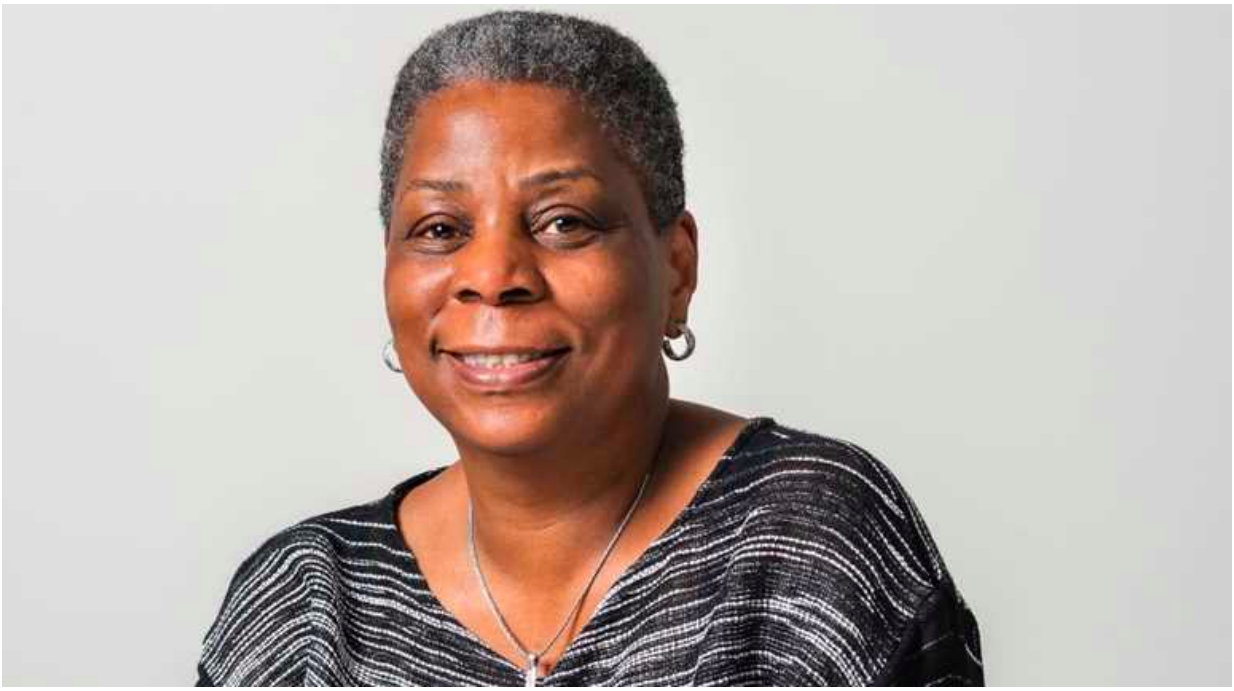

Ursula Burns

Leading in the B-Suite
Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"The '-isms' of Sexism And Racism Are Like Air. They're Everywhere."

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***Ursula Burns**, the former CEO of Xerox, was high on the list*

*of influential leaders that **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, and I wanted to interview for our "Leading in the B-Suite" series about race in corporate America and what should be done to increase the ranks of Black leaders in the C-Suite (thus the B-Suite name). Make time to read her powerful and provocative insights.*

Morris: Who were the biggest influences on you early in your life?

Burns: The biggest and probably only influence in the early part of my life was my mother. We grew up in an area where if you didn't have a tight rein on your children, they would probably be lost to some gang or drugs or some other bad alternative. She kept us surrounded and busy.

My father left the family when I was very young and my mother was left basically to fend for herself with my brother, sister and me. She had only finished high school and was an immigrant from Panama. She made it her life's mission to ensure that her kids were okay and successful.

You can't let the world happen to you. You have to happen to the world.

My mother's definition of success was very clear in our household — it was how good a person you are and what you leave behind. And she

would use words like, “Where you are is not who you are. You can’t let the world happen to you. You have to happen to the world.” My mother’s been dead for 35 years, but not a day goes by without me thinking about her.

Bryant: What do you see as the biggest break or decision early on that set your career on a different trajectory?

Burns: I really lucked out in choosing to study engineering. And it really was luck. I didn’t know what engineers were. I read in a book that if you’re really good at math, the career that would help you earn the most money was chemical engineering. To be a chemical engineer, you have to like chemistry. So I chose mechanical engineering. I was really good at it, particularly the physics and calculus aspects of it.

My other big break was working for Xerox. I just lucked into a company that was interested in me. They didn’t spend a lot of time trying to mold me or form me into something else or try to smooth my rough edges. They were interested in the fact that I was pretty good at engineering.

That allowed me to practice and perfect being me and not somebody else. Rochester had lived through some of the worst race riots in the 60’s, and Xerox made it its mission to make a difference in who they brought into the company. I joined a company that was a match made in heaven.

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And when I spoke up, people generally seemed to be interested in what I was saying. So I practiced, without even knowing it, speaking my mind and having an opinion. That led to me being chosen to be the assistant to the head of marketing and customer operations at Xerox. He was a White man who was from Indiana, and definitely not the kind of person I would typically spend time with.

But we hit it off. He knew a lot more about the company and a lot more about the world than I did. But he didn't know what I knew. He didn't know much about mechanical engineering or how the world was changing, and how women and Black and Brown people were having more of a voice. So we were able to have a good give-and-take relationship.

Morris: Over the course of your career, what headwinds did you face because you are a Black woman?

Burns: One of the things that I learned as a senior executive is that the "-isms" of sexism and racism are like air. They're everywhere. It's so important to understand this structurally. People will ask me, "Did you ever experience racism or sexism?" Of course, but a more realistic question is to ask, "When have you not experienced it?"

