

SPECIAL FEATURE

Working with CEOs to Close the Performance Gap

In conversation with Mobius Co-Founder and Chief Thought Leader, Erica Ariel Fox about the Executive Breakthrough Program.



The Executive Breakthrough Program runs several times throughout the year and includes a week-long residential off-site. In addition, every participant receives year-long support from their own Egon Zehnder development advisor. It is by invitation only for CEOs and other C-Suite executives known to Egon Zehnder. The program is tailored for the specific individual participants attending. The size of the group is strictly limited to 12-15 participants.

The program is led by Mobius Co-Founder and Chief Thought Leader Erica Ariel Fox and the curriculum draws from Erica's *New York Times* bestselling book, *Winning From Within: A Breakthrough Method for Leading, Living and Lasting Change*. The methodology is based on twenty years of Erica's research at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School and extensive experience as a C-suite advisor. *Winning From Within* is considered a seminal work in leadership and executive development.

Q Earlier in the magazine we spoke with Egon Zehnder Board member and your co-founder for the Executive Breakthrough Program, Jill Ader. When Mobius and Egon Zehnder first conceived of the offering, what need were you responding to?

By the time you have reached the C-suite you've done every management course under the sun. You've been to Harvard for a week, you've done a program at IMD or INSEAD. You've learned every fundamental management skill there is. And yet, the need for ever-more advanced levels of leadership is apparent in the world. Organizations need to ensure their most senior leaders are still learning and growing. How do they do that?

There may not be any obvious missing skills or

"knowledge" left to learn. CEOs know operations, finance, marketing. There is no "course" left to take — other than one and the name of that course is *You*. The unit of study is *yourself*. The work you need to do on yourself is the basis of the capability gap to which Jill refers (page 23). The pressing need is to go much deeper than surface behavior — to look at the core operating system of this human being, and then ask how it serves and does not serve their ability to lead (see, for example, Otto Scharmer's description of the blind spot on page 50).

There is a dilemma underpinning the concept of what I call the Performance Gap: leaders know what they should be doing; many of these very senior people could write their own book on leadership best practices. The interesting question is why are they not doing what they know they should? The answer

to that is slightly different for each person.

What the Executive Breakthrough Program (EBP) is uniquely set up to do is diagnose with great nuance the specific way in which the Performance Gap works in you – that is, the specific combination of factors in your way from unleashing the full capability you’ve been trained (and taught from experience) to use.

For example, you may have gone to an Active Listening course twenty years ago; you may’ve received your Myers Briggs or DISC profile; you may have 360 feedback reports that repeatedly reveal that you’re not building trust. Perhaps people don’t follow you because you’re seen as intimidating, maybe even a bully. But that conceptual understanding is, at best, a cognitive insight. It is of little use to you if you don’t understand *why* you are not exercising the capability or range of intelligences you possess, despite the fact that you’ve learned what you need to do and yes, even when you’re aware you’re not doing it. Simply making more of an effort, applying more of your will — like a New Year’s Resolution: *this time, I will become more trustworthy* — would have worked by now if ever it was going to work.

One way – and I would argue the best way, to have a real understanding of precisely how your Performance Gap works is what we provide at EBP. In small groups where we build a container of trust among a set of very senior peers who, most of the time, come from different organizations, we give each individual leader a very nuanced per person intervention or practical way to help crack the code. The end goal is to enable you to draw on the full breadth of what you’ve been trained to do as a leader, to activate the full potential of what you’re innately capable of doing, but which you are currently not doing.

How do you do this? What’s the secret behind being so attuned to the individual leader in front of you?

We get information about each person in advance, and we read their pre-work assignments. But once

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people are there, we forget about the “facts.” We focus our attention on the quality of their presence, their interactions in the group, and what kinds of archetypes they embody in the room. We sense into people, where they seem stuck, and where they might break free. For most of the program we work with what we call their “inner material.”

We get out of the literal world and move quickly into the symbolic world. In a symbolic setting, transformation can be profound and happen surprisingly fast.

What does it mean to work with symbols? It’s like reflecting on the images from a dream you had the night before. You tell a friend, “I had the weirdest dream. I was in this room. It didn’t look familiar, but I knew it was my old apartment

in London. All of a sudden, there was a bear, and then my university mentor was there, and we all started singing – including the bear.” While this sounds bizarre, your friend says, “Oh, that’s an interesting statement on your life right now” and proceeds to offer an interpretation of how the dream reveals a perspective on a topic you’ve been grappling with. Literally speaking, the images don’t make any sense at all. But symbolically, they can tell a compelling story that provides insight into a real decision you’re trying to make.

