

# Performance-Ready

A Conversation about Leadership Development

between Amy Elizabeth Fox and Scott J. Allen





In June 2024 Scott J. Allen, host of the podcast Phronesis: Practical Wisdom for Leaders invited Mobius Executive Leadership co-founder and CEO Amy Elizabeth Fox to discuss leadership development on his show. Their 30-minute conversation is available to listen by visiting the link noted in the source below. This interview is based on that transcript and offers an introduction to the leadership development work we do at Mobius and the principles that underpin our approach to performance-readiness.

# Scott J. Allen

Today I have a wonderful new friend that I am excited to have a conversation with, Amy Elizabeth Fox. Amy is a co-founder and CEO of Mobius Executive Leadership, a premier transformational leadership firm. She is an expert in vertical development, regularly conducting immersive, transformational programs for senior leaders for the last twenty years. She is also a pioneer in introducing traumainformed coaching and consulting into the domain of leadership development.

I want to say a little bit about her firm. As a leading professional services firm, Mobius is an incredibly unique organization. Here are just a few statements they offer which struck me: "We draw on a rich intellectual heritage and infuse our programs with a unique experiential learning approach. Our network of transformational practitioners is supported by affiliations with renowned thought leaders, senior experts in the field, and a

consortium of alliance partners. Our core body of work includes seminal models from adaptive leadership, organizational learning, innovation, adult development, leading in complexity, neuroplasticity, teaming and team dynamics. We operate at the nexus of best practice across organizational development, culture change and leadership – and next practice in psychology, mythology, Shadow Work, somatics, meditation and the expressive arts.

This sounds absolutely incredible. Thank you for being here today, Amy.

# **Amy Elizabeth Fox**

Such a delight to be with you.

# Scott

Could you share a little bit more about you. What is not in your bio, for example? What should listeners know about you?



TO LISTEN

https://practicalwisdom.buzzsprout.com/979897/15308796-amy-elizabeth-fox-performance-ready

# **Amy**

Perhaps two things – the first is that I had the great privilege of starting my career in the late 1980s, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. I spent ten years working under the then Dean Morton and Paul Gorman. In that process, I had the honor of helping Carl Sagan and then Senator Gore launch a religious response to the environmental crisis, which, over time, became the founding of an organization called the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. That experience gave me an extraordinary apprenticeship into how you can help a group of people across a wide diversity of perspectives, viewpoints and values come together on behalf of a common cause.

I think that model of coalition building, or of ecosystem engagement, very much informs the way I have shaped Mobius as a global network of practitioners with very porous boundaries, as a consortium of practice with other organizations that traditionally might be seen as our competitors. Instead, we operate as collaborators. That early training in multidisciplinary projects really shaped how I work and who I am.

Perhaps the second thing to add to that is I have had a long and deep healing path myself, which is why I became interested in studying psychology and why I became interested in leadership development, because I think the most cutting-edge work in leadership development is also a healing function.

# **Scott**

Let's talk a little bit about Mobius – what is the source of that name?

# **Amy**

Well, as you may well know, it is a reference to a German mathematical concept, the Möbius strip – a strip of paper that rotates so that the inside becomes the outside, and the outside becomes the inside. It rotates that way infinitely. This is a nod to the connection between doing deep, inner, vertical development and being effective and high performing on the external dimension. It is also a nod to the infinite power that connects all of us. Finally, the company was founded by two sisters, which is a very feminine orientation, and German mathematics seemed like a good counterbalance to that! So those are the reasons why we chose Mobius Executive Leadership.

# Scott

I love that, a good counterbalance. I love the interdisciplinary way that you have designed your organization, that you are doing this work across multiple ways of knowing. Could you talk about trauma-informed coaching. I don't know that we have that conversation on this podcast. So maybe bring listeners into that space ... its connection to leader development.

