

COVER STORY

DEVELOPING

Change-Ready Leaders with

LEADERSHIP RIGOR

Learning

JOURNEYS!

Erica Peitler & Associates



Erica Peitler,
CEO & Managing Partner



Erica Peitler is at the forefront of designing and facilitating customized leadership learning journeys that not only prepare leaders to respond to today's dynamic business needs, but also inspire entire organizations to reach new levels of performance and productivity.

As the CEO and managing partner of her boutique leadership coaching and facilitation firm, Erica Peitler & Associates, Erica and her team focus on building collaborative communities within their client organizations, mainly private and family-owned businesses.

Using the innovative and agile practices in her book, *Leadership Rigor*, as well as cutting-edge learning techniques, her clients transform their talent and growth potential into breakthrough performance with both customized Leadership Rigor Learning Journeys, and the recently launched Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy.

“We can no longer treat change and transformation as planned initiatives that can be mapped out on a timeline and managed,” Erica says. “Leaders are operating in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world, and they must be change-ready for everyday experiences that can turn their world upside down.”

Erica's customized leadership learning journeys are an outgrowth of her 20 years of big corporate experience as a successful healthcare executive, along with her 15 years of working primarily with private companies to create a unique approach to leadership development.

Developing change-ready leaders, she emphasizes, requires the commitment of a progressive CEO and/or executive team that believes it has not yet realized its full talent or business potential, and is willing to passionately invest time and energy to develop it.

This is our biggest challenge and opportunity, notes Erica, because this first requirement is not commonplace. Not all CEOs are willing, able, or ready to invest in their organization's future with such conviction. This is why, she emphasizes, “We are looking for partners who are looking for us.”

The work is challenging because it involves behavioral changes that initially start with a mindset shift. Positivity, patience, and genuinely believing in your talent bench are mandatory prerequisites for these journeys.

When CEOs are ready, willing, and able to invest in their organization's future with this kind of commitment,





says Erica, magical partnerships occur. Moreover, leaders are often surprised to realize just how breathtaking it is to watch their people learn, grow, and fully realize their potential, as a true cultural transformation takes place before their eyes.

Of course, the leadership journey can also expose disappointments, that likewise create important breakthroughs. These can include changes in roles or a team design, though the most consistent outcome, Erica affirms, is an embrace of the leadership journey because the learning is fun, practical, and results in positive changes in “how we do things around here.”

The organization's leaders also come to appreciate how including everyone, respecting each voice, and developing talent as an enterprise asset yields

incredible benefits in terms of energizing engagement and securing retention!

Discovering a Talent for Transformational Change and Growth

Erica's career started with two powerful interests that eventually became intertwined in subtle ways. As a child, she loved to sing and perform the songs from the musical albums her mother played, and she also wanted to become a doctor, so she spent a lot of time reading the encyclopedia and looking up diseases to curiously explore how the heart, brain, and lungs worked.

Later, while training to become a pharmacist, she applied for a summer internship at an over-the-counter healthcare company. “This experience

revealed how my communication skills and interest in medicine could come together in a creative way,” she says.

For 20 years, she worked as a healthcare executive running operational divisions, R+D organizations, strategic planning, and “all things transformational” for several large pharmaceutical organizations. There, she became a go-to-person for creating solutions and imagining new possibilities for change and growth.

“My personal evolution from transforming business challenges to coaching the transformational growth of leaders into their full potential was a logical sequence,” she recalls. “I didn't start out pursuing this specific path, though insightful experiences provided clues along the way, and I was always willing to take risks and make changes

throughout my career. For me, that's the big takeaway: if you want to grow into your true potential, you must be willing to take risks and make changes!”

Imagination and the Possibilities of “What If?”

As someone who is focused on untethering her imagination so she can connect the dots on possible solutions, Erica notes that imagining the possibilities of “What if?” has allowed her to create countless models and communication frameworks.

Listening intently as she engages with her clients allows her to hear patterns and find insights. She then integrates what she hears into structures that help her clients see possibilities more clearly. Always guided by “What if?”, as in “What if we looked through this lens?”, she brings her clients' ideas into formation so that opportunities and solutions are more evident.

“When I am preparing for journey workshops, being imaginative allows me to unleash an expansive array of new material that I'm then challenged to curate and synthesize. The output needs to meet the high bar of being valuable content that is simple to understand as well as easy to apply,” she says.

