

“This is the voyage of your life.”

Egon Zehnder talks with Erica Ariel Fox

Erica Ariel Fox has dedicated her professional life to senior leadership development. She's taught at Harvard Law School for over twenty years, and is The New York Times Best-selling author of “Winning from Within.” She's a globally-recognized innovator in advising C-suite executives, and is also the co-founder of Mobius Executive Leadership. Reflecting a shared commitment to CEOs and top-level development, Mobius and Egon Zehnder have worked collaboratively on developing world-changing leaders for many years. We spoke with Erica in Berlin about her experiences helping senior executives to embark on what she calls the “voyage” from self-discovery to leadership greatness.

Egon Zehnder: Erica, what defines the ideal leader today?

Erica Ariel Fox: Ideal leaders today realize they need to understand and direct more than their company, more than their market segment, and more than their P & L. For anyone with authority, their capacity for extraordinary leadership now comes from a passion to understand themselves, combined with a commitment to lifelong development as a leader and as a human being. They also appreciate that the days are over when results-orientation and hitting performance targets were enough. Employees, customers, clients, and corporate boards all want leaders who know who they are, who value relationships, and who inspire people with a sense of purpose. This comes as a surprise to many people who've had successful careers in business and now see the world has changed. In the past, executives were judged on their expertise and their results. What mattered? Strategy. Finance. Operations. Marketing. Compliance. Business schools prepared future corporate leaders to manage these areas of a company. In some cases, they gave a nod to “soft skills,” like requiring a class in negotiation or communication. But the preparation they gave for entering the world of work focused more on financial transactions and business strategy. It encouraged competitive drive as the fuel of success.

Over time, this kind of expertise created incredible value along many important dimensions. But that model can't thrive anymore. The human dimension of leadership has taken center stage. Ideal leaders today blend traditional business strengths with more human qualities, like authenticity and compassion for others. Most importantly, they have curiosity about what drives them. Self-awareness is now a central driver of success. A self-aware leader helps an organization be more self-aware so there's a huge multiplier effect.

***This is new territory for many business leaders.
How did we get here?***

The pace of change and level of complexity in the world today is extraordinary. Our lives are shaped by things that didn't exist ten years ago, even five years ago. Big data. Social media. Disruptive technologies. With this mind-boggling complexity and speed of innovation came the loss of basic stability. Industries that we took for granted have disappeared. Robotics and machine learning leave us wondering what the future of work will look like. We're surrounded by trends most of us don't understand, like artificial intelligence, or cryptocurrency. All of this puts enormous pressure on our systems. It's tough to keep up. Robert Kegan is a researcher and scholar in adult development at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. He described this situation well in a book he wrote called "In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life".

In other turbulent times, people turned to institutions they trusted. But today, many people have lost that faith. We have unprecedented distrust of government, the media, the church. Civic polarization is so intense, it tears at the fabric of communities, and even families. And trust in leadership has been shaken.

So, how did we get here? We're living now at the intersection of these two trends. On the one hand, the speed and magnitude of change makes our heads spin. At the same time, we don't know where to turn, because we've lost faith in our traditional sources of strength and resilience.

So many people now feel confused, overwhelmed, at times hopeless, or lost. Because the more typical institutions don't appeal to them, many are looking to company heads to help them make sense of things, to give them a sense of place. This is entirely new territory for executives. When today's leaders began their careers, people weren't looking to them to provide ground beneath their feet. What I see more and more is business leaders are being asked to take a stand and – almost as a collective of CEOs – to become a leadership institution in and of themselves. An ideal leader today feels that existential need in their people, and rises to meet it. The best CEOs and corporate leaders still achieve extraordinary results. At the same time, they genuinely connect with this unease in people. They communicate, in ways big and small, "it's all going to be okay."

Are CEOs prepared to go on this “self-discovery” voyage?

One of the things I've found is that high-performing people can climb the ladder of success, yet arrive to the top only to ask themselves, “is this all there is?” Facing that question, some get disconnected from who they truly are, and turn on “autopilot”. They still deliver results, but they’re going through the motions. Others begin a journey. They seek answers to deeper, timeless questions like: what is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of *my* life? Either way, the path forward includes a turn inward. For some it brings re-discovering the inspiration, vitality and joy that got lost along the way. Other people uncover something they’ve never found before: a way to lead not just from skill and expertise, but also from wisdom.

Another group engages with self-discovery simply because they want to keep developing. At senior levels, people know it’s not a matter of gaining new knowledge, or acquiring another “toolbox”. Experiencing a leadership breakthrough requires cultivating the qualities of being that enable us to live, and lead from the best parts of ourselves. These qualities are already within us: they are the parts that think, feel, yearn and do. But all too often they are out of balance, with some aspects over-developed and other aspects underused.

