

Winning from within

By Erica Fox

Introduction

How do we describe the leadership journey? What goal should we set for ourselves? To put it simply, at the end of our career, when we look back, we should feel that we have given our best by developing our full potential. But for that to happen, we need to be clear about our blind spots and mental blocks. Once we become aware of what is holding us back, we can “negotiate with ourselves” and allow our abilities to blossom. This is the key message from a thought provoking book, “Winning from within- A breakthrough method for leading, living and lasting change” by Erica Fox, a Harvard trained lawyer, a well-known leadership development expert and an advisor to McKinsey. Before we come to the book, (The book itself draws heavily from various works on Neuro Leadership and how the brain works and an emerging subject called Mindfulness.) a few observations.

The behaviors of successful leaders

What comes to our mind when we see top leaders in action? Clearly, it is their all-around abilities. At times, they sound like visionaries and at other times, they excel in execution. Sometimes they are fussy about all the data being available and at other times, they feel comfortable taking decisions based on their intuition. They can be tough task masters and drive us hard but from time to time we see a gentler side to them.

Take the example of Alan Mulally, former CEO of Ford, about whom we read in a separate book review. Mulally instilled discipline in his direct reports through his weekly Business Plan Review meetings and yet was patient with people. He took several short term cost cutting measures. But he protected long term R&D investments as he realized that without a revamped product line, Ford would not be competitive. While Mulally gave a lot of importance to data based decision making, he also demonstrated the importance of intuition when he decided against accepting a government bailout.

In her book, Erica Fox provides the example of an iconic leader of our times, Nelson Mandela. He articulated his vision for a united South Africa, thought through the challenges involved in restoring peace to a fragmented society, showed a deep sensitivity to the feelings of people who had suffered for several years and demonstrated a laser like focus on purposeful action.

Going beyond psychometric assessments

In many leadership development programs, we have one or more psychometric assessments that help us to understand ourselves better. There is a lot of excitement about completing assessments, getting the reports and then the interpretation. What happens after that? Often precious little. The reason we often find it difficult to change our behaviors despite access to the best psychometric tools (and even if we change, we find it difficult to sustain the change) is that we have not waged the battle within. To wage this battle, we need a much higher degree of self-awareness. We need to recognize that we are complex beings who are capable of much more than we think. Joseph Campbell, the famous mythologist described human beings as heroes with 1000 faces. What Campbell meant is that we are perfectly capable of wearing many (though 1000 may be a stretch!) hats.

For many of us, as Erica Fox mentions, there is usually a performance gap between what we know we should do to get the best results for the organization and what we actually do. Thus we may want to tell the client that the program needs to be governed in a different way. Or the deadlines being set are unrealistic. But we may end up saying yes to whatever the client is saying and later feel sorry that we did not speak up at the right time. To take one more example, we may know that it is important to be patient with younger, less experienced team members, encourage them to experiment and learn from their mistakes. Yet, we find it difficult to resist the urge to show off our knowledge and instruct them to do things the exactly the way we want the work to be done (The famous executive coach, Marshall Goldsmith calls this “adding value”!)

Towards greater self-awareness

To reduce the performance gap, we must reflect deeply on the image we have of ourselves. In the first example above, what held us back is the self-image we had of being someone who is always ready to please the client. A higher level of self-awareness would have warned us that trying to please the client would create problems in the long run. That would have motivated us to assert ourselves and speak up! In the second example, the self-image we had was of being a perfectionist who will not allow anything to go wrong. We did not realize that we could easily demonstrate more empathy and make the younger colleague feel

more confident. In short, we must learn to develop parts of us that are lying dormant but if activated can help us to become high performing leaders.

The seven different dimensions

Erica Fox mentions that **we have seven different dimensions to us**. If we understand and leverage these dimensions holistically, we can exploit our potential to the fullest extent.

