't like this idea that you have to engage more people to get the task done right.

What is your coping tactic with a narcissist adversary who's also very brilliant?

I am not the nicest person all the time. When I was younger, I took joy in crushing the person. The target became the actual person, not the task, and showing them just how wrong they were—not only about me as a leader, and the situation, but also wrong about themselves.

Does impostor syndrome hurt or help?

A unique differentiator for me is that, if it's new to me, I doubt myself. That lack of confidence is part of the loop for me to get prepared.



Former President Barack Obama and Burns at the president's Export Council meeting in 2014.
Photo: Win McNamee/Getty Images

When did you first start to understand that the top spot was within your grasp?

Probably 15 years after I started working at Xerox. By that time, it was clear that I had the content to know what to do and get the best product out in the shortest amount of time.

What do great leaders have in common?

Leadership is about bringing many people along, and sometimes, literally, they bring you along. For every great success we had, certain people knew more about certain pieces of it than I did: I had to follow them as much as they had to follow me.

What's a mistake you've made that other head honchos keep repeating?

Not firing people who need to be fired. Not acting on someone when you knew that this person was not the right person for the role. The more senior I got, the more dangerous this inability for me to say, *I'm going to give up on Joe*.

How did your mom prepare you for a CEO role, raising you three kids alone in New York City?

My mother didn't allow dreams to crush her. No victimhood: She didn't see the guys down the street who had more and felt slighted or angry. She looked at that and said, "My goodness, wouldn't it be great if I could enable my kids to have that?" My mother was absolutely maniacal about controlling us in a way that limited the possibilities that we had of getting into trouble. You would never see us on the street. It just did not happen. My mother said, "There's nothing there for you there."

What's one thing in life that got you here?

After my mom died, by the time I was 35 and going through something, I realized, "I've lived this before," or "I saw this before." She gave me a total and complete playbook on one way to handle each difficult situation I've faced. I needed that to make it clear that I could struggle through problems. If having a mother who is good with money is luck, I hit the jackpot.



'Confidence comes from knowing that all success doesn't come from me alone,' Burns says.
Photo: Jemal Countess/Getty Images

What did you do to rise to the top with so many worthy, talented peers around you?

I don't think there was a single thing I said no to in the first 15 years of my career at Xerox. The first time I was sent to Japan, I was only asked because most everyone else said no, and that trip and what I accomplished was one of the most important moves I ever had in my career. This is something that I was trained to do by my mother and schooling: You did what you were asked, and you don't hand in sloppy work. So, I think one of my superpowers is that I take very few things for granted. I hustle through everything. People try to get there without paying the dues. I didn't think of them as dues.

What's your relationship with power and money? Does it make you calm? Does any part of it make you anxious?

The more you get in life, the more you worry about not having it. More than the money and comforts, it's also the power and position. I am never comfortable with where I am. I do worry about why I'm here and whether I am doing it right. Am I being reasonable in how I spend? I

worry about all the things you would think would go away when you have as much power and influence, money and accessibility as I do: I worry from a different perspective about them.

What role does luck play in one's career?

A lot of where we end up is preparedness. I work on preparedness. I can't work on the luck. On the job, there's no such thing as dumb luck or pure luck. It is this faulty idea that people have about luck in the world: that this guy just walked in the room, someone saw him, liked him and made him president. No, you walked into the room prepared to take advantage of the meeting and the opportunity.

What about accidental inventions, like those 3M researchers who inadvertently made adhesive glue that created the first Post-it Notes?

Not luck! Do you have any idea how many years and brutal hours those people worked in the lab to make that so-called mistake?!

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