# **Amy**

Of course. I'll start by putting the topic inside the canon of how we think about vertical development. Senior, seminal thought leaders over the last many years have pointed to the degree to which our lens, our frame, our mindset, shapes what we perceive and how we interpret what we perceive, the meaning-making that we do, the sort of logic train we live inside. So, the most potent object of intervention is that perception. If you wanted to change someone's behavior, it was not effective or sustainable to say, I think it would be better if you replace behavior A with behavior B. First, you had to understand the underlying loyalties, assumptions, emotions and needs that were driving or shaping behavior A to seem like the optimal behavior. As you helped people integrate the less functional dimensions of their habits, then a new behavior would become the naturally arising option.

A different way of saying that is, for the last twenty-five years, people have already been doing work that is directed to or guided to some of the deeper, more unconscious terrain that shapes our actions and our experience of the world. There has also been a very strong move inside the world of coaching towards ontology and neurobiology and somatics. All of this starts to lead us to thinking about the leader's deeper patterns and perceptions as the instrument of intervention.

Trauma-informed consulting means that as we have done that work, we have started to have a real reverence and understanding of the enormous influence that multigenerational, untreated trauma has on people's fear, for example, or their reactivity or sensitivity. In preparing for a deeper leadership program, we do a trauma screening - a trauma interview for participants joining these immersive programs. In doing that I have come to understand that there is hardly anybody whose life has not been touched, if not in their own personal life narrative, then in the generations before them, their parents' life narrative, their grandparents' life narrative, by significant hardship, by things that are hard to integrate, hard to metabolize emotionally. What that means is that unprocessed emotion, unprocessed memory, continues to walk with a leader as unconscious habits and unconscious beliefs and in some cases, inner vows. For example, I won't be like my father, who was abusive. If you choose to disown anger, the strength and power that comes from a certain kind of warrior-like ferocity because you saw

it abused in your childhood, then it gets very hard to be effective as a leader, guiding others, inspiring others, directing others, because you do not have access to that vitality or life force. You could say to somebody, you should make more ambitious goals, or you should a have more bold leadership style, but if there is a deep agreement inside their psyche not to do that, then that advice will not work.

More and more, coaches and leadership development professionals realize that at the very least, we need to understand the deep roots of these derailers, the deep antecedents to *why* people are behaving in ways that do not serve them.

If you can go an extra step and be an agent of helping leaders to look at and metabolize trauma properly, that is even better. What I mean by trauma-informed, or what my teacher, Thomas Hübl, and I mean by that is you understand how to see the presenting problem in its depths.

## Scott

Let's say I had parents who were divorced, and that was a pretty traumatic experience in my life. It was about a three-year process, sophomore, junior, senior year of my high school years. It was very challenging for everybody involved. Now I carry that forward. I carry that forward in a number of ways, and then you put me in a position of authority, and there may be some blind spots that I have, there may be some things that I bring to that position, and if I have not done that healing work, if I have not explored some of these deep issues, I might struggle with different elements of the job. Is that accurate? Is that one way of contextualizing this for listeners?

### Amy

Yes, that is a very practical way to express it and without asking you to overexpose how it lives in you now, one could imagine different byproducts of your experience. You could have, for example, decided it is not safe to bond because relationships dissolve, and so you operate with siloed and isolated leadership behaviors. You could have decided it is too vulnerable *not* to have a connection, and so instead, you care-take everybody, and you never give

them critical feedback because you do not want them to leave. There could be multiple different expressions. It is not obvious what the lingering effect of that divorce experience might be on you as a leader, but equally, it would be naive to think there isn't one. That is the connection between life narrative and leadership.

# Scott

That's wonderfully helpful.

# **Amy**

So many leaders, early in their lives, were put into roles that were precocious to their age. Many, many leaders had a role in their family as a sort of a hero, rescuer, and they became used to being hyper responsible. They became used to being really effective. They got used to being in charge, often from a very young age, which is heartbreaking in terms of the dimensions of their childhood that they missed. But that child naturally grows up to lead others and to make stuff happen and to be very effective, and often the thing they were getting rewarded for in childhood was achievement. That pattern of external referencing and validation and going to the next goal post gets very entrenched in such a leader, and that aspect of it can be wonderful.