Today, more than ever, says Erica, those who invest time in learning how to engage in imaginative practices that design new solutions will reap the rewards if they are also able to apply them on the ground.

On a personal level, she is sometimes engaged with a world of possibilities in front of her. Fortunately, her extreme discipline provides the needed structure for her to deliver against her many commitments. “When I set a goal, I achieve it,” she affirms.

Once she started building her boutique coaching and facilitation firm, she was determined to be on the cutting edge of leadership development. She concludes, “We are achieving this with both our customized Leadership Rigor Learning Journeys and the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy.”

Conscious and by Design – the Leadership Rigor Model

The Leadership Rigor model that Erica highlights in her book offers an elegant way to talk about inputs, through-puts, and outputs. The input, not surprisingly, is conscious discipline. The through-put is continuously practicing specific skills and behaviors. The output is performance and productivity.

This combination of conscious discipline and practicing the right elements generates breakthrough performance and productivity for leaders and their organizations. “Simple to say, yes. Easy to deliver on, no!” Erica concludes.

Her desire to create impactful customized leadership learning journeys grew out of several critical observations as well as personal experiences that appeared to be underestimated or ignored in the world of leadership development:

- Change happens in systems, so one leader learning and growing does not necessarily make the team/organization better or stronger;
- Learning in corporations typically occurs as a one-time “event” where a course is attended or an off-site takes place, versus an integrated and on-going experience with a process and a continuous flow to ensure meaningful progress;

- Real learning is iterative, so it takes place in loops: individuals are exposed to something new, practice it, observe the impact, and then come back to discuss the experience again, a loop that needs to continue as the learning process evolves;

- Unless the top of the house is involved, committed, and role modeling the learning through words as well as actions, the organization will not achieve traction and momentum, and development growth will not occur.

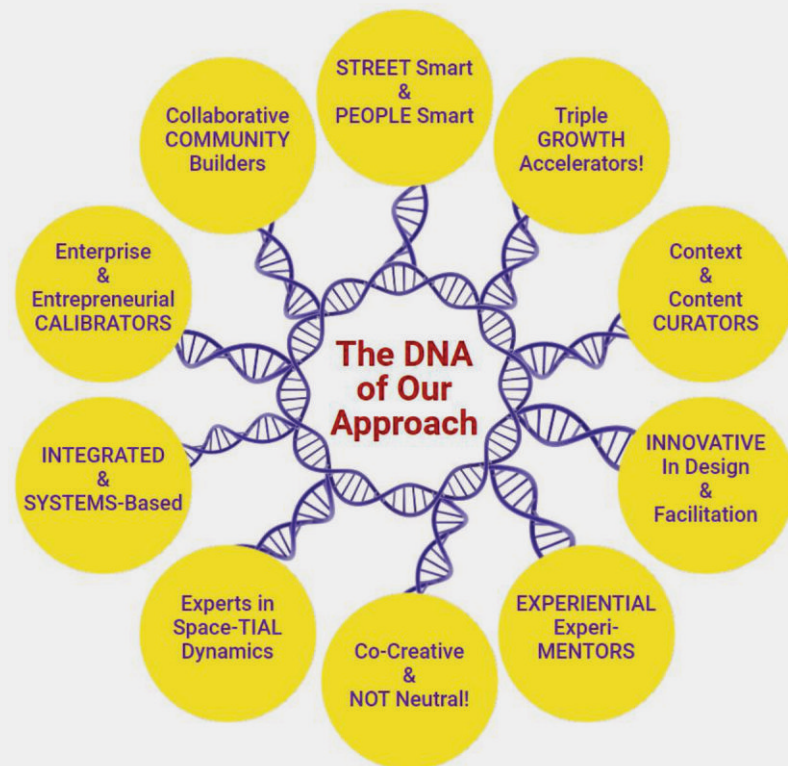
Each organization has a unique story, Erica affirms, a narrative for where they were, where they are now, and where they are going next. A customized leadership learning journey can help bring that story to life, give it language, and place it in the context of leadership skills and behaviors so it can be learned and leveraged across the entire enterprise.

Accordingly, Erica takes clients on a customized leadership development journey that provides them with a comprehensive understanding of the skills and behaviors they need to lead themselves, their teams, and their organizations.

As a high-potential executive during her career, Erica received tremendous training and development opportunities, including coaching, mentoring, sponsorship, stretch assignments, and comprehensive leadership programs.

