Effective Leadership

An Interview with Carly Fiorina,
Founder and Chairman, Carly Fiorina Enterprises, and Founder and Chairman, Unlocking Potential

EDITORS' NOTE *Carly Fiorina started out as a secretary for a nine-person real estate business and eventually became the first woman ever to lead a Fortune 50 company when she was recruited to lead Hewlett-Packard (HP) in 1999. During her tenure at HP, the company received numerous civic recognitions, including being named one of the 100 Best Corporate Citizens by* Business Ethics *magazine, one of the 100 Best Companies for Working Mothers by* Working Mother Magazine*, receiving a 100 percent rating by The Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index, and being named one of the World's Most Respected Companies by the* Financial Times *and PricewaterhouseCoopers. After leaving HP, Fiorina focused her efforts on giving back. Prior to founding Unlocking Potential, she served as the Chairman of Good360, the world's largest product philanthropy organization, and as Chairman of Opportunity International, a Christian-based organization that lifts millions out of poverty around the globe through microfinance. She also founded the One Woman Initiative in partnership with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to engage and empower women in Pakistan, Egypt, India and the Philippines through increased access to economic opportunity. Fiorina was appointed by President Bush and CIA Director Michael Hayden to serve as the Chairman of the External Advisory Board of the CIA after 9/11. In 2015, she launched her campaign for President of the United States. Fiorina is a best-selling author of* Tough Choices, Rising to the Challenge *and her latest book,* Find Your Way. *In February 2019, Fiorina and The Busch School of Business at The Catholic University of America began an academic partnership where she will serve as Distinguished Clinical Professor in Leadership.*

ORGANIZATION BRIEFS *Carly Fiorina Enterprises (carlyfiorina.com) helps clients identify and develop new perspectives that will help solve critical problems in the areas of diversity and inclusion, leadership development, strategic planning, communication, managing stakeholders, developing project management skills, culture and values.*

Carly Fiorina

Unlocking Potential (upleadership.org) provides community leaders with the tools and resources to strengthen their leadership and problem-solving skills. Its curriculum is built on Fiorina's deep experience developing leaders in every context and is based on her philosophy that leaders are made, not born; that everyone can be a leader; and that the people closest to the problem are best positioned to solve it. Its goal is to ensure that every member of the team, from executives to front-line employees, becomes a world class problem-solver.

What were the keys to your success in business and did you imagine in the early days that you would have had the opportunities you were presented?

I didn't imagine it, which is why I always tell young people in particular, don't map your life out. Part of life's adventure is seeing what opportunities come your way and focusing on doing the very best you can with the opportunity that's right in front of you.

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I think that was the most important revelation for me. When I got out of the secretarial pool and got an M.B.A. and landed in a huge corporation called AT&T, which at the time had 1 million employees, there was nothing about me that earmarked me for success. I didn't have an expectation of moving through the ranks or getting a promotion; my desire was to do a good job.

I found out that to do a good job, in my mind, meant I had to solve the problems that were right in front of me, not let them fester, not ignore them or pretend they didn't exist. It was about solving them, and the only way I could solve the problems that were right in front of me was to work with the people who were all around me.

That focus on problem solving, results, and collaboration in order to change things and make them better is what propelled me forward in the corporate world and also what has animated me and motivated me and given me joy in my life.

Do you feel that leadership can be taught or is it something that you are born with?

I think it's definitely something you can learn. In fact, I think leaders are made, not born, and I think everyone is capable of leadership. Not everyone knows they're capable of it and not everyone has the opportunity to develop it. I think part of the problem is the word itself. When people hear the word "leader" they tend to think about position and title, so we call people leaders because they're in a big position. When I was starting out, I thought the leader was someone with the title, position and office, but a lot of times people with positions and titles are managers, not leaders. Many times they're not changing anything for the better, and they're actually taking advantage of the status quo, which is different than leadership.