Often in our programs, we have some of the most successful people on the planet. However, at some point in the life cycle of their leadership, they are going to hit a wall where reaching yet another accolade or another appointment or another raise, another piece of security is not going to be very satisfying. That is an extremely pregnant moment. Suddenly, in adult development terms, they have the potential for moving from a socialized mind that is taking its guidance and its choices from what society commends, to an internally referenced selfauthoring mindset in which they can choose from deep inside their own values, their own sense of purpose, their own calling, what they want to do and how they want to contribute. It is a beautiful process to watch, because then tons of life force runs back into the river.

# Scott

A guest who has been on this podcast several times, Jonathan Reams, has a quote, he says "leaders create the weather." You put someone in a position of authority

As children, many leaders had a role in their family as a sort of a hero, rescuer, and they became used to being hyper responsible.

As organizations ask leaders to devote their life to leading organizations, the organization, in return, must be committed to that person's well-being and wholeness which includes their family.

who maybe hasn't spent time doing some of that work, and it can be a difficult place if that individual isn't prepared, if that individual is not present, if that individual isn't self-aware. I love how you think about this. My undergraduate degree was in family systems theory, so I have a very deep appreciation for how you are looking at this from multiple dimensions. I'm interested because you are working with people all over the world. We are now post-pandemic. We are moving back into "normalcy". What are you seeing in your work right now? What are you seeing out in the field that leaders are experiencing?

# Amy

There are some emerging trends post-pandemic that were always there, but now have more of the foreground of leaders' attention. The first one is just the level of complexity people are facing and the pace of change. Almost always, on an opening night of a program, if you have a group full of senior executives, they will talk about the disruption of AI, the disruption of the multi generations in the workforce, the level of transformation and churn that is going on inside their organizations, and how people are changechallenged. Just to make a connection back to the first part of our conversation, my dear friend Zander Grashow is a world expert on adaptive leadership. He says people are not afraid of change. They are afraid of perceived loss. So, one of the things I try to think about is, how can leaders tell a story of change in the context of conservation, of what is being preserved, what is being valued, what in the history is being honored? So that people have a context in which their psyche can relax and feel like there is a stream of continuity that sits alongside the stream of change. That is the first thing, and as you said, so beautifully, if the leader is the weather, how can we make sure there are not storm clouds everywhere? Which is to say, how can we help to lower the level of perceived loss by greater degrees of transparency, greater degrees of shared risk, greater degrees of generosity and caring and solidarity within teams.

We are trying to create much more of what Professor Amy Edmondson would call psychologically safe environments, trust-based environments. We often use exercises that help people to get to know each other in a much more personal way as a vehicle for creating that kind of fabric of caring and mutual nurturing. What I have discovered is that for many leaders there is a willingness to drop the historic divide between personal and professional and to blur the lines enough that they can can start to really get to know each other in a meaningful way and invest in each other's success. That is one of the things that Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey tell us drives a "deliberately developmental organization." People must feel like there is co-investment in each other's success, a willingness to mentor and guide and give feedback and coaching and to see feedback as the gift that it is.

### Scott

As you highlight some of the complexity, this is where the dots start connecting. If we can agree on the fact the leaders are immersed in a context with greater and greater levels of complexity ... the multi-generational workforce, work-from-home, or if we consider employ-ment law becoming more and more complex depending where you are in the world, it is fascinating what is swirling around these individual leaders. And if we are navigating complexity, it would seem to me that, from a Snowden and Boone standpoint [a reference to their Cynefin model], we are in a space where it is about our best guess moving forward, we are experimenting, and we are trying to learn quickly and figure out what is going to work in this new context and how we can move forward, but it is just our best guess. And if we don't have a team that has psychological safety, and everyone is sitting there quietly, not disagreeing with the authority figure, leaving the meeting and then saying to one another, well, this is going to be a train wreck, and not saying that in the meeting, the leader is literally flying blind. They are in trouble. They do not have a full awareness to truly work the problem and come up with the best experiments.

# **Amy**

Now we are going full circle to earlier in my career. I had the wonderful privilege through my relationship with my sister Erica Ariel Fox, who for many years has been a lecturer at Harvard Law School, to teach their work on Difficult Conversations. And, as you have just said, I started to get really sensitized to the degree to which the key conversations in the boardroom are happening at the water cooler. There is so many conversations, and particularly the one you pointed to Scott, which involves

a willingness to dissent with my leader, a willingness to hold a divergent perspective, even a willingness to be persuaded versus being sealed off from learning ... those shifts, while they sound skill based, and they are, to some degree, skill based, are also about cultivating a curiosity and an intellectual flexibility and a dialog among the team so that the conversations can be surfaced and you get real collective intelligence.

