

# Leadership

## Step *by* Step

Become the Person Others Follow

**JOSHUA SPODEK**

**AMACOM**

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*To my past students and clients, from whom I learned so much, and to my future students and clients, who I hope help solve the global problems our world has never faced or had to solve before.*

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# Acknowledgments

If I don't force myself to keep this section short, it will end up as long as the rest of the book. The influence of each person below shows up on every page of this book.

First are my leadership teachers. Despite what I say about the traditional education system they worked in, I learned from them and their courses more than I can say: Daniel Ames, Srikumar Rao, Ralph Biggadike, Michael Feiner, Bill Duggan, and Donald Waite.

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Finally, my students and clients, from whom I learned the most about leadership, how to learn it, and how to teach it.

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# Preface

Have you noticed how many top leaders were once actors, athletes, or other performers? And how few graduated from traditional academic leadership programs?

Actors, athletes, and other performers have become U.S. presidents, governors, senators, congress members, mayors, founders of well-known companies, and more. Love or hate actor-and-athlete-turned-president Ronald Reagan, he ranks near the top of many presidential polls. Meanwhile, the only MBA president, George W. Bush, ranks near the bottom.

Performers-turned-leaders include Arnold Schwarzenegger, Oprah Winfrey, Muhammad Ali, Sean Combs, Jesse Ventura, Jackie Chan, Al Franken, Jane Fonda, and others—not mere trendsetters. Besides not taking traditional leadership programs, many left or failed out of school. By contrast, few politicians or business leaders become performers or athletes.

What's going on? Why do top leadership programs produce few top leaders? Do traditional leadership programs actually produce middle managers? If so, what are our organizations and society losing by relying on them?

More importantly for leadership students and educators, *what works* that we're missing?

*Leadership Step by Step* is the first book to find what works in other fields and bring together an effective new way to teach and learn leadership beyond the predominant method of lecture, cases, and biography. It leads readers to develop leadership skills, beliefs, and experiences through a comprehensive, integrated progression

of exercises that I have tested and refined with hundreds of students at Columbia and New York University (NYU), online, and with private clients. I have also presented at Harvard, Princeton, MIT, INSEAD, and other top schools.

I first learned that schools taught leadership at Columbia Business School, where I got my MBA. Before then, I figured that you were born a leader or you were not. Business school taught me leadership principles, but implementing them after graduation felt like starting from scratch. Trying, say, to negotiate armed with principles but not experience still crippled me with anxiety.

Teaching me *about* leading didn't teach me *to lead*.

After graduating, I consumed leadership books, videos, courses, and any literature I found. They overwhelmingly focused on facts, information, and principles, too, without actionable instruction on how to develop skills and experiences. While facts didn't hurt, what leader became great from knowing more facts? Facts are a commodity that computers handle better.

How performers from other fields led without leadership education remained unexplained.

Two other fields showed me how to teach people to lead. The first was how we teach performers in other fields. The second was experiential, project-based learning—a teaching method tracing its roots to John Dewey and earlier.

## How We Teach Performance in Other Fields

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Performers in other fields aren't born masters either but learn through disciplined, dedicated, and structured practice. Let's first consider how we *don't* teach performance.

## How We Don't Teach Performance

Imagine that piano teachers taught only through lecture, cases, and biography; that piano scales as exercises didn't exist, nor other standard exercises; that everyone learned piano in classrooms at desks listening to lectures on music theory or debating case studies about other pianists; that teachers didn't play but researched and published instead; and that school ended with commencement, meaning that you commenced playing when school ended.

Books on habits of highly effective pianists, 48 laws of piano playing, and pianists' lives would cover principles, not playing. You would write more papers and take more tests than perform. School performances would be for classmates, not the public. You wouldn't face the anxiety of public performance, the exhilaration of nailing a performance, or the shame of blowing one.

You wouldn't expect people to play well by graduation. People who loved playing most would feel frustrated and disengage the most. Those who left or got kicked out might use their freed-up time to practice, developing their voices and learning to enjoy performing while their classroom-bound peers listened to lectures and wrote papers.

## How to Teach Performance

Now imagine that someone in that world invented piano scales as an exercise—not just as theoretical concepts—as well as other exercises at all levels.

Then anyone could start playing. Practicing basics develops skills to play actual music. When exercises are based in theory, they teach you theory, too—so it's usable, not abstract. If there are no big jumps in difficulty between the exercises, you can practice your way to mastery.

Lecture-based schools might criticize all that playing for neglecting the theory they consider fundamental. They might not recognize practicing as relevant to learning piano. They might fear their authority diminishing.

Aspiring pianists might rejoice at playing more and learning from it. Some might feel liberated from lecture and analysis. They might create for themselves more opportunities to perform, overcome anxieties, and improve faster. Some might start alternative schools.