“As a curious lifetime learner, I took each opportunity seriously and truly attempted to extract the full value, of both the content and the connections, to others I met along the way,” she reflects. “Each experience provided insights and learning that helped form

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the patchwork quilt of my own leadership practice. I was extremely conscious about its design, and today, 'conscious and by design' is how I approach my Leadership Rigor Learning Journeys."

Change-Partners Develop Change-Ready Leaders

Today, Erica shares, the increasing overlap in the work of management consultants and executive leadership coaches is giving way to a new breed of trusted advisors that she calls change-partners, who work with clients to develop change-ready leaders.

What does it take to be change-ready? For one thing, leaders of organizations

both large and small are increasingly aware that vulnerability is a leadership strength that builds trust. Erica and her team help leaders embrace this truth and reconcile the cognitive dissonance between old school and new school beliefs, starting with the fact that people aren't looking for their leaders to be heroes.

"We want leaders to be real with us, to be in the struggle with us," says Erica. "Consequently, our Leadership Rigor Learning Journeys debunk the myths around old-school leadership heroics, acknowledge that people are messy, and set the pretext with our clients that while much of what they will work through on their journey with us is predictable, it will often feel scary,

new, and unfamiliar at first, and that's okay."

She adds, "The fact is, the DNA of our firm is unique, as evidenced by the 10 DNA elements we bring to our client partnerships."

"Our Leadership Learning Journeys are unique experiences, and we appreciate that our approach isn't for everyone," says Erica. "We put a lot of time and energy into expressing who we are and how we engage in our client partnerships. When we do find that magical match, our partnerships involve the entire organization and often span multiple years, and many extend well beyond that."

"The work we do is game-changing for organizations and life-changing for leaders; we never underestimate this fact or take it for granted," says Erica. "We do not have passengers in our sessions, only participants!"

The experience that Erica creates on the journey toggles between intellectual and emotional breakthroughs as participants learn the true value of "having a seat at the table" and experience the influential impact of developing their leadership voices and presence.

Taking Time for Personal Transformation & Book Writing

Erica had always wanted to write a book, and in 2006, after a 20-year successful career, she left corporate America to literally get to know herself better.

"Transforming organizations was fun and exhausting; now it was time for some personal transformation," she says. Her first book was *Open Up and Say Aaah!*, which explored how to navigate through personal change and transformation.

While writing this book, Erica also became certified as a coach and began launching her boutique coaching and facilitation firm. During this process, she was introduced to Vistage International, which propelled her directly into coaching at the CEO and business-owner level, exactly where she wanted to take her practice.

She soon found herself with the opportunity to build a dynamic CEO peer group, facilitate debates and discussions on critical business topics, and coach CEOs individually, which exposed her to deep learning on the operations, challenges, and opportunities of private companies and family businesses.

This exposure, coupled with her big corporate experience in both intrapreneurial and entrepreneurial initiatives, gave her the opportunity to codify *Leadership Rigor*, the business book of her dreams.

Designed as a progressive three-part curriculum, *Leadership Rigor* took the concepts of leading yourself, leading teams, and leading organizations and structured them in a down-to-earth, easy-to-digest format.

"This book was the culmination of my diversified business experiences to date and integrated the powerful insights and learning from the amazing leaders I had been exposed to throughout my career," she notes. "Our Leadership Rigor Learning Journeys are based on this work, and the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy, explained in more detail below, further expands on this foundation."

The Progressive Mindset® Model – A Pathway to Success

Success can be challenging to define, especially for curious learners who see a stream of never-ending possibilities

to explore and challenges to tackle.

In her coaching work, Erica uses a model called the Progressive Mindset® that helps to communicate the dynamics of change. This elegant S-curve, she explains, provides a structure for conveying both rational and emotional messages.