I've learned through experience. I have met people who have been motivated to become leaders, sometimes by very difficult circumstances, sometimes by enormous challenge as well as enormous opportunity and sometimes because they've been lifted up by others. Anyone is capable of leadership and leadership can be learned.

Was the creation of Carly Fiorina Enterprises a natural extension of your career and how do you define its mission?

It has been a natural extension of my career. I've spent my career building effective teams and solving problems and it is what brings me joy. When I look at our communities, when I look at our companies, when I look at our nation, when I look at our world, what I see are a lot of problems, and I know we need more problem-solvers, which is to say we need more leaders.

During my career, having done this in many sectors and over many decades, the curriculum that we've developed gets to the essentials of leadership; what are the essential tools that you need to use to change something for the better and solve a problem?

What is Unlocking Potential?

Unlocking Potential is the nonprofit arm of Carly Fiorina Enterprises. In the Unlocking Potential Foundation, we are focusing our leadership training, team effectiveness, and problem-solving capacity on the social sector. We do so in some cases with corporate partners such as American Express and MassMutual among others.

When you look at the many challenges facing the world today, are you optimistic for the future?

I'm optimistic when I look in the right places. Leadership isn't coming out of Washington and that's been true for a long time. George Washington in 1789 said to the nation, "Beware the rise of political parties because politics will become all about winning and not about governing."

I think one of the things we have to do to solve the problems in front of us is to recognize where problems aren't getting solved. Problems are not getting solved in Washington. Every election is animated by the same set of problems every time. People differ as to the solutions, but we argue about the same things every time. I am not optimistic looking at Washington D.C. I'm very optimistic when I go into communities across this country, whether it's Boston or Salt Lake City or Washington D.C. or Dallas. When I go into communities and I see community leaders and company employees coming together and focusing on the challenges they have in common, I'm optimistic because problem-solvers are emerging.

It goes back to what I said earlier; we think that leaders are the people with position and title and will therefore solve the problems. I think we'll make more progress when we realize that it is for all of us to solve. We all have problems right in front of us and we can make a difference if we tackle them together.

What were the keys that led to the transformation at HP under your leadership?

The first key was that we all had to agree on what the problems were. I did not come in as CEO and say "here is the problem." What I did instead was interview scores of customers and employees and I let them do the talking. The thing about problems is that everyone knows what they are. The question is, do you agree on solving them, and to start to solve them you have to agree on what they are and then agree that you're going to do something about it.

From that point forward, we began to work together to address the problems that HP was facing. It doesn't mean we didn't get resistance and pushback when we started down that path.

Were you able to drive change at HP with the people who were already at the company or did you need to bring in new talent?

I'll answer that question in two ways. First, I purposely came to Hewlett-Packard alone. I didn't bring anyone new with me and that was a deliberate decision because I wanted to signal to the organization my belief, based on experience, that we already had everything we needed in the organization to identify our problems and solve them.

The second answer I will give you is that in my experience, there are three kinds of people. There are people who get it immediately; I call them change warriors and they're usually about 20 percent of the people. There are other people who will resist mightily to the end, not because they're bad people, but because they benefited from the way it is; I call them resisters and they're about 20 percent of the people.

Then, there is everybody else who are skeptical and want to wait to see what happens. Successful change occurs when leaders mobilize the change warriors to convince the skeptics.

Often in the process of change, leaders focus all of their attention on the resisters, but this doesn't work and eventually some of the resisters have to go. You don't change something because the resisters change their minds. You change something because the skeptics get on board.

Have you been happy with the progress made around diversity and inclusion in the workplace?

Progress has been made. When I joined HP, I was the only woman CEO among the Fortune 50; now there are several more. On the other hand, there are more CEOs named

Carly Fiorina at the Unlocking Potential Springfield Leadership Lab sponsored by MassMutual

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James in the Fortune 500 than there are women and that's a fact. Additionally, the percentage of board members who are women has been stubbornly stuck at less than 20 percent for decades.