We could have imagined fields besides piano transformed from theoretical to practical—dance, sports, singing, improv, and so on. In one case, though, we don't have to imagine. James Lipton, creator and host of *Inside the Actors Studio*, described such a revolution in acting:

At the end of the nineteenth century, a man named Constantin Stanislavsky rebelled against the kind of presentational hortatory, self-conscious, self-referential, often self-reverential acting that was the norm.

Stanislavsky developed a system of acting and of exercises, of training, of rehearsal, and of performance that went from a theater that was meant to impress to the theater that was meant to express. And suddenly, everything that was external—the fine form, the perfectly articulated vowels, the piercing consonants, the thick make-up, everything that was posed and disbelieved by the actor—god forbid that the actor should cry and mess up his make-up . . . this was the way acting was taught and the way acting was done until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Stanislavsky changed all that. The Moscow Art Theater came to New York and everything changed in America forever. These young people—Stella Adler, Herald Clurman, Lee Strasburg—they went and saw this theater and it wasn't like anything they'd seen before. These people really believed what they were saying.

They were expressing something that was truthful to them and therefore truthful to the audience. It was an extraordinary experience.

It wasn't declaimed. It wasn't recited. It hadn't been rehearsed in front of a mirror. It wasn't perfect.

It was real.

Stanislavsky freed actors from pursuing abstract, inauthentic perfection in favor of exercises that created what felt true and real. His students soon became teachers, creating and refining their styles. Nobody teaches perfection today. Acting didn't abandon rigor or standards, though. Actors today practice with as much diligence and discipline as ever.

It's not surprising for a community that produces genuineness, authenticity, expression, and sensitivity to produce great leaders, even if traditional leadership educators don't get it.

Stanislavsky's system was new to acting, but many fields—dance, voice, improv, and sports, for example—teach through experiential, comprehensive, integrated progressions of exercises, starting with basics. Lecture, theory, and cases have their places, to be sure—after practice.

What do these fields have in common? They are active, social, emotional, expressive, and performance-based (ASEEP). In ASEEP fields, students practice basics until they master them, then progress to intermediates, and so on. Exercises differ between fields, but the structure doesn't. Many results are the same, too: skills, experience, genuineness, authenticity, sensitivity, discipline, vision, expression, and so on.

Leadership is an active, social, experiential, emotional, and performance-based field, too. We teach nearly every ASEEP field through progressions of exercises except leadership. No one has made the leadership equivalent of scales through advanced pieces.

Until this book.

## Another Way Not to Teach Performance

Science and the latest findings are another big source of leadership-development literature, exemplified by TED talks, periodicals, and books that summarize and popularize behavioral science. They typically tell an engaging story about an unexpected experimental result that gets you scratching your head, then an alternative, new perspective based on new results, followed by tips for you to use it.

People feel inspired watching and reading this branch of literature, often thinking, “Wow, what an amazing discovery. I can use it to get ahead of other people who don’t know it.” Few act on the feeling. The pattern is enticing and effective at selling books and event tickets but rarely changes behavior.

Have you noticed that there are no TED talks or “latest findings” literature on how to play piano or basketball? People are just as passionate to improve with them. There is some variation in teaching styles but hardly the relentless and dramatic march of experiment.

Why? First, because practice and rehearsal work, and everyone knows they take time. Nobody suggests, “Learn this one trick and you’ll play tennis like a pro.” There are tricks, thousands of them, that you learn on the side while learning the basics by practicing and rehearsing.

You can learn tricks unrelated to scales, like playing chopsticks on the piano. They may entertain people at parties, but they don’t move you closer to expressing yourself freely, from your heart, to evoke emotions and inspire others. That freedom and ability to express comes through practice, like learning a language.

The difference between chopsticks and scales is that scales are based in theory, which you learn by playing them. Every field has tricks or latest discoveries. They aren’t useless, but they’re valuable in the long term only to those versed in theory. It’s great for dancers to learn flashy flair or spin moves if they’ve mastered footwork,

rhythm, and teamwork. Otherwise, they're cute tricks. Master the basics and you'll pick them up anyway.

Teaching raw theory in ASEEP fields has its place—*after* mastering performance through practice and rehearsal. A responsibility of a teacher is to translate the theory into exercises a student can do and learn from.

The results of practice and rehearsing theory-based exercises with discipline and diligence is fluency, expression, and creativity that come from conforming to the basics of the craft that the latest or hidden findings of a scientific approach may tell you about but cannot create. It's the difference between abstractly knowing a language's rules of grammar and fluently speaking it.

As Martha Graham said,

The dancer is realistic. His craft teaches him to be. Either the foot is pointed or it is not. No amount of dreaming will point it for you. This requires discipline, not drill, not something imposed from without, but discipline imposed by you yourself upon yourself.