As you said, if the picture is more complex than one person can see, the right answer has to exist in the we-space, not in the individual expert. Those skills, the metacognition, skills of learning, of dialog, of collaboration at the level of ideation and experimentation, but also the ability to sense and intuit and to use a more innate gut intelligence, and not just an analytic intelligence, become more important

as the picture gets more intricate and you have to be able to differentiate the signal from the noise. That is more of a right-brain capacity than it is a left-brain capacity. Leaders are starting to get really interested in tapping into multifaceted intelligence and beginning to understand that what got them here will not get them through the next phase of their leadership.

Leaders must be intentional around the practices that now are critical to being in performance-ready shape.

# Scott

Yes, and if they have interesting relationships with authority, then as soon as things get a little bit chaotic, for example during lock down, they don't necessarily create that place of psychological safety. Then they are making decisions in a vacuum, and that is a bad place to be, especially in this new context where you cannot know, you cannot see everything, and it is always your best guess. I suppose that has always been the way with strategy. It has always been, well, we think these are the three places to play in the market. This is our best guess. But again, there is an awful lot of strategies that did not work over the course of the years.

# **Amy**

I love what you are saying, too, Scott. Amy Edmondson would say that one of the most critical skills now is asking high quality questions. That is a very different orientation than most leaders were groomed on, where they were meant to be the Knower and the Doer. Now, the most essential skill is to be the antenna that's constantly receives new information and synthesizes it and iterates it. I think that's very exciting.

### Scott

This is something I have been reflecting on quite a bit. I did some work with an organization, a nonprofit in my community, last year, and it just came into my head and out of my mouth in the session — I looked at the executive director and said "you must go to bed with thousands of questions." A real challenge for these leaders is to see what are the right four or five questions. Because you could choose to work on hundreds of questions, on too much of the list. Some leaders do. If they are not disciplined in what are the four or five right questions that we need to be working as a team. And then secondly, do we have the psychological safety in the space to have the real conversation where people's voices are heard. I might not get my way, you might not get your way, we are going to cocreate a path forward with our best guess. But to your point,

to get that collective intelligence, to benefit from that safety, we need the right questions too.

# **Amy**

I love that. If I may say something perhaps more avant-garde, one then asks oneself the question, what practices cultivate my ability to sort out what to attend to? In my experience, that is about creating a kind of inner spaciousness and quiet or stillness,

whether it is through contemplative practices, expressive arts, time in nature, time for reflection and journaling — there are many experiential exercises you can do that allow that kind of intuitive intelligence to rise up to the surface and guide you to the right questions. Part of what we do in our leadership programs is slow people down, because at the speed of information and the speed of exertion that we are living in, that intuition becomes harder to access. When you help people to take a breath and exhale and actually do things that quiet their mind, then they have that *a-ha* moment in the shower, or they have that sort of immediate clarity that only becomes possible when you slow down.

### Scott

I always think of Ray Dalio saying something to the effect that he credits Transcendental Meditation with a lot of his success, a couple times a day. Twenty minutes, and he'll sing that from the mountaintop that meditation was helpful in his development of Bridgewater.

# **Amy**

Bridgewater is one of the companies that Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey feature in their book *An Everyone Culture* in

part because Ray has had such a significant commitment to building that mindfulness practice into the fabric of the organization. At Mobius we have the wonderful privilege of a partnership with our colleagues, Marty Boroson and Carmel Moore at One Moment Company, who offer very short meditative practices on their website that people can download and engage in for just one minute a day. It is not time consuming, but it is a significant cognitive downshift that allows for the kind of pattern recognition that you are pointing to ... that becomes more available to an executive. There is simply no way to tell the forest from the trees, now, without that.

#### Scott

What else are you seeing? I mean this is so much fun, but what else is present for you as you work with executives?