When we work with symbols at EBP, and in the Winning From Within® methodology in general, we’re interpreting a “waking dream.” We prompt participants to create an image from their imagination. They can use art supplies to draw something, or go outside and bring back objects, like a rock and a branch. They can generate an image however they want. It’s important to remind people this isn’t an art class, we aren’t judging them on their artistic skill. They’re creating a symbol so that we can explore what it could mean beyond the literal level.

Several years ago, one participant made a drawing, using different colored pencils. He explained to the group what the picture represented: “This is me on a mountain. I made it all the way up. I’m sitting down to rest after the long hike. I’m looking at wild flowers



because I'm surprised to see them there. There is yellow and blue at the top of my picture, because the weather isn't sure what it's going to do: the sun might come out, but it also might rain. So, there is sun and clouds over the mountain." As we listened to him explain the picture, his description makes perfect sense.

Then we looked at it symbolically, asking questions about what the details might represent. Like many in the group, he was a new CEO. The group got curious about other, less literal, meanings of the images. These interpretations weren't meant to be "correct," but instead offered him potential topics to explore in later exercises. The group asked questions and offered comments like these:

- Could the climb up the mountain represent tackling the challenges of your career?
- Are you sitting down to rest because you need to catch your breath after an exhausting CEO succession process?
- Maybe you're surprised to see the wild flowers, because now that you're in the CEO role, it's not what you expected?
- I wonder why you're alone at the top of the mountain. Now that you've made it to the top, maybe you feel lonely?
- Could the uncertain weather reflect that you're not confident you'll succeed in the role?

Working with information on a symbolic level isn't about telling someone what their image is "really" about, it's about adding layers of possible meaning. We're particularly interested in ways the drawing might connect to the person's current life situations. It's very meaningful for people to make that shift from the literal to the symbolic, discovering elements that are often hidden, even from themselves.

Q In addition to working symbolically, what are some schools of thought that Winning From Within® draws on? How do these come into play during EBP?

One of our core principles is that organizational transformation requires individual transformation. We introduce different practices to each EBP group, but all of them offer the same invitation to personal transformation: come free yourself from a lifetime of limiting habits of heart, mind, and action. Though the specific exercises differ, in the Winning From Within® approach that we use at EBP, we draw from three core intellectual underpinnings: depth psychology, mythology, and Action Science. The book articulates the *framework* of Winning From Within®, which I developed building on these and other disciplines. EBP is an example of how you can *experience the methodology*



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of *Winning From Within*®, which evolved over 20 years of teaching the material to clients.

1) **Depth psychology** looks for bridges between someone's unconscious mind, and their ordinary reality. That's one reason why we look at the symbolic meaning of a drawing, like the hiker on a mountain. Depth psychology illustrates connections between the outer world of your daily life and the inner world of your hopes, fears, and motivations.

Another important element of this school of thought is the idea that underneath all of our personal stories, dramas, challenges, and even victories, there is a deeper dimension to who we are. The pioneer of the field, the acclaimed Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, named this part of human nature *The Self*. Jung taught that alienation from *The Self* creates distress in our lives, and reconnecting to it brings us back to balance. My theory of human transformation is strongly influenced by Jung's ideas. In *Winning From Within*, I talk about "The Self" as your Essence, your Center, or your Center of Well-being. One of the most powerful aspects of EBP is the way we help leaders to reconnect with the "Essence" of who they are.

Jungian author and teacher, Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, is another depth psychologist whose work informs *Winning From Within*®. As part of developing her own theories, she's researched and written extensively about the inner lives of women. Though we focus a lot on the hero's journey, she pointed my attention to the heroine. The other central thread in this domain comes from my friend and colleague Cliff Barry, a master practitioner of working with unconscious material. Cliff taught me how to use archetypes to recognize patterns in the psyche. The way I work with clients at EBP is different from the body of work that Cliff created, which he calls *Shadow Work*®, but our thinking, and the emergent nature of our interventions, share a foundation.

2) **Mythology** has to do with universal themes or motifs that run through human experience that are not

unique to an individual's unconscious. Understanding how what people say and do links to universal myths – well, that's another way in which we elicit participant learning. If one of these myths is overly pronounced in your story and how you understand yourself, then we can call on another myth to bring in some balance.

A mythical understanding of stories helps you locate yourself and others within greater narratives.

