

# LEADERSHIP STEP BY STEP

*by Joshua Spodek*

**T**he movie *The Iron Lady* shows an acting coach teaching Margaret Thatcher to speak, dress, and act more like a leader. Some may have dismissed such training as superficial, even if effective. I suggest such training was not only critical in making her one of the twentieth century's most important leaders, but that aspiring leaders should do far more of it.

The reason, though, has little to do with the sound of her voice.

## We Learn By Doing

You probably know the punchline about the lost tourist who asked a New Yorker how to get to Carnegie Hall: "Practice, practice, practice!"

We students of leadership could learn from it.

The punchline is funny because we know that practice is how to master musical performance. It wouldn't work if the New Yorker said, "Listen to lectures on music theory," "Read the latest research," or "Discuss case studies on Bach."

Some fields we can learn through traditional academic techniques, but not playing music. We teach playing music with basic exercises like scales, then intermediate exercises, then advanced. Instead of a teacher lecturing theory at the student, students learn both theory and practice by practicing. There is a lot of theory in scales—they aren't randomly hitting keys. Music teachers are seasoned masters, not academics. Most of all, the more you practice, the more you learn.

We teach many fields besides playing music through progressions of exercises. These include acting, dance, athletics, improv, and singing.

These fields have in common that they are active, social, emotional, expressive, and performance based. Each begins with its "scales," followed by its integrated, comprehensive progression of exercises from basics to mastery—what I call "method learning," after "method acting," which follows this structure and is known for creating genuine, authentic performance in which practitioners *become* the roles they play, such as Daniel Day-Lewis as Abraham Lincoln in the movie *Lincoln*.

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Tennis begins with ground strokes, dancing with footwork, and so on. In none do we mainly lecture, analyze case studies, write papers, or rely on other traditional academic approaches. You'd think anyone suggesting starting a student in any of these fields with a year or two of classroom lectures and case studies was crazy. Method fields use method learning at every level. When Tiger Woods changed his swing, he practiced with a coach. He didn't expect to improve by reading.

Watching Michael Phelps, listening to Vladimir Horowitz, and watching Meryl Streep show how effectively method learning works. Today's best performers started with the same basics and those who practice the most perform the best. As an actor told me, "You show me the best actor in a room and I'll show you the one who works hardest." Same with any method field.

*Leadership is a method field*, yet universities and business schools teach leadership like a traditional academic one. Researchers teach leadership in schools more than do seasoned masters. Unlike every other method field, leadership hasn't developed "scales" for students to practice, practice, practice. Most current leadership

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instruction is like lecturing piano students about music theory, assigning them to read about Mozart, and vague instruction like "Play with feeling!" or "You can do it!" It may not hurt, but no leader became great from knowing more theory or reading more academic papers.

Method learning teaches skills we leaders associate with leadership, like empathy, listening, self-awareness, discipline, and so on, but they are common to successful performers in all method fields. Traditional academic training generally talks *about* them without actually developing them. In fact, method learning teaches such skills so effectively that method-trained performers from outside leadership often lead better than people specifically trained to lead through traditional academic pedagogy. Whatever you think of his politics, actor-and-athlete-turned-President Ronald Reagan ranks near the top of presidential polls. Meanwhile, George W. Bush, with a traditional Yale BA and Harvard MBA, ranks near the bottom.

Many of today's top leaders foresaw futility, or at least limitations, in traditional academic education and left it: Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Sean Combs, Michael Dell, Richard Branson, Russell Simmons, Ralph Lauren, and Whole Foods Market's John Mackey, for example. Many were once athletes, musicians, actors, and performers of other method fields—Arnold Schwarzenegger, Al Franken, Gerald Ford, Muhammad Ali, and Jay-Z, for example. Meanwhile, Enron's Kenneth Lay had a traditional academic PhD in economics and his colleague Jeffrey Skilling a traditional Harvard MBA.

For schools to use traditional academic approaches makes sense historically. Leadership training as a field is younger than training in music, theater, and other method fields. Scales and other method exercises

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developed over centuries. We leaders are only beginning to develop equivalents, let alone progressions of them. Marshall Goldsmith stands out with his *Feedforward* and *No, But, However* exercises, which he teaches to his clients, workshop participants, and readers. More important, he has his students practice the exercises, not just listen to him or read about them.