As I give talks and teach executive off-sites around the world on this material, people grasp immediately the idea of integrating all parts of themselves into their everyday interactions – the practical, the analytical, the emotional and the inspirational. They recognize quickly how they have disowned essential parts of themselves, and further, how denying these aspects gets in their way when they negotiate. They see right away how working toward their own wholeness will help them be better executives, public sector leaders, parents, consultants, spouses, friends and colleagues.

You like to say that great leaders manage themselves first...

Yes, but when people think about that, they think of time management or stress management or dealing with the external world: “How do I balance my work and my family?” But what I mean is managing your inner world: the thoughts you have, your emotions, and your reactivity to others. There’s a straight line from the internal experience to the actions that people take and the consequences that they produce. When leaders don’t like their results, they have a tendency to look at everyone around them, not noticing that actually, those results came from their own actions, and their actions came from their mindset. The ability and the willingness to say, “My mindset has been so helpful to getting me to this senior role, but now that I am at the helm, I actually need to unpack it and create it anew.” This takes a lot of strength and is a road to greatness.

Self-awareness is fundamental, and then there’s more. It takes courage to admit to yourself where you really are. The key to genuine self-awareness is to recognize there are many different parts that make up your self, not just one. That's part of the hunger for mastery that we see in people who truly understand all these different aspects of who they are and how they can bring the best of who they are into the organizations that they lead.

You say there are different aspects that make up your self, you use four components – the Dreamer, the Thinker, the Lover and the Warrior that you call The Big Four. Can you explain what you mean?

Leading mythologist Joseph Campbell described each of us as “a hero with a thousand faces”. I think mastering a thousand faces sounds a bit daunting. If you have all of these different sides of you, how can you even begin to get a hold on them?

To help people develop as leaders I focus on a small set of those hundreds of faces. I call the group **The Big Four**. They are:

- your Dreamer
- your Thinker
- your Lover
- your Warrior

The Big Four are universal, and relevant to the way you function every day. They’re also most likely to trip you up if you don’t see them coming.

Since I consult to a lot of businesses, I sometimes describe The Big Four as a leadership team, occupying your internal executive suite:

- The Chief Executive Officer: CEO, or Dreamer who cares about creativity and future vision
- The Chief Financial Officer: CFO, or Thinker invested in reason and analysis
- The Chief Human Resources Officer: CHRO, or Lover engaged with emotion and relationships
- The Chief Operating Officer: COO, or Warrior determined to achieve results and protect what matters.

Sitting around a conference room table, these leaders would bring their own expertise and priorities to the conversation. If anyone missed the meeting, the team would make decisions that lacked a perspective vital to the company’s success.

Without the CEO, they could miss the bold vision that’s essential to an innovative strategy. No CFO, and the budget collapses. Without HR, the right people don’t get hired or developed. If the COO’s absent, it’s all talk and no action.

A business will find itself in trouble if it doesn’t envision possibilities, can’t appreciate a 360-degree perspective, fails to care for its people, or turns in lackluster performance. This is true for you too.

Wanting, thinking, feeling and doing – these are part of the shared human experience. The Big Four represent your capacity to dream about the future, to analyze and solve problems, to build relationships with people, and to take effective action. How people express The Big Four varies by culture. But the basic functions cross boundaries.

What would you say to a skeptic who argues that self-discovery has no impact on a CEO's success or failure?

As the world reinvents itself, the only way to win is to reinvent yourself, too. The number one imperative in business today is to learn the inner path of leadership, what I've called "winning from within." In fact, that means that as the world transforms all around you, you need to change, too. Think about it. Uber is upending taxis. Hotels lose ground daily to Airbnb. Google threatens to replace everyone, even automakers if they scale the self-driving car. What happens to industries that fail to innovate in these times?

To stay competitive and thrive in today's world, companies need to release expectations from the past. To open themselves to entirely new mindsets about what their brand means. To let their very identity evolve. The same is true for you. At the core of my work with people is helping them to ask "who am I?" and "who can I become?" Then together we use "winning from within" methodology to discover new answers.

I advise CEOs to embrace this principle: no business can stay a leader in its field without reinvention, and the same is true of individual leaders. If you continue to function according to past expectations, you will fail.

The inner "order" or "structure" I'm talking about is the story you tell yourself about who you are. Your personal myth. In roles of influence, that story becomes your leadership myth as well. Releasing old myths that no longer serve you, and replacing them with a new, more expansive story about who you are, is the process of "reinventing" yourself.

