

The Key to Leadership: Practice, Practice, Practice

These tools will give you the hands-on leadership experience you need.

By Terrence Fernsler

LEADERSHIP STEP BY STEP: BECOME THE PERSON OTHERS FOLLOW

By Joshua Spodek. 246 pages. Hard cover. AMACOM, amacombooks.org.

When they think about leadership, too many people focus on individual leaders. They think of leaders as celebrities who have acquired lots of followers.

But that's not true leadership. A true leader values the full worth of all participants and motivates people to join together to accomplish things of value.

Joshua Spodek gets a lot right in his book *Leadership Step by Step*. He begins by acknowledging that you need to understand yourself – and sustain that understanding – to practice leadership. Without recognizing your own values, you'll misunderstand what you want others to do and can too easily focus on collecting followers rather than upholding core principles.

Spodek's book offers exercises to hone self-awareness, basic leadership skills, and more advanced paradigms such as servanthship, empathic communication, and shared leadership. Spodek's approach can be quite useful in developing new leaders and helping veteran leaders gain fresh perspectives. Try the exercises, beginning with where you are in his leadership continuum. The following is a great place to start:

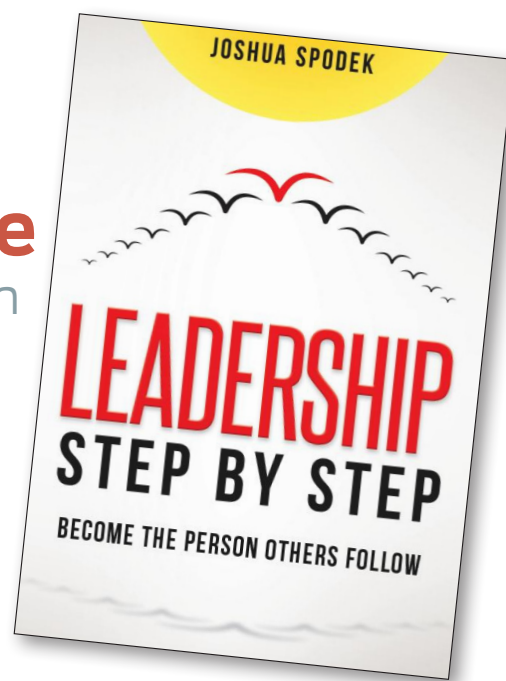
THE THREE RAISINS EXERCISE

1. Get three raisins. You can use raisin-sized pieces of other fruit if you prefer.

2. Block off an hour when you can turn off your phone and other distractions. You won't take that long, but the cushion keeps you from feeling rushed.

3. Put the three raisins in front of you and do the following:

- View each raisin, and imagine you've never seen one before. Observe it with all your senses.
- Eat the first raisin slowly. Start the second one only after completely swallowing the first.



4. Reflect on the experience. What did you observe about your senses and ability to focus? How might you apply your experience in the rest of your life? Can awareness of your senses extend to awareness of other parts of yourself and others? Can you see other things and people in a new way by paying more attention? What's the value of seeing nuances? What about the intricacies of communication with your staff and board? What might you be missing because you've stopped paying attention? Can you focus more of your awareness on the people you're leading?

5. Write a short essay about what you've learned.

6. Reread your essay, sleep on it, and edit it the next morning. Consider sharing it with someone and discussing your insights.

As Spodek notes, you'll learn things from such exercises that you'll never learn by reading. Only through practice does a person gain mastery. Practicing takes effort, but you'll emerge with greater self-awareness, which is fundamental to leadership and growth.

Spodek follows each exercise with the graphic of a stop sign and the exhortation, "Stop reading. Put the book down and do the exercise." That's because you can't gain the benefits of an activity by reading about it – although we all think we can! No, you must actually do it and then reflect on it. Step by step – that's the way to become a great leader.

Terrence Fernsler, MNPL, has been a nonprofit professional for over 30 years. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Strategic Leadership Studies at James Madison University, with a concentration in Nonprofit and Community Leadership, and instructor and advisor in the JMU Nonprofit Studies minor program.