



Rotman Initiative for Women in Business

Member Spotlight: Melanie Philip, Business Transformation Manager, Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, Xerox Canada Ltd.

Interview from May 2014



What or who inspires you and why?

What inspires me are the mentees who I have mentored. There is nothing more inspiring than working with an individual on a plan for their growth and development and watching him or her succeed. Finding the talent is one thing, but what drives success is providing the opportunity, and the coaching, to help the individual to take on a role that will make him or her a stronger contributor and leader. I have been a mentor to many individuals and, through our discussions, I always come away with a better understanding of my own abilities and limitations and a greater sense of self.

In one particular example, I had the opportunity to help a young woman through a difficult time in her life when a family member was dying of cancer. I was able to coach her through her options with respect to staying at work vs. taking time away from the office and how to approach these topics with her manager in a professional way. I continue to be inspired by her strength.

Another individual I mentored started out with significant experience outside of our company. In many cases, external experience is hard to evaluate or to recognize as a strength. I was able to help this individual to look at her experience differently and to effectively articulate how the outside experience would be an asset in a coveted new position. Once in the role, her progression was quick as her skills were easily identified. Watching this person's growth and development has been truly inspiring and has helped me to reflect on my own experiences and identify ways to leverage my skills in a different capacity.

What three accomplishments are you most proud of?

1. In 2009, I became the President of the [Women's Alliance](#) in Canada. In this role, one of my undertakings was working with the Board to create a consistent process for the meetings and quarterly events. Driving a consistent process and accountability is key for keeping momentum in the delivery of events to our membership. It is fantastic to watch the Women's Alliance Board run effectively and provide consistency in program delivery.

2. Prior to becoming certified as a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt at Xerox, I initiated a project to help me determine whether I should attain the certification. By working with an assigned Black belt and taking on the role of project leader, I learned a great deal about challenges associated with advancing a highly cross-functional project. As a team, we took on the challenges, including cultural hurdles, and presented a viable plan, which was successfully implemented. Now, more than two years later, the changes that were implemented have laid the groundwork for further improvements to our customer service and internal efficiencies.
3. In my personal life, I have two children who are 18 and 13 years old. I have been an active mother in their lives, while simultaneously focusing on my career at Xerox and dedicating time to the Women's Alliance. I thoroughly enjoy being a mother and supporting my children in their endeavors. While my life can be extremely busy at times, I am proud of my choice to keep all of these facets forefront in my life.

What do you think is the most significant barrier to female leadership?

Unconscious Bias is one of the most significant barriers for female Leadership.

Unconscious Bias is a misleading cognitive tendency, or mental shortcut, that one is not aware of having. With Unconscious Bias, people make choices that discriminate without realizing that they are doing so, and against their own conscious belief that they are being unbiased in their decision-making (source Binna Kandola).

In terms of opportunities for advancement, men and women can be characterized by typical gender traits. Since this is something that our minds do unconsciously, it is not obvious that a talented women may not be considered for a role due to an unconscious decision by the hiring individual that a male would perform better in that particular role. If this happens perpetually within the various layers of an organization, then talented females are not getting the same opportunities for advancement as their male counterparts.

The good news about this challenge is that many organizations are implementing training throughout their organizations on unconscious bias. By being aware of this human tendency, hiring managers can consciously consider a wider pool of talent including both male and female candidates and expand the leadership pipeline.

What is the biggest risk you have taken in your career? Did it pay off?

The biggest risk I have taken is to move between sales roles and finance roles within Xerox. This has been risky in terms of developing a reputation in sales and then having to build a new reputation in finance. Failure in one area could mean that the door will not be open in the other business line should I decide to return. I took this risk because it has allowed me to develop cross functional experience and develop a unique skill set. By taking this risk, I have benefited from a wide range of available opportunities as my career has developed. My advice would be to recognize that betting on yourself is a

calculated risk, as long as you are determined to work hard ensure success and seek out the required support.

What will be the biggest challenge for the generation of women behind you?

One of the biggest challenges for the generation behind us is the perception that barriers no longer exist and that equality has been achieved. With this mindset, young women may feel they do not need to belong to an employee resource group like the Women's Alliance. This is an issue because unconscious biases still work against women who are trying to ascend into senior leadership positions. The numbers show that women still significantly lag behind men in promotion and lifetime career earnings; this is especially true of those who take time out of the workforce to raise children or juggle family responsibilities with aging parents. New graduates may not be aware of these challenges; therefore, the mentoring and support provided through the Women's Alliance is invaluable. Supporting each other through groups like the Women's Alliance is needed to see continued success in women attaining their personal and professional goals. We need new young members to become involved in order to fully understand and address the needs of our current and future female leaders. It is up to this new generation to get involved in Women networks and amplify the great groundwork that the current and past women leaders have worked so hard to create. I encourage the current leaders to welcome this new generation and embrace their ideas. You will be amazed at the relationships you will build, the mentors/mentees you will find, the value you will bring and the personal growth you will experience.