



From Humble Beginnings to Fortune 500: The Ursula Burns Leadership Saga

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As her mother always reminded her, who you are is not what you are. From humble beginnings working through the ranks, starting as an engineering intern, to eventual promotion to CEO, it has been a remarkable journey for Ursula Burns. Burns navigated a quest rife with challenges, breaking through barriers of stereotypes and discrimination, winning people's respect with a charismatic personality, and emerging as a transformational leader. Burns gained recognition in 2009 after she was appointed as the first African-American woman to head a Fortune 500 company. This essay aims to conduct a thorough evaluation of Ursula Burns's leadership style using critical theoretical frameworks with illustrative examples drawn from her career. Additionally, I will discuss necessary leadership traits, challenges that she overcame in traditionally male-dominated fields, and how she developed or made changes in her leadership as she progressed within the organizational hierarchy.

"Leadership is one of the most observed and the least understood phenomena on earth," according to James McGregor Burns (Van Vugt, 2006). Most of the early leadership research was built on the trait approach. This method focuses on the personal qualities (or traits) of leaders, including their abilities, values, and physical and personality traits (Fleenor, 2006). The researchers acknowledge that several traits, such as intelligence, perseverance, self-assurance, assertiveness, courage, empathy, adaptability, responsibility, etc. These traits are correlated with how people view leaders; however, it is evident that there is a wide range of traits associated with leadership, making it challenging to identify which traits are superior (Meng et al., 2011). Most of Burns's traits were formed by her mother, who played a vital role in her life. By examining the case study (Xerox, p3), we can identify that Ursula Burns possesses many traits, like empathy, intelligence, and self-confidence. She can connect with employers and stakeholders on a personal level and has a good understanding of working with people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. This empathy made people at Xerox feel like they belonged, which consequently encouraged teamwork, developed relationships, and created a collaborative atmosphere.

Burns, who is well-known for her intelligence and strategic thinking, showed a deep comprehension of the complex workings of the industry. Her technical prowess was a crucial factor in determining Xerox's strategic orientation. Likewise, she showed courage by making difficult choices and taking reasonable risks for the business's growth. Stogdill's survey of 163 studies in 1974 suggested self-confidence as a certain characteristic and goes hand in hand with

Burns's persona. To explain these traits, let's take an example from a case study. Ursula Burns displayed assertiveness during a meeting by questioning the executives about the lack of diversity in the workforce. Her confidence in voicing her opinions, pushing for change, and bringing up significant issues that might have gone unnoticed was made evident by her willingness to challenge the status quo and have an honest conversation about a sensitive subject (Xerox, p3). Her intelligence, empathy, and self-assurance in interacting with people and handling difficult situations apparently helped her become well-known within the organization. Lastly, Burns exhibited strong communication skills, often captivating audiences with her articulate and persuasive speeches. Her ability to convey the vision and motivate others through compelling dialogue contributed to her leadership effectiveness. It's crucial to remember that a trait's absence or lower prominence doesn't always imply a weakness. While certain aspects of Ursula Burns' leadership were more overtly illustrated, other traits may have been expressed differently or had a less significant role in her overall style. Understanding these nuances provides a more comprehensive view of her leadership profile. Now that we have a better understanding of leadership traits, let's talk about how they differ between genders.

Men have traditionally held positions of leadership, and academics who study women in leadership have labeled leadership as a "gendered construct." (Lyness and Grotto, 2018, p230). The researchers' primary concept for the gender gap is that gender differences in personality traits are a result of societal pressures. Men are typically more assertive and dominant, while women are more likely to be communal, cooperative, and nurturing. As a result, men are more likely than women to participate in group discussions, speak up, and be viewed as leaders (Badura et.al, 2018, p336). The notion that women are leaders is intrinsically linked to their gender identity, bringing with it all the stereotypes associated with that role (Yoder, 2001, p815). In contrast to men, who are perceived as competitive and in control, society finds it difficult to let go of the stereotype of the emotional and sensitive woman who would struggle in a leadership role. (Xerox, p5). Female access to education, training, mentorship, networking, and career opportunities is limited by institutional and structural barriers, discrimination, and a glass ceiling that prevents women from rising to positions of outstanding leadership. These all sum up the perception that women are less ambitious and more biologically (and culturally) submissive and that they must conform to roles that are reinforced by a patriarchal society. For women to feel inspired to move up the leadership

ladder, it is critical that they receive the right kind of support to raise their levels of aspiration, self-efficacy, and self-determination (Hashim et.al, 2016).

Burns grew up in the Baruch Houses in Lower East Side New York, a tough neighborhood in the 1970s. Baruch was one of the infamous housing projects, which were government-subsidized apartment complexes full of low-income families and were frequently connected to gang violence. Growing up there was challenging but formative, teaching Burns lessons that would be useful in her career (Katsomitros, 2019a). Racism was commonplace in the 1960s and 1970s when Burns was growing up. "We didn't have segregated bathrooms because I was in the north, but it was evident that black people were treated very differently from White people and from poor black people; women were not taken into consideration at all," Burns claims. "We were up against three barriers: poor, black, and women" (Financial Times, 2010). Burns had to balance being collaborative and compassionate without coming across as weak or emotional and being assertive and authoritative without coming across as haughty or conceited. Striking this balance was challenging as a leader who is Black and a woman (HBR, 2021). Additionally, she had to navigate the demands of her personal and professional roles, juggling responsibilities as a mother, a wife, and a CEO. This involved managing expectations and pressures from diverse stakeholders, spanning her family, community, and society at large (Excoleadership, 2020).