So while there has been progress, we're not making the progress you would think we would be. It's also true that corporate America spends $8 billion a year on diversity and inclusion training and the money isn't working. We're not getting the results we should achieve and I think the reason for it is simple. It's not that people are bad. It's not that people are saying they don't want to have a diverse workforce or don't want to include people. I think it is because businesses believe it is the right thing to do, but they don't understand it is the necessary thing to do.

When businesses finally figure out that they need to do this for business success, they'll do it, but they haven't figured this out yet. I think the reason is because decision-making is easier when people are more alike, however it is more effective when people are more different. Diverse teams, and the data supports this, make better decisions over the long haul because they challenge each other. I may have a point of view, but you may have a point of view that adds to my understanding and perspective about an issue. This isn't a nice to do; the most diverse teams are the most effective teams over the long haul.

How critical is it for businesses to be purpose-driven?

The private sector does so much and yet if you look at the data, most young people don't think capitalism is a good thing. When business earns a reputation for being blood thirsty and taking advantage of customers – the financial crisis, the opioid crisis, the Boeing jet issue, for example – whether that perception is fair or not, it harms businesses over time. It is clear that a business being a great corporate citizen, a purpose-driven organization, and making a positive impact in the communities in which they live and work is a necessity for the long haul.

It is also necessary because millennials demand it. I have a lot of millennials who work for me and we work with a lot of millennials in our clients' organizations. Millennials realize they don't have a lifetime employment and a rich pension at the end since things have changed. They're looking for companies that challenge them intellectually and capture them emotionally, not just that puts money in their bank account. An organization that is purpose-driven does that.

What interested you in writing books?

It's interesting. If you would have asked me 20 years ago if I would have written three books, and I'm already on the fourth, my answer would have been, no. I've developed a passion for it and if you have ever listened to a speech of mine, you would know that I like to tell stories because I think people learn by listening to stories.

For me, writing books is about telling stories, not just my own story, but other peoples' stories as well because I think that's how we learn and get inspired and motivated. Storytelling is a very impactful way to unlock someone's potential, and if my books help to do that, it's gratifying

What led you to decide to run for public office?

I'm a problem-solver and I saw so many problems where I thought a different approach would be useful. I think we have too many professional politicians. I'm not being disparaging of them as people, instead I'm reflecting on the fact that the system of politics is geared towards running and winning, running and winning, running and winning.

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That's not the same as being geared towards serving citizens and solving their problems and I thought an outsider's perspective would be useful. I thought someone who had a lot of experience with very complex problems in organizations might be useful. I knew the odds were long, very long, and I didn't have false expectations about the outcome or how easy it would be, but I also have no regrets for having done it.

I learned a lot about the political process, which is partially why I say with such confidence that we should not be looking to Washington for solutions right now. We should be looking elsewhere because the system isn't geared to produce solutions. Politics is a nasty business in many ways, but voters are not, citizens are not. For me, talking to voters and talking to citizens and being in communities was a wonderful process.

What advice do you offer young people about the keys to building a sustainable career?

I tell them several things. First, get a job, any job. It doesn't have to be the perfect job. Then, whatever job you get, do it really well, because when you do a really good job, someone will take notice and opportunity will knock. When that happens, answer the call.

Second, I tell them to have courage and be brave. I think that's particularly hard for young people because criticism is so omnipresent. Social media is such a pressure on young people to conform and to fulfill others' expectations. My goodness, they spend so much time curating photos and making everything look the way they want it to look. You have to have courage to forge ahead in life and you have to be brave to take risks, because without taking risks you won't achieve very much.

The final thing that I tell them is not to worry about ten years from now. Don't even worry about five years from now. Worry about what's right in front of you. How do I make an impact? How do I make a difference? How do I collaborate with others? How do I solve the problem that's right in front of me? The more you do that, the more capable you are of doing it. The more capable you are of doing it, the more you're going to want to do it and that's how you get on a path, not just a path to progress and impact, but a path to joy because people get fulfillment from making a contribution and having an impact. ●