Your goal is freedom. But freedom may only be achieved through discipline. In the studio you learn to conform, to submit yourself to the demands of your craft, so that you may finally be free. . . . And when a dancer is at the peak of his power, he has two lovely, powerful, perishable things. One is spontaneity, but it is something arrived at over years and years of training. It is not a mere chance. The other is simplicity, but that also is a different simplicity. It's the state of complete simplicity, costing no less than everything.

Doing this book's exercises will bring you this realism, freedom, power, spontaneity, and simplicity in leadership.

## Experiential Project-Based Learning

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The second field that influenced *Leadership Step by Step* was experiential, project-based learning. Since this field and its progenitors like Dewey and Montessori are better known, even among lecture-based educators, I'll just summarize its contribution.

Its main influences are prioritizing students' interests over content, engaging students by connecting the material to their lives and interests, learning by doing, drawing classwork from real-world practices, assessing progress with performance rather than testing, and using reflection to reinforce and expand on what they learned by doing.

These practices complement and augment progressions of exercises. Both fields have generations of success. They were waiting for someone to integrate them and apply them to leadership.

## Leadership Step by Step

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*Leadership Step by Step* teaches you to lead through what I call ASEEP-style learning:

A comprehensive, integrated progression of exercises from basics that require no experience to advanced ones that masters can benefit from continuing to practice, with no big jumps between.

I believe that, like Stanislavsky applying his system in acting, ASEEP-style learning will revolutionize leadership training. Instead of giving you answers, it gives you experiences that lead you to discover them for yourself. As one of my NYU graduate students put it,



I like that this course teaches leadership not just by reading theory but actually putting the theory into practice. In most classes we are forced to regurgitate information back to the professor, in this class we are taught to be self-accountable, which is a skill everyone should have. What I learned in this class will stick with me for life. . . . I would recommend this course not just to peers, but anyone interested in leadership. Honestly, even if you don't care about being a leader, this is the kind of class which can help anyone grow as a person, not only bettering themselves in terms of leadership, but also in terms of self actualization. The social skills you learn in this class have never been taught to me in an academic environment.

Although this book starts with basics, the exercises will help leaders and aspirants of all levels, like cardiovascular, balance, or strength exercises in sports—they are valuable for nearly any athlete at any level. Students reported that the exercises were greatly valuable, from undergraduates in their teens to CEOs in their 60s, from those with MBAs and other advanced degrees to those without college degrees, coming from many fields, many countries, and so on.

As Bethany, MBA, an associate partner at IBM who did the exercises in this book online, said,

From the very first lesson, Josh's course sets a tone of simple, self-exploration that felt different from other leadership courses to me because it was so customized to each individual's self-awareness. Each lesson builds on the last and you get out of it exactly what you put in. Each lesson is also very applicable across a wide spectrum of people in a variety of careers because the concepts are so universal. . . . The weekly exercises helped me put my current and long-term work stresses into perspective, because they focused on such small actions. They were bite-sized (in a sense) and weren't overwhelming so they were easy

to fold into my daily routine. Yet, they were extremely impactful.

Instead of preparing you for “real” life after commencement, *Leadership Step by Step* believes your life is real now and that you can lead now. You will do its exercises with people you care about on matters you care about. You will face and overcome low-stakes challenges so that when stakes are high, you can act from experience, not analysis.

To clarify, *Leadership Step by Step*'s exercises come from leadership practice, not acting or other fields, so you learn specific leadership skills while getting general Method Learning results like genuineness, authenticity, self-awareness, and empathy. Many of us have taken workshops like improv for leadership, art for leadership, and others. Many work—some tremendously well. They nonetheless have a limitation: If an improv for leadership workshop goes well, what do you do next? Learn more improv?

Learning leadership from leadership practices means that you can focus on your practice more. You can keep progressing in the same field. It also treats leadership like the art it is, in which you can express yourself fully.

An inspiration and influence was the leadership luminary (and my mentor) Marshall Goldsmith. His exercises *Feedforward* and *No, But, However* are leadership equivalents of piano scales. *Feedforward* develops skills in getting advice and building nonjudgmental relationships. *No, But, However* develops communication skills while raising self-awareness. *Leadership Step by Step* uses both, and all the exercises in the book follow their model. They are quick to learn, are simple (although not necessarily easy), and give value as long as you practice them. They are based in theory, which they teach. Marshall crafted them as carefully as any composer did a musical exercise.

Each chapter develops a set of skills, beliefs, and experiences.

Each has three parts—a story illustrating their importance, instructions for an exercise to develop them, and a post-exercise reflection. You learn between the chapters, doing the exercises and then reflecting.