Goldsmith states that *Feedforward* contributed significantly to his career, which includes *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling books and accolades from prominent media. He also decries traditional academic pedagogy. In his words:

The problem with most leadership training to me is you go sit in a room, you hear a lecture, and then you leave and there's an assumption that somehow your behavior is going to change. Most leadership training is based on the assumption that if people understand they will do. There's a huge gap between understanding and doing. And

in life our problem isn't understanding, it's doing. I think most people understand what we want to do, we just don't do it.

The sidebars in this article describe what to do. As with lifting weights for an athlete, only lifting them gives the benefit. Reading about it doesn't. Diligent, consistent practice leads to long-term results.

It takes a few minutes, but doing it several times each for several behavioral changes will teach you leadership skills you'll use your whole life that lecturing or case studies can't.

Mindfulness luminary Jon Kabat-Zinn also teaches practices that are useful to method leaders. He typically makes his lectures into workshops by having the room practice mindfulness exercises. His exercises differ from Goldsmith's, but he uses similar pedagogy and achieves similarly effective results: students develop new experiences, beliefs, and skills.

### Feedforward

*Feedforward* is Marshall Goldsmith's signature exercise. As an experiential exercise, you learn by doing it, but here is its core, in step-by-step instructions, to show the modest scale and type of exercise sufficient for him to base his successful career on.

1. **Identify** something behavior-related you want to improve.
2. **Identify** a person who can help and why that person would be helpful.
3. **Say** to him or her: "I'd like to improve [X]. You've seen me [do X] and others who are great at it. I wonder if you could give me two or three pieces of advice that could help me improve at it?"
4. **Write** them down. Clarify if necessary. Do not evaluate.
5. **Say**, "Thank you."
6. Optional: **Ask** for accountability.

For example, as a frequent public speaker, I might do it as follows:

1. I would identify public speaking as something to improve.
2. I'd identify people who saw me speak in public.
3. I'd say to one of them, "I'd like to improve my public speaking. You've seen me speak in public and others who are great at it. I wonder if you could give me two or three pieces of advice that could help me improve at it?"
4. I'd write their answer, asking clarification if necessary.
5. **I'd say**, "Thank you."
6. Say they recommended I tell more jokes. I might ask them to review a future presentation to make sure I included a few jokes.

### No, But, However

*No, But, However* is another Marshall Goldsmith exercise even easier to explain than *Feedforward*. Here it is, as I practice it:

Do not begin responses to others with the words “no,” “but,” or “however.”

That’s it. It takes no extra time, yet you learn from it—in listening, paying attention, verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and so on—things no book or lecture could teach. It also illustrates a common trait of method exercises—simple but not necessarily easy.

## Developing Method Leadership Exercises

Since cofounding my first venture while finishing my PhD more than twenty years ago, I have had leadership thrust upon me. In business school, more than ten years ago, I first learned you could learn leadership and didn’t have to be born a leader. Still, after business school I was struck by how ineffectively academic knowledge translated to actually leading. Anyone who prepares to negotiate, or perform any leadership task, by reading books but not practicing knows how quickly abstract knowledge abandons you under stress.

I then discovered *Feedforward* and found that practicing it improved my technique more than academic knowledge. I discovered *Three Raisins* and meditation and found that they taught me more about my mind, and the mind in general, than any psychology class—in particular, what I could use, not just know *about*. As I

began to mentor, coach, and teach, I transitioned from lecturing and using case studies to finding and creating relevant, effective exercises.

The more I looked, the more I found and created new ones. Practicing them developed in me the mind-set that anything anyone else could do, so could I, which I also developed in my students and clients. I just needed to replicate the experience successful practitioners learned from.

I also learned more about method learning, for example, by taking classes in Meisner Technique—a prominent technique of method acting instruction, known for its structured, integrated progression of exercises. I further learned pedagogy with roots in John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and other educators.

I saw that, unlike every other method field, leadership had no integrated, comprehensive progression of exercises, so I created one, borrowing from Goldsmith,

### Three Raisins

*Three Raisins* is a mindfulness exercise from Jon Kabat-Zinn. In under an hour, it gives much of the benefit and insight of meditating much longer.