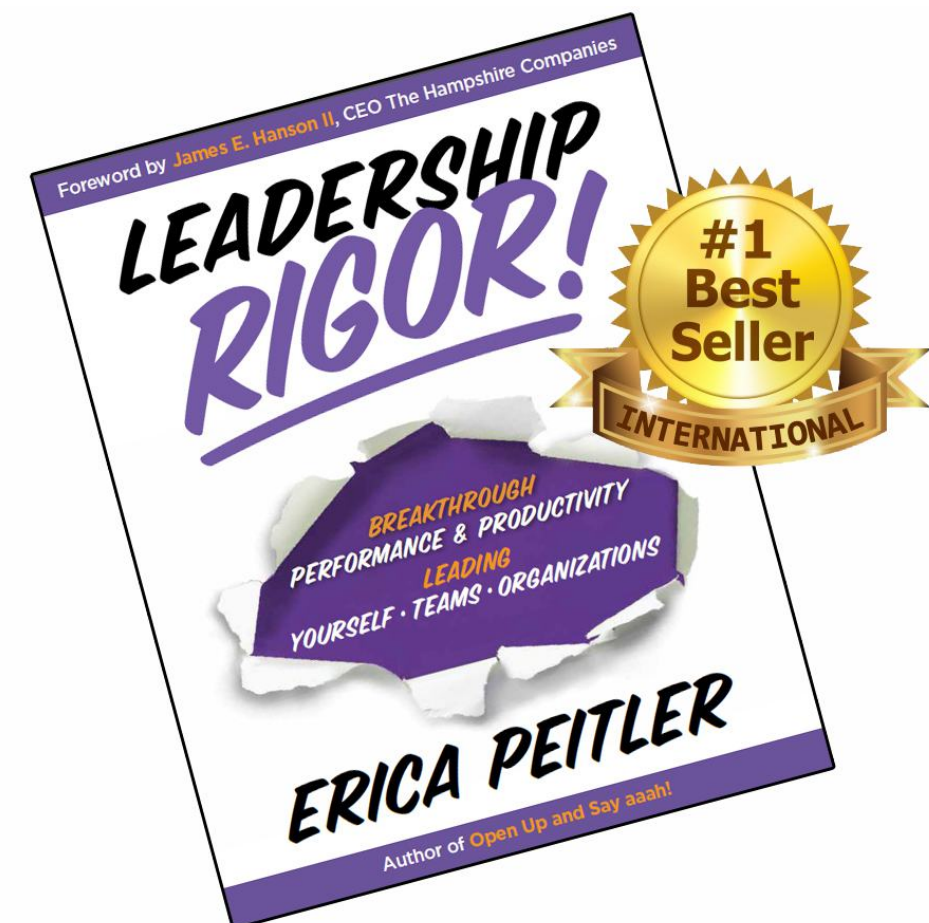
Erica notes that the bottom of the curve, the bevel, is where we struggle to define the new way forward. The inflection point reveals a subtle, yet significant, shift and represents the place where new approaches are learned and practiced. Here, we are out of our comfort zone. The crest is where competence and confidence return, as we look

further ahead at what's next.

"This process is circular and continuous," Erica explains. "We help clients understand the process of cresting, which involves maintaining themselves at the level of continuous learning, as they build their competence and confidence in new skills."

Erica believes that when the road is hard, it's because we're in the process of learning something important that we may be resisting. Likewise, when the road is easy, we're executing our well-designed plans with excellence.

"The game changer here is that new ideas often require new learning and present a new set of challenges that we need to openly embrace. The process is an on-



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going cycle. You need to learn to surf with it, never settle too much into it, and try not to be overwhelmed by it.”

Behaviors Transform with Leadership Learning Journeys

Leadership learning journeys that create breakthrough outcomes involve real changes in behavior. This takes time, support, special skill sets, as well as being intentionally integrated and systems-based.

“Leadership and business practices work best when they are integrated. A mistake we often see leaders make is trying to separate these practices into two different approaches,” Erica points out. “Leaders often ‘talk the talk’ of leadership principles or best practices, yet when the pressure is on and a real business challenge presents itself, the ‘walking the walk’ is absent or looks totally different. Our work focuses on BOTH skill acquisition and skill application, what we call putting it ‘on the ground, in real time.’”

Erica also notes that change and growth happen in systems, not in isolation. The Leadership Rigor learning journeys are powerful because they include the entire organization, beginning with the CEO and executive leadership team.

“When everyone is on the same page, using the same language and tools, the **real magic happens**,” says Erica. “This is also why our focus on private and family businesses is so exciting. We are often working with DAVID to take on GOLIATH, and we bring innovation, as well as agile techniques, to the table. This means that being smaller isn’t a constraint. It’s actually an advantage to leverage!”

Leadership Rigor learning journeys also create breakthrough outcomes by calibrating both entrepreneurial and enterprise practices to the current state



of the clients' lifecycle development.

Erica explains that most private companies, and especially family businesses, have entrepreneurial beginnings. A smart business idea or model that grows in the first and potentially second generations often hits a growth plateau, or faces a change in environmental complexity, that hinders getting to scale with a sustainable enterprise approach. Depending on the leader's vision, this situation can be approached in several ways.