As with any skill, you get out what you put in. As an actor once told me, “You show me the best actor in the room and I’ll show you the one who works the hardest.” *Leadership Step by Step* enables you to put in as much as you want. Chris, an entrepreneur and salesman who did the book’s exercises (and whose interviews you hear before and after each exercise in the online version), described how natural the exercises felt:

It also helped me start public speaking and very quickly landed my first, second, and third speaking gigs. I now have two-year contracts set up with major corporations all from using what Josh teaches in his leadership course. Again, to an outsider looking in on my progress it seems like it was difficult, the truth is the course exercises instilled in me passive progress that happens naturally. Building up to professional success was as enjoyable as the exercises in his course.

What about getting experience through life? Life does also give you experience, but not comprehensively, nor ordered for your education. Many who face challenges too soon conclude that they can’t lead—even if they could have handled the challenges with preparation and then flourished. *Leadership Step by Step* gives you challenges progressively, requiring no experience to start. By the end of the book, you will have practiced and mastered advanced, effective skills that even very experienced leaders don’t know.

Readers who don’t do the exercises will find *Leadership Step by Step* like any other leadership book—maybe confusing for not just stating facts. Students who want a richer experience can explore the online version available at [SpodekAcademy.com](http://SpodekAcademy.com), too, which

uses the same exercises as the book and the same software as the university courses. The online experience requires students to write and post reflections after each exercise, creating a community of accountability, sharing, and growth.

## What You Will Learn

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The progression of exercises is structured to take you smoothly from basic to advanced. One of my undergraduate students described the progression this way:

I found this structure very helpful as it provided us the opportunity to gain practical knowledge instead of textbook knowledge that could be acquired without having to take a course. The class allowed me to learn at my own pace, and really think about what was being taught in class outside of class. . . . I found myself being able to handle situations in team environments with much more effectiveness because I had a reference to the way I was participating in groups. I think Professor Spodek effectively redefined my understanding of leadership and of being a leader . . . He really provided perspective in that we use leadership every day in both encounters with others as well as within myself. Overall . . . an incredibly rewarding course that allowed me to challenge myself to strive for a better version of myself. . . . It required discovering what I wanted to learn through real-life encounters, as opposed to lecture-based classes in which many students only memorize concepts for the exam only to completely forget it in a couple months.

The progression contains four units: **Understanding Yourself, Leading Yourself, Understanding Others,** and **Leading Others.**

**Unit 1: Understanding Yourself** focuses on perceptions, beliefs, and thought processes. In this unit, you will develop a foundation of self-awareness of what you sense, think, and believe, as well as how your mental processes filter and process your world. The rest of the exercises build on this foundation.

**Unit 2: Leading Yourself** focuses on changing beliefs, changing habits, discovering and speaking your authentic voice, and personal development. In this unit you will start changing how you view the world and see how that change affects you. You'll develop habits in personal and professional development, communication, and attracting people to work with you.

**Unit 3: Understanding Others** generalizes to others what you learned about yourself in units 1 and 2. You will learn about the human emotional system—what leaders work with. In the process, you will learn how to act on it, including on yours, for more personal development. In this unit you'll start seeing the problems with “leading” through authority, such as how it motivates resentment, and work with more effective alternatives, such as making emotional connections.

**Unit 4: Leading Others** focuses on leading through empathy, compassion, listening, and supportive management that avoids micromanagement. This unit is the culmination of the exercises. You will learn to behave and communicate to attract others to your teams and then to inspire them to find meaning, value, importance, and purpose in their work. They will want to work effectively, produce quality, feel ownership, and thank you for it.

The results of doing the exercises is that you will develop an integrated leadership practice across all areas of your life—work,

friends, family, new acquaintances, and more. Ellen, former founder and CEO of a financial tech startup, describes the effects of these exercises:

For the past 10 weeks I have been working with my family to deal with placing my 93-year-old mother in a nursing home.

Normally I would have been angry and impatient with my siblings. I would have just grabbed control and charged ahead and probably ruined relationships with them forever. Instead, I was able to manage my feelings, see what was going on for them emotionally, and manage to the situation with the goal in mind. We moved my mother on Wednesday and it was amazing on so many levels. Joe, my husband, kept saying that I have been “transformed,” he kept saying I don’t know how you do this without wanting to kill everyone. My brother for the first time ever said I was wonderful and he was grateful. He thanked me. Most bizarre of all was that I really enjoyed working with my mother and my brother and husband. It was a joy!

And this was all going on as I started two consulting jobs. Not only am I having fun, but I think these may turn into full time jobs—can you imagine, I’m 66 and may have a real job leading the build-out of a new company.

## UNIT 1:

# Understanding Yourself

**Unit 1: Understanding Yourself** focuses on perception, beliefs, and thought processes. In this unit you will develop a foundation of self-awareness of what you sense, think, and believe, as well as how your mental processes filter and shape your world. The rest of the exercises build on this foundation.