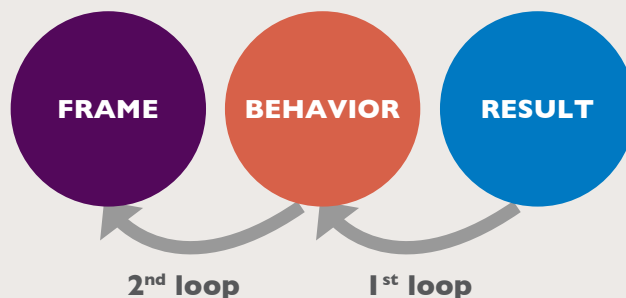
We might be working with a participant and observe, "In the story you told us there's a lot of Atlas – you're holding the world on your shoulders. What about Peter Pan? How would you show up in the world if you were allowed to be a playful, carefree person?" We might spend the day embodying different mythic characters. People relate to mythological and archetypal characters easily, because they are part of

our collective understanding of how the world works. Because it's fun and theatrical, people let themselves stretch into new, temporary "identities." They "play characters" that are very different from their everyday lives. The goal isn't to replace what usually works for them at work or at home. The idea is to enable them to have experiences that integrate a new myth or archetype into their leadership repertoire, expanding their range of behavioral possibility.

3) **Action Science** reaches beyond a deep understanding of humanity (mythology) and this particular human being in front of us (depth psychology), to surface the practical application of these insights. It's a method of analyzing the connection – or the disconnection – between what people say, versus what they think and feel but choose not to say. This body of work promotes inquiry into your mindsets and behavior, emphasizing "reflection in action." Action Science answers the question: *What am I going to do differently on Monday, as a result of these new insights into myself?*

The combination of these three strands is part of what is so unique about EBP. There are places where you can learn about mythology and depth psychology,

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FIGURE 1. Chris Argyris' Double-loop learning

but they're not designed to help you lead more effectively as a senior executive. Likewise, you can find programs to study organizational learning and action science methodology, but they are unlikely to dig as deeply into the inner world of unconscious material. It's the integration and adaptation of Action Science and the other lineages that makes the combination a break-set intervention.

You mention adaptation... Winning From Within® builds on Action Science to add a further dimension. Can you tell us more about that?

Dr. Chris Argyris, together with Donald Schön and colleagues, developed the Action Science model. They distinguished between the different ways people try to achieve better outcomes. The first way we might get a new result is through what they called Single-loop learning which, to over-simplify, states: if you do not like the result you are getting, you can change your behavior to get a better result.

From there they added an element which they called a frame, a frame of mind, or a “mental model.” Argyris demonstrated that you have a frame of mind that's leading you to choose that action which is leading to the result you're getting. Figure 1 illustrates what he meant by Double-loop learning. In the Double-loop process, to change the result, you loop back twice to look at your underlying model or frame. If you don't change your frame, you're not going to change your

behavior. If you can adjust your frame or lens, this gives you more behaviors to choose from and these will lead to new results.

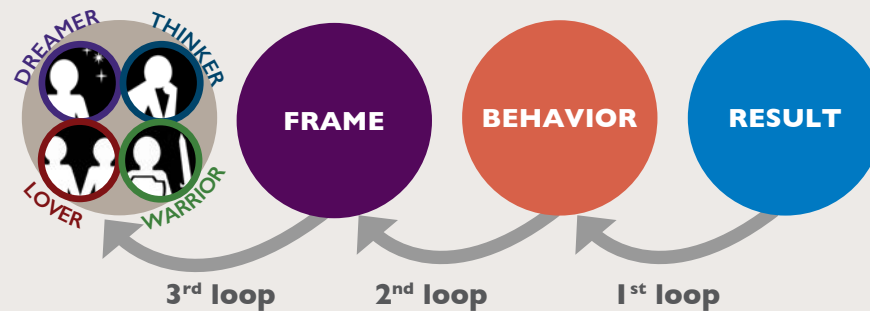
Back to the example we used earlier, whereby a leader gets the repeated feedback that he needs to build more trust. In a Single-loop approach, the counsel might be: *Well, share more of yourself with your colleagues.* But what if your frame is: *Sharing more of myself will get me hurt?* If that's what you believe underneath, if that's what you internalized a long time ago, then you're not going to change your behavior.

With Double-loop learning the question is what's the belief about yourself or about the world that causes you to assume that sharing more of yourself leads to bad outcomes? Action Science gets us to adjust our frames or ingoing beliefs so that we might shift our behavior, so that we can realize the different desired result we'd previously been failing to produce.

Argyris also introduced the notion of *espoused values* and *values-in-use*. You think you really value trust (espoused), but if we look at what you're doing, you don't. In fact, your values-in-use seem to be about personal safety. It turns out you value this more than trusting other people. This lack of congruence undermines you as a leader. (For more, see the first adaptive challenge: espoused values, on page 12.)