# **Amy**

The other thing that has my attention and my heart is the chronic exhaustion and the burnout that people coming into our programs are reporting. The timescarcity in their lives, a very significant lack of white space, the physical challenges that stem from the health effects of being overextended and exhausted. Sometimes I think if the leadership program does nothing except give them a chance to rest, we have already done a good thing, because when people are exhausted, it is very hard to be inspired or inspiring. It is very hard for them to believe that the world could meaningfully change or to undertake an audacious ambition together. It also lowers the accessibility of their heart, so people come in more walled-off and guarded because they are tired and they do not have anything more to give. Leaders need to really think about practices for soul nourishment.

When you see participants go through a session where we ask how could others support you emotionally? We extend their vocabulary of relational needs and requests. You could ask somebody to teach you something. You could ask somebody to walk in nature with you. You could ask somebody to acknowledge your growth. You could ask somebody to celebrate an important occasion. You could ask somebody to share their wisdom. There are many, many ways to build a fabric of interdependence inside of a team and inside of an organization that I think are neglected at great cost.

In a world in which people are giving so much and they are plugged in so comprehensively, white space and also friendship – these become a priority, they become urgent in this context.

If the picture is more complex than one person can see, the right answer has to exist in the we-space, not in the individual expert.

# Scott

For people in positions of authority, it can be incredibly lonely. I love how you are communicating this. It is a question of how are you going to, in some ways, arm yourself in a healthy way? And that takes some design, and that takes some foresight, and that takes talking about Transcendental Meditation as just one tool you might use. There are probably seven or eight tools that you are not accessing, tapping into and prioritizing. You are getting up each day. You are in charge of creating the weather patterns, and yet you are beat down. Well then, you are going to miss a lot of opportunities to create something wonderful. It is going to be dark and stormy. It is going to be a whirlwind. It is going to be a dust storm. It becomes too hard to attend to others if you have not been attended to ... so I love how you frame that, because with all of that complexity, it is no longer a two Martini lunch that will do it.

# **Amy**

Yes, and the two Martini lunches were also problematic in their own way. But yes, as far as I can understand, talking to leaders, they really feel themselves as constantly in the hamster wheel of effort and new information and a bombardment of demand, and you have people getting hundreds of emails in a day. My dear friend Srini Pillay, who is a neuroscientist, talks about the switch costs of moving from one kind of task to another, or one kind of cognitive conversation to another. The brain gets tired. These are not just emotional needs. These are really intellectual needs, cognitive needs, mental clarity needs. Going forward, leaders must be intentional around the self-care practices that maybe could have been neglected in an earlier time, but now are critical to being in performance-ready shape.

### Scott

I love that phrasing, performance-ready shape. If you think of a world-class athlete, they have a team of individuals helping them be performance-ready.

Is there anything else that you want to highlight before we wind down? You mentioned avant garde. Is there

anything else that might take us by surprise. It seems to me you are really seven years ahead of the rest of us.

# **Amy**

I don't know how ahead I am, but I do have a sense that the future includes a lot more professional intimacy. I could say that. So one of the things we have been doing is inviting a single leader to meet with transformational coaches for two days on their own. Sometimes we do it for the leader and the spouse. We have also had the privilege to do it for families, both the leader and their parents, or the leader and their children. To think about the family unit as part of the unit of leadership development, is a bit avant garde I suppose. But of course, everything that is occurring in the family has an influence on the inner weather of that leader, and everything that can heal or integrate or repair the family elevates that leader to have more open space, freedom of mind, to be creative and effective in life. We cannot disconnect those things anymore, and have all of that relegated to somebody's personal journey. As organizations ask leaders to devote their life to leading organizations, the organization, in return, must be committed to that person's well-being and wholeness which includes their family. So that is an important focus of our work.

The other thing I would mention, just in case leadership practitioners are listening to us right now, is that once a year we host an Annual Gathering of what we call our Next Practice Institute, the professional development arm of Mobius. It's a week-long event. It happens in November of this year on Cape Cod. We have seven or eight immersive learning tracks that operate all week. Twice a day, we have presentations from various senior experts and thought leaders, many drawn from our friends at Harvard University. In the evenings, we have cello and poetry and theater and wonderful expressive arts performances. It is a week of fun and friendship and global community, and it is really a catalytic week of learning. So, if somebody's looking for their next step in terms of how they lead others or how they coach and consult, please consider coming to join us at one of our Annual Gatherings. We would love to have you.

