



Ursula Burns, Corporate Executive



Xerox CEO Ursula Burns has consulted with President Obama about improving the U.S. Export Economy. © AP Images

Ursula Burns, chief executive officer of Xerox, is the first African-American woman to head a Fortune 500 company. Burns, born in 1958, spent her childhood in a low-income public housing project on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. “[My mother was] a single woman

raising three kids on next to nothing who showed me courage and gave me inner strength,” Burns said. In 2009, she told a gathering, “I can still hear her telling me, ‘Circumstances don’t define anyone.’ She used to say to me all the time, ‘Where you are is not who you are.’”

Burns’ tenure with Xerox began with a position as a summer intern. Her first years saw her work rewarded with promotion to middle management. During a panel on teamwork, the strong disapproval Burns expressed about another participant’s opinions on women in management impressed

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Ursula Burns chats with other CEO panelists at a conference in Las Vegas in 2012. © AP Images

a vice president. “My boldness caught [his] attention. He asked to meet with me and later offered me a position as his executive assistant — a mentoring opportunity to work side by side with him to better understand how the business is run,” she said. Not long after that, she became executive assistant for Xerox’s chief executive, where

she was able to get an understanding of the day-to-day activities of senior-level management. Burns said, “From there I saw a path for me in management that took me outside my comfort zone but gave me a whole new sense of confidence in the value I could bring to the business.”

“I’m known for being frank and speaking my mind,” Burns said. “The critical component [of success] is the alignment of people around a common set of objectives. Diversity is a key factor to this strategy. I truly am my race and my gender. There is no denying either. They define my heritage.”