Revising your personal myth fortifies your inner structure to thrive in a new environment. In my work with senior leaders, I've found that understanding all of who they are — the revealed parts and the concealed parts — provides that powerful inner lattice to keep them on their feet, while at the same time allowing new parts of them to emerge.

Unless we practice this inner innovation, human beings see what we expect to see, think what we expect to think, feel what we expect to feel, and do what we always do. But holding tight to expectations, built on the inner structure of our past, we are too fragile. We will break, and fall. In these times of massive change, we need leaders who embrace the complexity and emerging possibility of the world, and meet it with the full power of the complexity and emerging possibility within themselves. That is the disruption and reinvention "from within" that will take us into the future.

You describe every leader as a "Voyager". What do you mean?

The "voyage" is a timeless motif for self-discovery and fulfilling your potential, both as a person and as a leader. As Voyagers we live in a state of paradox. We need audacity and humility. The hunger to grow and acceptance of where we are now. The urgency to act and the patience to let things ripen.

The Voyager in us keeps us moving, rolling with the punches, falling down and picking ourselves back up. We adapt to new circumstances. Rise to meet new occasions. It's our Voyager who learns from our successes and our mistakes.

By whatever name, societies around the world converge on the notion that we develop as we travel. They likewise agree that the journey to growth has an outer expression and an inner dimension. There is a part of each of us designed for this very process. That's the part of human nature that I'm calling the Voyager.

It's true that in many journey stories, protagonists "leave" where they are to take a voyage. At the same time, throughout folklore of civilizations, people search for things in faraway places, only to find what they seek right where they already are. Like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, who needs only to click her heels three times to get home, the lesson you need is available the moment you recognize it.

Hard as it may sound, that's the invitation that your Voyager gives you. This is your life. Can you live well and lead wisely, while being true to yourself? Only you can decide. As Charles Dickens' David Copperfield writes, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."

Your Voyager stands for the idea that you have choices, and that ultimately, *you create your life.*

You've talked about how important it is for leaders to communicate a sense of purpose. What does this mean for a CEO?

It's like night and day when you see leaders who are coming from a sense of purpose. It changes the level of employee engagement from people feeling like, "Well, I know what I'm supposed to do today," to, "I know why it matters." It's the way to mobilize people, to galvanize people to keep going to conquer a really difficult problem, to hang in there.

For example, engineers, scientists, often spend years trying to solve the same problem, and they might feel, "We've been working on this for five years, and we can't find the answer." And if it's just a task, then why do you keep doing it? You would give up. But if you see this as your mission – you're going to save lives, you're going to solve bigger problems – then you have a purpose that keeps you going. Resilience comes from purpose.

So what we want to help people see is: This isn't your journey as a CEO. This is the voyage of your life. It's so much bigger. And yes, it's about leading this organization, but to put it in the starkest terms: What is the legacy of your life? What do you want people to say about you as a human being when you're gone? Being a CEO is part of that, but it couldn't ever encompass or express the full breadth of the purpose of your life.

Clients often ask us: “Can people really, really change their inner self?”

Yes, they can. At every age, in whatever stage of life they’re in. The good news is, although historically, social scientists have been saying for a long time that you can change and you can grow, the blessing we have now is neuroscience. We have brain researchers telling us about neuroplasticity; telling us that, even at a neurochemical level, the brain expands over time throughout all the decades of your life. So even if you want a purely scientific, research-based answer: Yes, people can really change their inner self. I personally have seen the process thousands of times. Everything I know, 25 years of experience, three decades of research tell me: yes, yes, yes.

Vita

Erica Ariel Fox teaches business leaders the art and science of leading yourself.

She is the author of the New York Times bestselling book, WINNING FROM WITHIN, which is published in 10 languages. As an Influencer on LinkedIn, Erica has over 150,000 followers. She teaches negotiation at Harvard Law School and, together with her partners at Mobius Executive Leadership, she is a senior advisor to CEOs and top teams.

Partnership between Egon Zehnder and Mobius Executive Leadership

Egon Zehnder has long accompanied CEOs and top executives on their leadership journey. In recent years, against the backdrop of a highly volatile world, the need to focus on leadership development has emerged. Today more than ever, it is not only the professional capabilities of CEOs but their entire personalities that form a cornerstone of success within some of the world’s most respected organizations. In recognition of this, Egon Zehnder has adopted a holistic approach, supported by Mobius Executive Leadership with whom the firm has been working for many years. The two run both in-house programs for clients and programs for aspiring and serving CEOs.