She was instrumental in steering the business through challenging periods like the financial crisis, the disruption of new technologies, and changes in the competitive environment. In the early 2000s, Xerox's decline was evident as the company failed to cope with other technological companies like Canon and Ricoh in the era of rapid development. People still associate Xerox with antiquated devices like fax machines and photocopiers. Revenues were falling as emails and texting on mobile devices rapidly supplanted printing. To stop this steady decline, Burns pursued a strategy of growth for Xerox to expand its market share and profits (Xerox, p2). She had been among a select group of executives in 2001 who prevented the company from going bankrupt and encouraged diversification, especially in business processing services. Her technical prowess and years of experience in the industry forced her to change Xerox's traditional approach to digital printing to the development of new products and services. For which plans to expand through mergers and acquisitions came in place. In 2009 under Burns' direction, Xerox paid 6.4 billion to acquire the IT outsourcing services provider ACS (Katsomitros, 2019b). Xerox swiftly made a

transition from a hardware company to a software company. The revenue of the company spiked after Burns's appointment in 2009. According to Statista, Xerox's Revenue went from 14.38 billion U.S. dollars to 19.65 billion in one year (Statista, 2023). Through her career and personal struggles, Ursula Burns showed us her courage, resilience, and vision as a leader. After discussing the challenges Burns faced during her journey, let's further discuss what leadership style Ursula Burns possesses and the adjustments she made in her leadership approach as her career progressed.

According to Bass, the organization's culture is massively shaped by its leadership, and the culture of an organization can influence the development of its leadership. For instance, transformational leaders realign the organization's culture with a new vision and a revision of its shared assumptions, values, and norms, while transactional leaders operate within their organizational cultures, adhering to existing rules, procedures, and norms (Bass and Avolio, 1993). According to Rosener and Eagly, there is a perception that masculine leaders frequently employ a "transactional" style of leadership, while feminine leaders exhibit a "transformational" style (Faizan et.al, 2018). This theory can be further explained by using an example from a case study as a meta-analysis by Alice Eagly and Blair Johnson demonstrated that feminine traits of support and care could be a strategic advantage for the success and well-being of organizations rather than fitting into the conventional stereotypes of male and female leadership behaviors (Xerox, p4). Burns strives to build relationships and considers her team's interests, so her approach tends to be "people-concern." Burns was seen as a charismatic leader by her peers (Xerox, p4), Those who are utterly dedicated to their specific goal and plan, who have unwavering faith in the validity of their cause and their ultimate success, and who possess the ability to convey this to their followers are charismatic leaders (Fiedler, 1996). The theory of transformational leaders is enhanced by traits such as an inspirational and charismatic personality. Consequently, Ursula Burns exemplifies the traits and actions of a transformational leader.

According to Fiedler's theory, the relationship between leader and followers is crucial, although followers are less frequently studied than leaders, their importance in the leadership process cannot be amplified, as followers must recognize and respect a leader's authority (Padilla et.al, 2007). Burns was a good follower at the beginning of her career, which helped her advance through the ranks. While serving as Chairman Paul Allaire's executive assistant, Burns's various leadership traits such as her keen perception and ability to respond to the needs of the team lured her to

numerous promotions (Xerox, p2). Burns mentors deserve full credit as coaching is an essential fundamental leadership development. Relationships and trust are built by coaching leaders who engage in personal conversations with their staff because they demonstrate a sincere interest in them. They are skilled at assigning tasks to their employee that present challenges. Their mentor-mentee relationship was advantageous to the organization and to her personally (Xerox, p3). As Fielder said people who are noticed as good leaders are good followers, preparing future leaders by teaching them that good followers make good leaders (Fielder,1996). In a nutshell, Ursula Burns' authenticity is a defining feature of her leadership style. Working under higher authorities like executives, chairpersons, and CEOs has provided Ursula with invaluable exposure to diverse leadership styles, strategic decision-making, and organizational dynamics. This experience laid a foundation for her growth as a leader, allowing her to absorb insights, refine her approach, and eventually ascend to leadership positions, equipped with a wealth of knowledge and understanding of effective leadership principles. Her leadership style and lessons offer valuable insights for anyone aspiring to achieve success in any field.

In conclusion, Ursula Burn's journey from humble beginnings at Baruch Houses to becoming the first African-American woman to lead a Fortune 500 company is a testament to her resilience, vision, and transformative leadership. Burns defied stereotypes and discrimination and navigated challenges with unwavering commitment and leadership prowess. Her empathetic, intelligent, and self-confident qualities promoted an inclusive work environment at Xerox, encouraging teamwork and stimulating strategic innovation. Burns demonstrates a blend of compassion and courage, while challenging norms and steering Xerox through turbulent financial times. Her trajectory, shaped by mentorship, diverse experiences, and exposure to varied leadership styles, displays the transformative power of leadership in shaping organizational cultures and success. Burns's leadership style, marked by a responsibility to change and inclusive leadership, aligns with theories highlighting the influence of leaders on organizational dynamics. The narrative of Ursula Burns sheds light on the transformative power of leadership and encourages upcoming leaders to embrace diversity, resilience, and visionary leadership to promote organizational growth and success.

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