“We help our clients calibrate their entrepreneurial and enterprise balance, as well as realize their full potential across their talent bench, by developing the skill sets needed for both types of leaders — and make no mistake, every organization needs both!” says Erica.

Erica and her team see the future of leadership development through the lens of being community builders. “Being united and unified as an organizational community is the primary output of our leadership learning journeys. This ‘innervation’

allows for ‘innovation’ to be accelerated because we co-create a collaborative culture with our clients,” says Erica.

Digital Transformation Meets Organizational Learning with the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy

While customized leadership learning journeys start “at the top of the house” with CEOs and their executive teams, the ultimate goal is to cascade the experience down and across the entire organization.

The true value of the journey, says Erica, is in creating a collaborative community of leaders fully immersed in their unique company culture. The challenge that emerges is reaching everyone through a structured cascading process that maintains the quality of the experience, with an investment of resources that is reasonable.

To address the need for the cascade to occur more deeply and consistently in larger organizations, Erica designed a video-on-demand program that integrates the concepts of *Leadership Rigor* with her workshop exercises and coaching practice, to create the most

integrated and comprehensive enterprise leadership program available today.

Complete with learning objectives, models, concepts, interactive exercises, learning assessments, and leadership challenges, the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy brings the learning leadership journey to life in a new and fully accessible way.

Ironically, notes Erica, the video program was designed and developed pre-COVID and the world of hybrid work. We were visionary and lucky! We now have the exciting opportunity to meet the new needs of work environments, along with the needs of organizations to upskill their talent and secure their culture around leadership learning practices that are both synchronous and asynchronous.

In addition to utilizing a visually engaging whiteboard animation design for the content material, the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy leverages a technology platform that integrates social interaction, gaming opportunities and playful competition with both individual and team-based learning approaches.

Like the Leadership Rigor Learning Journeys, the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy is custom designed in look, feel, and format with a leaderboard (Erica's team calls it a Rigorboard) that tracks both individual and team scoring progress with spirited competition.

Several program elements provide high levels of engagement. First is the academy's Train the Trainer program. Here, the client identifies individuals in the company who are trained to be coaches/facilitators on the ground. The role of these RIGORNAUTS™ is to facilitate internal team discussions on the content of the Leadership Rigor program within the context of their

organization's dynamics.

The experience is fully customized to the challenges and opportunities at play in each company, through the voices and insights of its community members, which locks in the critical skill acquisition and application process the program is designed to deliver.

The second element occurs at the end of each part of the program, when certifications of achievement to recognize the leadership development progress each participant has made are provided. Those who complete all three parts – leading yourself, leading teams, and leading organizations – receive recognition in the form of a Master Certification of Achievement.

The Leadership Coaches of the FUTURE

With the Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy off and running, Erica and her team are now taking their boutique approach in a new direction, by designing a comprehensive change-partner certification progress for established coaches who wish to further expand their practices utilizing the Leadership Rigor and Leadership Rigor Virtual Academy content with their clients.

With the first certification class targeted for April 2023, Erica and her team are hard at work putting the finishing touches on the program, which includes introductory webinars and workshops. Interested coaches are encouraged to reach out to Erica directly.

Leaders Need to Be Inspirational, Always and Every Day

Like many entrepreneurs, Erica believes that work needs to be playful and that play often takes work. In the post-COVID world, she observes, we're finally beginning to understand that our

best selves show up in integrated ways and that work and life choices create tensions.

“Finding our ‘AND,’ which allows for balance in both work and life, is what I strive for. I have learned that it all can be done — just not all at the same time,” she states.

Erica coaches her clients on the differences between motivation and inspiration. Many people believe they are the same, yet they are meaningfully different. “We’re all hard-wired with intrinsic motivations,” she explains. “For me, it’s learning, achievement, imagining, and creating new models and frameworks. For others, it might be money, recognition, or inclusion.”

She notes that leaders are inspirational when they understand the motivations of their colleagues and create the conditions for them to live into their motivations. “We all want inspiring leaders who know us, believe in us, and can create magical partnerships with us as we learn, grow, and accomplish the work together.”

Her advice to aspiring business leaders is, “Leadership is a journey. Take the time to reflect and consider who you are, and how you can bring your talents to the world. Your career is tactical. Your purpose is meaningful. Your calling is your unique contribution to the world, so don’t miss your entry point to GIVE it generously to others!”