Consider a large company with an executive leadership team consisting of a CEO, CFO, COO and CPO. This is the team which is tasked with running the company effectively to maximize shareholders' wealth.

The CEO sets the vision. The CFO thinks through and arrives at the best possible way resources should be mobilized and deployed to achieve the vision. The COO goes out of the Exec leadership meetings and gets things implemented. The CPO tries to ensure that associates are motivated and fully engaged.

The Board of Directors of such a company would have oversight responsibilities, i.e. checking whether the executive leadership is acting in the best interests of shareholders. Imagine that the board consists of three members.

The first board member checks whether all the four executive leaders are working together as a team and managing the company in the best possible way. The second board member makes sure that the capabilities of the different leaders are pressed into service, for the best possible results, depending on the situation. And the third board member tries to ensure that the executive leadership is investing in their personal growth by exploring new areas, moving into uncharted territories and learning from these experiences.

Fox's contention is that within each of us resides the entire team, i.e. the four executive leaders and the three board members. It is up to us to be cognizant of them. And we can certainly leverage all their talents if we choose to do so. Let us dive a little deeper into the capabilities of these 7 people.

The 4 executive leadership capabilities

The 4 executive leadership capabilities as defined by Fox are:

Dreamer: Dreams and articulates it in a compelling way to inspire others. Dreamers thrive on their intuition. They focus on leading people to a brighter future.

Thinker: Uses facts, reason and logic, looks at the situation from different perspectives and thinks through the implications of different decisions. Thinkers have great analytical skills. Thinkers can read documents, absorb information and distil out the essence, create scenarios and craft suitable solutions or recommendations.

Warrior: Tries to be assertive, speaks boldly and pushes back without effort. Warriors have plenty of will power and they are determined to move forward. They are exceptionally good at implementing strategy and leading things to closure. They have a vital role to play when meeting tight project deadlines and during client escalations!

Lover: Is empathetic and helpful and tries to nurture an environment of trust and support. Lovers display a high degree of emotional intelligence. They show a lot of empathy and are always thinking about the people side of things. To use a colloquial expression, their emotional connect with people is very strong.

Executives can achieve self-understanding, without drowning in unwieldy complexity, by concentrating on the Big Four of their 'inner team.'

Inner negotiator	Focus of attention	Power source	Sweet spot
Inspirational Dreamer (CEO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What I want• What I don't want	Intuition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generate your vision• Dare to pursue your dream• Sense a path forward
Analytical Thinker (CFO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• My opinion• My ideas	Reason	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Apply facts and logic• Consider consequences• Look from all sides
Emotional Lover (CPO, or chief people officer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How we both feel• Our level of trust	Emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connect with emotions• Build and maintain trust• Collaborate with others
Practical Warrior (COO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What task to do• What line to draw	Willpower	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak hard truths• Hold your ground• Take action

Source: Erica Ariel Fox, *Winning from Within: A Breakthrough Method for Leading, Living, and Lasting Change*, New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2013

The three oversight responsibilities

And the three oversight responsibilities of the board of directors are discharged by what Fox calls the **transformers**:

Lookout: This is the first board member who pays close attention to what is happening inside us. Are we getting irritated or upset? Are we getting bored? Are we being too docile and not speaking up? This board member makes us aware of how we are feeling in a given situation. When functioning properly, Lookout sends us an “instant message” just before we do something which makes us repent later. Developing the lookout will enable us to grow as leaders by “watching ourselves” and displaying a high degree of emotional intelligence.

Captain: This is the second board member who tries to ensure that one of the exec leaders is not hijacking the agenda, because of his or her dominating personality! In many ways, the captain is the most important board member. So we can call the captain the Lead Independent Director. It is very useful to understand more about the captain. The captain tries to ensure that the talents of all the leaders are used depending on the situation. It is the captain who is responsible for executive presence. Often we equate presence with charisma and presentation skills. But presence is really about noticing what is happening around us and responding in the best possible way. It is about being mindful!