People think that the only racism that we now feel or should feel is when people overtly say or do something. Unfortunately, it's worse than that. It's like the air that you breathe. My daughter and I were walking down a street in New York City and there was a bunch of people coming toward us, three or four across. They didn't pay any attention to us, and my daughter said, "They walk like they own the place."

There's a structural comfort level in society, a supremacy, that White people, particularly in America, feel. The challenge is so much more about the world re-educating White people than it is about the world re-educating Black people or Brown people. What happened with the Jim Crow laws was that they taught White society to look at all Blacks as objects that were less valuable than their horse or their dog.

And this was during non-slave times. So if you saw a Black person walking toward you, that Black person had to give way to you. The reason why I'm talking about this is that I've never been faced with ignorant racism at work. But it was clear that no matter how hard I tried, no matter how good I was, we're going to be judged against this standard that we will never be able to meet, and most of us don't want to.

It became clearer as I moved up in the company that there was a level of discomfort because I am so different from the people my colleagues normally saw. The subtle messages were that I was in a place that I didn't belong.

We have to rethink society in a more intellectually advanced way.

I've been asked many times, "How does it feel to be a Black female CEO?" If you think about this question, it means that the person asking it must believe that their reality is the normal reality and I'm now changing this reality. The question is insane. It means that the baseline is their baseline and now I'm being compared to and judged against that baseline.

It's so wrong. It's so pervasive. We don't ask Chinese people how it feels to be Chinese. We don't ask Jewish people how it feels to be Jewish. We have to rethink society in a more intellectually advanced way. We have to be more inclusive in defining normalcy.

Bryant: Why are so many people uncomfortable about having conversations about race in America, and what advice do you have about ways to have more constructive discussions?

Burns: There are a couple of reasons. One is that this issue has been viewed as somebody else's problem. You can live your whole life as a White person and never have to interact with a Black person. That ability to kind of distance yourself from other humans in such a way that you don't have to ever learn anything about them makes it a conversation that just becomes very easy to remove yourself from.

Second, if you look at what happened to Blacks in America, the country owes Blacks an apology. I literally cry as I learn more about how Blacks were treated. Families were destroyed. Cruelty became normal. Even after freedom, the South decided that they were going to structure a society that kept this unbelievable pressure and inhumane treatment of other human beings going.

This is not a dinnertime conversation.

We need an apology and we're never going to get it unless people realize that, no, it wasn't like the slave that you saw in *Gone with the Wind*. White people don't want to deal with this. We cannot have a conversation about this comfortably. This is not a dinnertime conversation. The reason it's difficult to talk about and deal with is because we have to admit the worst about ourselves and what we're capable of doing, and people just don't want to do that.

Over the last 30 or 40 years, CEOs were responsible for one thing and one thing only: shareholder return. Basically, they could say that the government deals with policing, healthcare and diversity and inclusion. But the fact is that CEOs, business leaders, shareholders, and boards are responsible for being members of society in the fullest sense. The thing that's really encouraging right now is that people are having that conversation. And companies are realizing that they better be on the right side of this debate.

Morris: What can and should be done to increase the representation of Black executives in the ranks of senior leaders?

Burns: The way that you fix this problem of lack of Black and Brown people in leadership is that you find them and hire them. Start at the director level. I have 25 names I can give you today. And then you focus on your leadership team. Is it easy? No. But you're going to find a head of HR or a head of IT or marketing. These are three fields that have more females and people of color than other fields.

Next, you have to get engaged as a company. There's a lot of intellectual and emotional laziness, and the way you solve this problem is to just fix it. But then people start mentioning their rules, like, "But this person didn't go to Harvard."

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If you're recruiting from Harvard, you're going to find ten Black people. You go to Howard, you're going to find 100. You go to Hampton, you're going to find 100. You go to University of Maryland, Baltimore County, you're going to find 100. You have to recruit where they are, not where you want them to be. There is a way to do this, and CEOs have started to realize that they need to think differently.

Bryant: What has been your reaction to all the announcements that companies have made in the wake of the killing of George Floyd?

Burns: Hopefulness. This time we may see something different. We're in a divided nation that's being purposely divided. And with all the events of this year, there's a sense of disgust about the way, even to this day, people who are poor and people who are Black are treated. People are saying, "No longer am I going to look to others to get this solved. I'm not longer going to say that it's not part of my mandate or my remit."

Corporate America is saying that maybe it needs to do something. Even if companies don't know exactly what to do, they want to have a point of view and be part of the solution. Businesses are starting to realize that the current state of affairs is really just not sustainable. And it's not only Black and Brown people. It's about poverty. It's about women.

I'm very hopeful that George Floyd didn't die in vain.

They're starting to realize that they can't hope for other people to solve this for them. I'm very hopeful that George Floyd didn't die in vain. He had nothing to do with corporate America, but he's probably going to have a major and lasting impact in the way that companies approach racism and inclusion and equity.

There is no one else to solve this problem but us. We know it's a

problem. Inequity, lack of diversity, lack of inclusion, huge disparities in the way that people live and what they can expect from their lives — it's really important that we understand that we're at a point where people are willing to try things, and shame on us if we just sit back and say that it's not going to be fixed. "They" won't fix it. There is no "they." It's "us," so we have to take charge of it.

Morris: What advice would you give mid- to early-career Black professionals?

Burns: You've got to know the difference between right and wrong and you have to tend to what's right. Not everyone does everything right because we're not saints, but tend toward right.

Second, it's really important that we work hard, and are good at something. You can't actually skip over the steps between the day you were born and the presidency of the United States just because you're bright. You earn your way up the ladder, and there are things that you have to experience and do. So find something that you're really good at, perfect yourself in that and work really, really hard.