One thing I've added to this model is to ask how do you change your mental model? Through the research and practical work I did to develop the Winning From Within® framework, I boiled down the many frames available to us, to say there are four universal lenses

FIGURE II. How to change the frame with Winning From Within® Triple-loop learning



to which we all have access. These are the Winning From Within® Big Four. As in figure II, we see the world through the lens of the Lover, Thinker, Warrior, or Dreamer. Each of us have different tendencies or favorite ways of combining these four frames so that in Winning From Within® we might talk about a person who is “high in Lover, low in Warrior” – this is what we mean by someone’s Big Four profile. (For more on the Big Four, see page 84.)

In EBP, we help people come to know and observe what frames they’re using to perceive the world, and to notice when they are low or too high in one of them. In doing so we unlock and experiment with the untapped or under-tapped aspects of the Big Four in each of us. This changes participants’ frame or way of seeing, which in turn opens the possibility of behaving in ways they don’t tend to, which as leaders, will start to give them different results. Working with the Big Four is the way you change your frame. In EBP we’re looking at your world view, your view of yourself, your ideas about what a leader should do. In Winning From Within®, we’re going from Double-loop to Triple-loop learning.

Can you give us examples of how EBP participants learn to adjust their frame?

Before I do, I should point out the lack of Lover and Dreamer in senior leadership is extraordinary. They’ve been taught and rewarded for Thinker and Warrior all their professional lives. What the CEO

needs to step into more than any other archetype is their Dreamer — given the demands and function of the role, and also their Lover — given just how pale and underdeveloped this archetype tends to be and the need for today’s leaders to show much deeper presence and emotional engagement. We’ve worked with hundreds of CEOs. The propensity among this population for Thinker and Warrior profiles with low Dreamers and low Lovers is *extreme*.

With that in mind, I’ll focus on an illustrative example of a leader whose profile is a high thinker, high warrior frame:

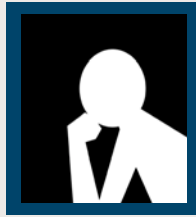
I understand that employees want to feel valued. I understand from engagement surveys that people don’t trust the leadership. I’ve also seen research that says having a mentor or feeling that your company has invested in you and your professional development helps with retention. Therefore, I do things like ask people out to lunch once a week, I maintain an open-door policy, I make sure I ask everyone on my team what’s on their minds. The result I get is that our stock price is solid and we routinely hit our performance targets. Despite all this, the Board criticizes my leadership style, saying that I don’t do enough to inspire people and that I have colleagues who think I don’t care about them. And I don’t know why! I understand people need to feel valued and cared about and I do everything I can to demonstrate that. To repeatedly get this feedback is incredibly frustrating. Our organizational performance is great, why do they keep harping on that I’ve low followership?

This leader then goes through an exercise at EBP

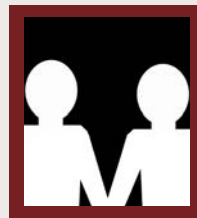
FIGURE III. THE BIG FOUR

**DREAMER**

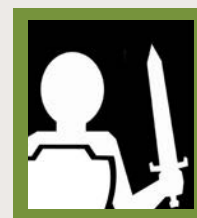
Your *Dreamer* cares about creativity and future vision. Letting yourself muse about your ideal world energizes your *Dreamer* to remember that your future holds great possibilities.

**THINKER**

Your *Thinker* is invested in reason and analysis. Stop waiting to understand the answer all at once, and start breaking it down into parts. Even putting your ideas into a spreadsheet can wake up your analytical mind.

**LOVER**

Your *Lover* is engaged with emotion and relationships. If you're out of alignment with your *Lover*, step back for a minute, and consider if you've withdrawn from the people around you. Why might that be?

**WARRIOR**

Your *Warrior* is determined to achieve results and protect what matters. Your *Warrior* is out of alignment when you're not getting things done. A healthy *Warrior* loves momentum, and even more appreciates crossing the finish line.

where they get a chance to experience the real power and strength of human connectedness. They learn a quality of appropriate intimacy in a professional setting that doesn't require monumental disclosure. It's not about details of your personal life. It's not about knowing if your colleague's wife is sick or that they had a good or bad vacation. But when you access the Lover aspect, which in archetypal terms is a natural, innate way of connecting with another human being, when you experience how powerful that is, then the Lover in you can't help but to seek that connection. That's the channel that Lover runs on. So now as it's not as if your head is trying to tick boxes to show you care, you just have a natural emotional longing to be connected to the people around you.

