

CFO SPOTLIGHT: JUANITA RUSSELL, SVP, CFO OF MERSCORP HOLDINGS, INC.



1. Who had the biggest influence on your career and why?

Hands down, my father. He taught by example that anything was possible for me and my six brothers and sisters and the only limitations in my life are the ones that I impose on myself. With only a second-grade education and unable to read, he owned and operated one of the largest Shell gas stations on the East Coast. He was a true entrepreneur who taught me that if you cannot find a role model, become one, and embrace being the first of a kind. He also taught me that if it does not exist, don't be afraid to build it.

Once his business was profitable, he moved his seven children to an all-white suburb. Despite my father's second-grade education, he understood the need to provide his children with the best education and opportunities - several decades ago this was primarily attainable in white suburbs. While I frequently felt like an outsider, I learned valuable lessons from that experience. Over time I gained confidence and learned to embrace my gender and race as strengths and positive differentiators as opposed to limitations. I still carry these lessons with me to this day.

2. Do you have a personal mantra, words of wisdom or favorite inspirational quote?

My favorite inspirational quote and personal mantra is a quote by Marianne Williamson. It reminds me that the world is full of people unknowingly managing their internalized oppression and holding others down because of it. It reminds me that I limit myself when I worry about what others think. It reminds me of the lessons of my father.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do.....and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

3. What are the three most important components for your personal and professional success?

Self-care, integrity, and surrounding myself with people of excellence who consistently, lovingly and without apology, hold me accountable to the highest personal and professional standards.

4. What opportunities/experiences did you have that best prepared you to be a CFO?

In my tenure with MERS, I had the unique opportunity of growing professionally as the organization grew.

I had the responsibility for building a financial organization from the ground up with no prior experience in doing so. This required me to think strategically about not only current, but future organizational needs and to architect a structure that would best serve the needs of the Company and allow us to expand our range of services.

There were times when I felt I was making it up as I went along but I trusted my instincts and, as a result, built a solid financial organization that I am very proud of. During this time, I also obtained my MBA at Columbia Business School because I felt it was necessary to increase my capacity and gain a broader perspective on business. These experiences have prepared me to be successful in a variety of CFO roles.

5. What's one regret you can share about your career?

As I advanced in my career, the biggest challenge was the feeling of isolation. There was a lack of role models and mentors who were females and people of color. I didn't see anyone like me in senior roles. It was challenging enough, as a woman, raising a family while pursuing a career in a demanding role. Add to that, I am a 6'0" tall, outspoken, and assertive black female CFO, in a role typically held by men. This created the dual challenge of not always being sure I was receiving honest feedback and feeling that my perspective or views were not always valued. Had there been role models or mentors to look to for advice and counsel, I believe my journey would have been a smoother one and held even greater opportunity. That said, I am humbled to serve as one of the few black women in my position and to serve as a role model and mentor to others.

6. What is your biggest accomplishment of your career?

I recently oversaw the acquisition of the company that I helped to grow as it was acquired by Intercontinental Exchange ("ICE"). This was a 3-year process which required my leadership in the due diligence efforts, contract review, negotiations, and development of the necessary financial models critical to the deal. With the acquisition by ICE (owner of the New York Stock Exchange), MERS is well positioned to leverage their technological expertise and resources to make an even bigger impact on the mortgage industry.