1. Get three raisins. You can use raisin-sized pieces of other fruit if you prefer.
2. Block off an hour to turn off your phone and other distractions. You won’t take that long, but the cushion keeps you from feeling rushed.
3. During that hour, put the raisins in front of you and eat them as follows:
  - a. Imagine you’ve never seen one before.
  - b. Observe it with each sense in turn. Look at it, its folds, its color, and so on. Feel it in your fingers and how it moves when you squeeze it. Does it have a smell? Taste it before biting into it, then after. Feel it dissolve in your mouth. Does it make noise? And so on, with all your senses.
  - c. Start the next raisin only after swallowing all the remnants of the first.
4. If your attention drifts, return to sensing the raisins.

Kabat-Zinn, Meisner, Dewey, Montessori, and personal experience. Although there exists much Method Learning for leadership that draws from other method fields, like improv for leaders or jazz for leaders, I drew exercises from leadership practice. Though learning improv can help leaders, it doesn't help to keep learning improv forever.

## Developing Method Leadership Courses

The result is a set of method learning courses I've taught at New York University and Columbia University to undergraduates, graduates, and working professionals, as well as in workshops, in person, and online at SpodekAcademy.com.

My leadership course is based on a progression of twenty exercises, including the four featured in this article (you can do a fifth of the course already!), along with supporting material to motivate, illustrate, and follow up each exercise. I designed the exercises to build on each other with no big jumps (because they are isolated, the sidebar's examples don't exhibit this flow). Participants must also post reflections on each exercise to an online forum to advance to the next. Many alumni describe the forum as the course's most valuable part for internalizing and generalizing what they learned by doing, as well as making it a group learning experience.

The course divides into four units:

1. Understanding Yourself
2. Leading Yourself
3. Understanding Others
4. Leading Others

Doing the exercises results in a reader experienced in leading others with empathy, self-awareness, and all the aforementioned skills inherent to method learning to create meaning, value, purpose, and passion in his or her work. It gives you the experiences, skills, and beliefs of successful leaders. By connecting the existing motivations of those you lead to the team task, the leadership style leads them to feel gratitude toward you, often for working harder than they would

have otherwise. They feel like they are working for themselves, not you.

The course also develops personal leadership skills to create habits, speak authentically, be mindful, and more.

I have to modify my earlier statement that leadership was the only method field lacking a method-style progression of exercises. Entrepreneurship did too. I created a method learning course in entrepreneurial thinking and behavior, with more courses to come.

The course was released in February in book format, titled *Leadership Step by Step*, containing the same progression of exercises, though not the online forum and community.

## Conclusion

A representative student perspective of the course comes from this NYU graduate student:

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.

Students ranging from teenagers to seasoned executives and entrepreneurs describe the courses as unlike any they've taken and also more effective and transformative.

I'll close with another exercise you can practice, the foundation for Unit 4: Leading Others, called *Meaningful Connection*. (You can also see me teaching it to Marshall Goldsmith on a video online at Spodek Academy.)

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## Meaningful Connection

I developed the *Meaningful Connection* exercise to teach skills in networking, empathy, creating meaning, and so on. It's a simple script you can do in a few minutes. Practicing it a few times per day for a week will teach lasting skills no lecture or case study could. Here is the script:

1. Ask what their passion is, or what they like to do, besides work and family.
2. They will reply with something still fairly usual: travel, books, food, and so on.
3. Say "Cool... . You know, I know [someone you know] who [does X] for [their reason] and I know [someone else] who [does X] for [their reason]. Why do you [do X]?"
4. Listen in their response for two or three words that are unusual or stressed.
5. Respond to clarify what they said using those two or three words in your response.

Presenting the script in workshops nearly always prompts push-back on using the word *passion*—before trying the script. Doing it teaches experientially what no words could explain. As one student reflected *after* doing it:

At first I felt weird about using the word *passion*, but not anymore. I mean why? Everyone wants passion, so why would it be weird to say? Sometimes I got a response like "Ehm, my passion?" like "Passion? Really?," but when they saw I was being serious and sincere that changed to something that looked like "Well, maybe I do have a passion" and then they would start talking happily.

These experiences really deepen the belief that people are just like me, in the sense that our emotions and minds work the same way, at least.

It's useful in networking, interviewing, being interviewed, deepening team intimacy and collaboration, and more.

I could tell you the exercise's benefits, but you'll only get them if you practice. If you don't, you will only have read something interesting.

More generally, if you want to mentor, teach, coach, or otherwise lead others (or yourself), instead of giving answers, think of experiences that gave masters the answer. Then try to create exercises to replicate the experience of how they learned, preferably on a safe, small scale.

Above all, practice, practice, practice.



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