# Scott

Thank you so much for this conversation. This has been absolutely wonderful, and I just have great respect for the work that you are doing and the sense-making of how do we best support leaders. I sometimes phrase my

mission as how do we better prepare people to serve in these really gnarly roles? They are just so challenging. How do we better prepare them, whether it is to your point, from a mental standpoint, from a physical standpoint, from any number of different ways, how do we better prepare people to serve in these roles? You are e at the forefront of this and I think it's wonderful.

# **Amy**

I love what you said. It is really about holistic readiness.

#### Scott

Yes. It is no longer just you were the CFO, so now you're ready.

I always end these conversations by asking what has caught your attention in recent times? What have you been listening to, or reading or streaming? It could have something to do with what we have just discussed. It could have nothing to do with what we have just discussed, but maybe something listeners might be interested in that has caught your attention.

# **Amy**

Well, I am a biased fan of my sister's wonderful book, Winning from Within. In teaching her archetype model in business for last 20 years, I have seen how meaningful and how accessible it is as a way for helping people carve their own path of development. Otherwise, I've been streaming Bridgerton. I feel like I so often deal with the heavy parts of life, doing trauma-informed work, that on occasion, I really need some mind candy. Shonda Rhimes is my hero for that.

# Scott

We all need a little bit of a mindless, entertainment to shut down the mind.

# **Amy**

And, of course, romance and love.

# Scott

I hope we can do this again. Amy, I really appreciate your time. I know that listeners have got a lot out of this conversation. I have really enjoyed getting to know you a little bit better. Until we speak again, thank you so much for the work that you do in the world.

### Amv

Thank you, Scott, and everybody for listening. ■



You may wish to follow <u>Scott J. Allen</u> and <u>Amy Elizabeth Fox</u> on LinkedIn where both regularly publish podcasts and thought pieces on advances in leadership development



Amy Elizabeth Fox
Founder and CEO of
Mobius Executive Leadership

Since 2005 Amy Elizabeth Fox has served as one of the founders and Chief Executive Officer of Mobius Executive Leadership, a global transformational leadership firm. For the last twenty years she has served as a leadership and culture change advisor to eminent professional services firms and Fortune 500 companies and has facilitated immersive executive development programs for senior leaders.

Mobius offers top team intervention, business mediation, executive coaching and transformational leadership programs all aimed at unlocking potential and building deeper trust, intimacy and connection within a company's top tier. Mobius also sponsors a professional development arm for maturing transformational practitioners called the Next Practice Institute.

Since 2013 Mobius has had the privilege of partnering with the premier leadership advisory firm, Egon Zehnder, together offering sessions for leaders from around the world. Amy serves as the lead faculty for the quarterly Executive Discovery program offered jointly to C-suite leaders. Amy is also guest faculty for African Leadership Institute's Desmond Tutu Fellows program at Oxford. She has a Masters in Counseling from Lesley College and a BA in Psychology from Wesleyan University.



Scott J. Allen Author & Founder of Phronesis

Scott J. Allen is a speaker, academic, author, and podcaster who empowers people and organizations to build stellar leaders. He is an award-winning educator passionate about working with people at all levels and across industries. He spent 18 years as a professor of management, and his areas of expertise include leadership, leader development, the future of work, and executive communication.

Scott has published more than 60 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. He is the co-author of The Little Book of Leadership Development (2011), and the textbook Discovering Leadership: Designing Your Success (2023).

He is also hosts Phronesis: Practical Wisdom for Leaders, ranked among the world's top 2.5% of podcasts. Scott frequently serves as a keynote speaker. In addition, he consults, facilitates workshops, and leads retreats across industries. He co-founded the Collegiate Leadership Competition and served as the board chair. He also served on the board of the International Leadership Association, Association of Leadership Educators, and Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society. He was named an ILA Fellow by the International Leadership Association in 2021.



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