So, I return after EBP to my work with a felt sense of desire to feel connected. And from that natural impulse, I stop thinking so much about what I must do to "show" people I care. It comes naturally to me. I drop by someone's office and ask how they're doing. Except this time my sincere interest comes across. This longing I've been suppressing has been reactivated and

it naturally alters my behavior — and therefore the result — because I really am more open and interested in the people around me. I crave that connection. (On the receiving side, this authentic interest is incredibly easy to sense.) And then, as if by sheer magic, I start to receive feedback from the Board that colleagues have perceived a shift. People notice I seem more relaxed and present, that I appear to be really listening for the first time. My change in frame gives me the desired end result without me paying too much attention to how to adjust my behavior.

Once the frame has changed, the behavior naturally follows. One way we accomplish this from a methodological point of view, is to hold up the mirror to show people their behavior *in the extreme*. We exaggerate the frame they are currently holding.

For the participant who needs to access their Lover, I ask them to share with the group something they care deeply about. Then someone else, another participant or faculty, has the job of listening to what that participant is saying, perhaps nodding and showing signs they're listening, but then saying aloud "I really don't care." As an actor in this exercise, they

repeat those words with increasing conviction. We escalate the response to have the actor go so far as to *interrupt* the participant's tale with, "Seriously? Please stop talking. I do not care."

Other times the participant may simply watch a scene like this that we've orchestrated between two faculty members acting this out. Either way, we take it to an exaggerated place. This gives the participant the chance to glimpse how people in their lives might feel. Despite the nodding and the listening noises, people detect you do not really care. You suddenly see why people don't disclose to you. When being met with the insistence that the person listening doesn't care, you now know what it feels like to shut down in your body. You no longer need to imagine what's hurtful about this scenario.

Afterward, we might ask the participant, so do you trust this person who's repeating they don't care? No. Would you want to follow this person? No. If the organization was in trouble and this person kept saying everyone just needs to pull it together or that they needed something from you, would you do it? No.

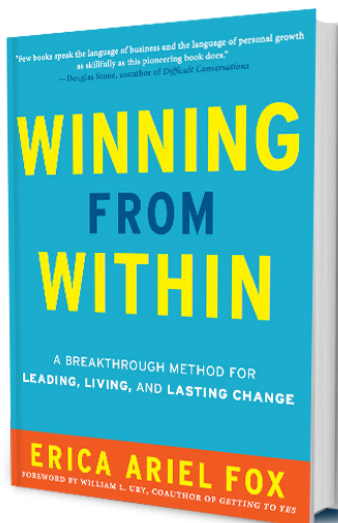
It's these sorts of experiences that help internalize the consequences of our current behaviors and frames. It's not possible to lead people with your Lover closed off. And yet so many leaders attempt exactly that. And then they wonder why people don't back their strategy, won't follow them and complain to others about their leadership style.

At EBP, we are such a small group in the room and the faculty are so skilled, that we're able to attune to what the participant needs in that moment to grasp how other people experience them and why that is.

That's how we get a different result on Monday. There's a way in which the methodology works with exaggeration (this is what myths are too – exaggerated truths), to help participants see in extreme relief, the essence of where their Big Four may be jammed and how to release themselves. Startling experiences shift something profound. It's a vivid shock to the system and it goes far beyond what we can appreciate about ourselves cognitively. This is symbolic space where eye-opening work takes place to show us how our basic operating system may be damaging. It's not possible to have that experience and go back to how you were. You can't unlearn this type of experience.

The reason why EBP triggers such sustainable change afterward, compared with other programs, is because the transformation is anchored in rediscovering a part of you that is very fundamental but with which you'd lost contact. Once you reconnect with it, you can't forget that. You can learn a model and then put it in a binder and stick it on a shelf, but you can't rediscover some aspect of yourself you'd lost sight of and not remember this later. The experience is anchored in you.

That's what we teach at the Executive Breakthrough Program. ■



Visit www.ericarielfox.com for more about the Winning From Within® approach to self-development and leadership work. A sample chapter of the book is available on the website. There's also a resource section, where a companion bibliography explores each of the Big Four leadership archetypes in depth.

More information about the Executive Breakthrough Program and the Discovery Program is available on both the Egon Zehnder and Mobius Executive Leadership websites.

Erica Ariel Fox was interviewed by Nathalie Hourihan, Mobius Chief Knowledge Manager, acting editor of the *Mobius Strip* and founder of Wolf Knowledge Ltd.