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Entrepreneurial Leadership – Lessons from a CEO

By Susan Foley

Anne Mulcahy, the former CEO of Xerox recently spoke at the Commonwealth Institute in Boston. She started her talk by saying, *“Amazing things happen through difficult times.”*

Anne’s rise to the top of Xerox was as much of a surprise to her as it was to others. The company was facing a financial crisis when she was asked to become the CEO. There was no job interview just a request from the board. It was *“a time of dramatic crisis.”*

As one of only five women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies at the time, Anne was handed a company on the brink of collapse. Not only was the company in financial crisis, it was facing scrutiny by the securities and exchange committee. *There was no time to waste.*

The new CEO was facing a daunting task. It would put her leadership skills to the test. Her first challenge was getting the other senior executives on board. There were only a few things that she wanted from them - *no second guessing, belief and loyalty.* Although not all of her direct reports wanted to stick around, she was surprised to find that everyone else signed on.

In retrospect it is easy to see what worked and what didn’t but in Anne’s case a lot of the things she did were exactly what the company needed. *What she learned along the way:*

- **Spend time listening** - listen to customers and employees
- **Communicate face to face** – meet with people where they are
- **Make goals clear** - let employees know what is expected
- **Give people a roadmap** - give people a sense of hope grounded in reality
- **Be honest** – need to be transparent and honest with customers, employees and yourself
- **Lead and manage to values** – have a clear and consistent set of values
- **Challenge the status quo** – make the tough, difficult calls
- **Focus on things that matter** – things that add value
- **Inspire your people** – inspire them to be and do more
- **Invest upstream** – cut costs and increase productivity while investing upstream

Anne said that the greatest piece of wisdom came from Warren Buffet who told her *“don’t spend any time with bankers. Focus on customers and employees.”* Anne knew that getting the financials fixed was critical, but investing in the future was just as important.

In the business world there is harsh punishment for not making your numbers. It took extraordinary courage for Anne to look beyond the ninety day window that analysts look at. She knew that without loyal customers and engaged employees there was no future for Xerox.

Anne Mulcahy is an entrepreneurial leader. Not only was she trying to *save a company*, she was *reinventing it* at the same time.

Susan Foley is the founder of Corporate Entrepreneurs LLC and the author of the book, *Entrepreneurs Inside: Accelerating Business Growth with Corporate Entrepreneurs.* www.corporate-entrepreneurs.com