

# "The personality of Xerox is not gender-based, but it is one that enables women"

**URSULA BURNS** is the first African-American woman Chairman and CEO of a Fortune 500 company and she wears that badge with some pride. Her logic for that is simple: she needs to inspire others – and get some mileage for Xerox, the company she leads – by standing proudly in the limelight. In India late-August to attend Business Today's Most Powerful Women awards, Burns, spoke with Chaitanya Kalbag and Josey Puliyeenthuruthel on Xerox's transformation to a products and services company and her personal journey. Edited excerpts:

**Kalbag:** Xerox was a company in a near-death experience about 12 or 13 years ago. You took over in 2009, made a huge acquisition. Do you believe that the way the company is being positioned now will make it grow for the next 50 years?

**Burns:** Absolutely, if I didn't I'd change the strategy. Part of the responsibility that I have is to assure that all the assets that we have, which are huge, as a company, are utilised to the best for our clients and for our shareholders and for our employees. Before I became CEO, we had a CEO named Anne Mulcahy who steered the company out of

some pretty precarious waters. In doing that, she allowed me to take over a company that was not in a financial problem, that had flexibility, that had a foundation and strategy that was already started. My job when I took over was to figure out a way to accelerate it. We didn't take shortcuts, we worked really hard, we believed... we were kind of a blue-collar company so we had great foundation, to actually take on heavy challenges and take on a lot of work. Under Anne, we had started and grown into a document outsourcing business.



What that did, it allowed me and the team that was under Anne at this time to think about other things that we could do since this business was started. We had to actually think about additional [businesses]. We looked at and acquired companies in this time, legal outsourcing, e-discovery outsourcing, mortgage processing outsourcing... The goal we had was to try to continue to buy these small kind of players and grow them up. But when I looked at that, I realised that it would take forever, take a lot of time to buy these small

10-million dollar companies. And it's a lot of risk.

We looked, and looked and looked, and we kept running into this company called ACS that had already consolidated and rolled up a lot of different BPO type of busi-

nesses. So we bought that company and the reason why that was important is because that allowed us to then buy companies from that point forward – and attach them to something [in ACS]. ACS had a history of buying small companies, putting

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them into a larger company and stabilising the small company and growing its scale.

**Kalbag:** You've been a lifer at Xerox. Do you think that's made a huge difference, in terms of leadership and the confidence to take the company forward in a time of change and challenge? Or do you actually think sometimes it could work in the wrong way because you are too hemmed in by old rules and conservatism?

**Burns:** In the case of Xerox and the last two CEOs at least, it was absolutely required that the leader of the company was somebody who knew a lot about the history of the company. And had lived some of it. So this...we started out with this word, blue collar, and I use it purposefully at Xerox. Blue collar is the heart and soul of most economies. It's people who work hard, people who are not afraid of challenges, people who are fairly egalitarian, who are



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willing to pull the bail even if that's not their job.

In the change that we are making now, from a product only business to a product and services business – the “and” is important – if I don't know enough about what we did in the past, then I literally would sacrifice and make huge trade-offs and lot of mistakes about what to keep and you know, how do we grow and nurture what we need to keep. You could get blind to that, but I have enough reminders so I want to continue as best as [I can and] not hold on too long to things that are not valuable.

**Kalbag: Eleven of your 30 top management people are women. Do you think that's made a difference at Xerox?**

**Burns:** The personality of the company is made up of the sum of many different personalities. I am one hundred per cent sure that the personality of our company and the tilt that we have is affected by the fact that we have had two successive women CEOs. No doubt about it. Our hiring pattern, interestingly enough, probably hasn't changed that much. The reason why we had two successful (female) CEOs is because some guys hired us before. So the personality of the company is not a gender-based

personality, but it is one that actually enables, fairly easily, distinction of women. When I travel it's sometimes three women who are travelling; I don't say let's find the three women to travel with me. I say my treasurer has to come, my technology lead has to come, and my head of [marketing] has to come and it turns out that I have more of a shot of that person being a woman than most other people.

**Puliyenthuruthel: Tell us about the “imposter syndrome” you say women deal with.**

**Burns:** A lot of women I run into actually experience it – and I do as well, even today, sometimes. When I started, when I was an engineer, when I became an engineer, when I became a manager of engineering, when I became a manager of business... I was unique, all the time, often, not because I was uniquely smart but because I was a woman, I was black. I was this unique thing. And, I was young, that was a huge thing as well. I had no control over those facts, right?

But there's too much of self reflecting. Men don't worry about this at all. They get up in the morning

and go to work, everything is pretty standard, they're very comfortable where they are. Women are not necessarily automatically comfortable, they have to get themselves there and that forces you to be very self-reflective. [They] pause a lot before they act, pause a lot before they think. You're a little bit more cautious. And we women actually do question our abilities more than most men do by a mile. [We're] very self critical, very cautious, etc.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg wrote a book *Lean In*. I'm not a lean-in or lean-out person, but the point that she's saying is that we women actually step back a lot and it's not because we're less smart or poorly trained or less articulate. We are always the different voice, so we get the syndrome of – are we really this good? Literally, the things that men say about us: is she here because she's a woman, is she here because she's black, the things that men say about us, we actually ask about ourselves. I do it sometimes myself – which is interesting because I'm already the CEO of a company. ♦

*For more on Xerox's turnaround, its future growth and targets, read more of the Ursula Burns interview at: [businesstoday.in/ursulaburns-xerox](http://businesstoday.in/ursulaburns-xerox)*