While Lookout is more of a commentator or observer, the captain is a doer. The captain acts based on the inputs from the Lookout and the cues from the environment. It is the captain who helps us to remain anchored in our values and leverage our wisdom. The captain helps us to get out of our own way by making us aware of our blind spots! Let us now take a few examples to understand how the captain operates.

One of the best examples of the captain in action, comes from aviation. (For stories of adventure and heroism and presence of mind, we often have to turn to the Air Force, Army or Navy. On January 15, 2009, Chesley Burnett “Sully” Sullenberger was in command of US Airways flight No 1549 from New York's La Guardia airport to Charlotte, North Carolina. Shortly after taking off, the plane hit a large flock of birds, disabling both engines. Immediately, the left engine caught fire. Sullenberger discussed with air traffic control about either returning to LaGuardia airport or landing at the Teterboro airport in New Jersey. However, he quickly

decided that neither option was feasible, and decided that the survival of people on board was possible only by landing on the Hudson river. Sullenberger told the passengers to "brace for impact," then piloted the plane to a water landing. He took care to land the plane at a spot, where help would be more easily available. Nearby boats and ferries came to the rescue of the 150 passengers and five crew members. Like a true hero, Sullenberger walked through the passenger cabin twice to make sure everyone had evacuated, retrieved the plane's maintenance logbook and was the last person to evacuate the aircraft. All passengers and crew members survived. Sullenberger functioned at his very best by leveraging all the four capabilities- Intuition which decided on landing in the Hudson river (Dreamer), clarity of thought that ruled out New Jersey and La Guardia (Thinker), determination to keep fighting for what looked like a lost cause and do an unbelievable landing (Warrior) and concern for passengers (Lover). Please see picture on the next page to visualize the entire drama. Captain Sullenberger can be seen in the second picture, with a broad smile on his face.

Voyager: This is the board member who encourages the exec leaders to immerse themselves in new experiences, find opportunities to learn new things and travel along unfamiliar roads into new territories. The voyager pushes us to go out of our comfort zone and get exposed to new routines and responsibilities. Think of senior leaders who take up a long overseas assignment, start running Marathon races, climb tall, snow clad mountains, serve on the boards of charitable trusts or go into long duration meditation camps!



Concluding notes

To become transformational leaders, we need an optimal combination of all these capabilities. In the early years of our leadership journey, we may be exceptionally good at one or two of these capabilities but as we become more senior, we must try to develop the others also. Otherwise, we will find ourselves at a disadvantage.

Thus if we are great thinkers but without the ability to dream, we will focus on the present and fail to envision a future that will inspire the rank and file.

If we closely examine the leadership pipeline framework of Ram Charan, the leadership journey is all about developing new executive leadership capabilities as we go up the ladder. At the lowest levels, we can succeed by being good warriors who can get things done. As we progress in our career, besides getting things done, we also need to be good thinkers who can plan and organize our work well. And then as managers of managers, we must certainly plan and organize and get things done but we must also be very good at nurturing and grooming people. And finally when we reach very senior levels, we should also be able to dream, that is envision a better future for the organization and inspire others with our vision. At this level, we must protect people by exposing them to reality and by promising to take them to a future that is much better than the present.

Erica Fox uses the term **centering** to describe the state of affairs when we are truly at our best and experience a unique sense of wellbeing and fulfilment. When we are centred, we are in full awareness and control of our emotions, desires and impulses. We are in harmony with ourselves and the world around us. Centering is the process of ensuring that our Lookout, Captain and Voyager are working together effectively to get the best out of all our capabilities. In simple terms, in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) environment, we must be mindful of all that is going on around us and within us so that we do not feel lost. To maintain our balance, we need centering. We can become centred in various ways- running long distances, taking part in Outreach activities, doing yoga/meditation, etc.

To know more about the big Four and how they work in your case, visit the website: <http://www.winningfromwithin.com/resources/>