



Over the holiday break, I had the opportunity to catch up with with Dr. Joshua Spodek, author of the upcoming book [Leadership Step by Step](#) and discuss emotional intelligence. The term gets thrown around a lot in the military, but I don't think a lot of us understand what exactly it means and why it's so important to leading successful organizations. So, I hope readers get as much out of this post as I did!

Joe: I've heard the term "emotional intelligence" mentioned in a lot of leadership conversations over the last couple of years, but what exactly does it mean?

Josh: Let me start with some examples.

Has your mind ever drifted while someone told you a story and she stops and says, “Is everything alright? You look like you drifted off.”

She couldn’t read your mind. That’s a simple form of emotional intelligence: she read your body language, facial expression, and other cues that told him your emotions.

Think of a basketball coach sensing that his players aren’t playing well together and talking to each separately to figure out how to get them to gel. It’s not a matter of strength or skill. They’re just as strong and skilled as the day before. The more emotional intelligence he has, the more likely he can find the issue. If he has enough emotional skills, he’ll be able to solve it.

Think of an athlete heading into competition—palms sweating, breathing fast, a sweaty brow. Does he read those cues as signs of being nervous or excited? Can he use them to compete better or do they lead him to doubt himself. Someone without emotional intelligence might fall apart while someone with it might use it to psych himself up.

The term *emotional intelligence* generally means the ability to read the emotions of other people and yourself.

Before continuing, I consider more important than knowing the term’s definition is having the skills and experience it alludes to. Many emotionally intelligent people don’t know the term. Many who know the term don’t have the skills or experience it refers to.

I don’t claim to be the most emotionally intelligent person in the world, but through practice I’ve come a long way. I can keep myself more calm under stress and sense how others feel and how I can help them. That sensitivity helps me in relationships of all sorts, including work, family, and significant others.

I’ve found developing emotional intelligence one of the greatest improvements to my

relationships, which is part of why I teach about emotions to people moving into leadership roles.

You can contrast it with being able to read people's behavior. It's easy to look at what someone is doing and tell *what* they're doing. It's more subtle to tell *why*—their relevant motivations and emotions.

Most people can read clear, simple emotions, like anger or joy. How well can you distinguish between anxiety, excitement, and fear? How about detecting emotions of someone trying to hide them?

The term has only existed about fifty years and popular for about twenty, so while it's widespread, it's not in everyday use. It hasn't been around long enough for people to test the concept rigorously and define it conclusively so people still use it vaguely or in conflicting ways.

I prefer to speak of more specific skills, like the ability to read people's facial expressions, vocal patterns, and so on, as well as awareness of how the human emotional system works. Focusing on low-level skills helps you develop them. Once you've learned to read enough facial expressions, body positions, and so on, emotional intelligence emerges, like learning to play the piano, once you practice enough, your understanding of musical theory begins to emerge.

Joe: Ok, so now that you've helped me better understand what it is, do you see emotional intelligence as a prerequisite to great leadership?

Josh: Many who work on emotional intelligence say that people who have more of it succeed more in team and leadership contexts, which means they succeed more professionally.

Like carpenters use tools to work on wood and mechanics use tools to work on cars, leaders

use emotional tools to work on people—specifically to motivate their behavior.

A leader being able to read emotions is like a mechanic being able to hear someone describe engine noises and figure out the problem. Think of the guys on *Car Talk* who could diagnose engine problems from their owners mimicking their noise. They had the car mechanic equivalent of emotional intelligence.

It also helps to have a model of the human emotional system, like it helps a mechanic to know about the internal combustion engine or a carpenter to know about trees, wood, and grain.

I consider emotional intelligence critically important for leading others and yourself. A manager can manage people's behavior through external incentives like raises or demotions. Leaders access people's emotions so they *want* to follow you, not *have to* to avoid punishment.

Still, I consider emotional intelligence only part of the picture—a critical part, but the passive part. The active part is what I call *emotional skill*—the ability to influence and change people's emotions, including your own.

Most people would agree Oprah Winfrey had a lot of emotional intelligence. We might not consider George Patton, with a nickname like “old blood and guts,” emotionally intelligent but his speech to the Third Army shows tremendous awareness of his troops' emotions and ability to motivate them, even to risk their lives. That's emotional skill.

Actors often have powerful emotional skills, meaning they can express their emotions effectively and evoke emotions in others. That's why we laugh and cry at movies despite knowing we're looking at projections of people we know were acting for a camera.

Joe: Does that mean we can improve emotional intelligence and skills?

Josh: Yes!

Thinking that people must be born with emotional intelligence and skill is like thinking people lift weights because they're strong. It's the opposite. They're strong because they lift weights. People develop emotional intelligence and skill through experience too. My book and courses are designed to give people those experiences.

Most academic researchers haven't led or acted so they can't teach from experience. They don't teach emotional awareness or skills. They teach *about* emotions but not *how to use* them, which is like teaching musical theory but not how to play the piano.

By contrast, teachers in fields that use emotionally active techniques see their students develop emotional and social skills. Acting is an example of such a field, but all active, social, emotional, expressive, performance-based fields can develop emotional intelligence and skills. Other such fields include athletics, improv, playing musical instruments, dance, and, of course, the military. Many emerge from such fields mature, expressive, genuine, and authentic—all signs of emotional skills.

Nobody would think of trying to teach someone to play piano, play basketball, or be a Soldier principally by lecture, case study, reading, or writing papers.

Sadly, since many people look to business schools and other institutions based in traditional passive academic techniques, they wonder if people can learn to lead. Meanwhile, schools that teach people to perform experientially consistently produce people with emotional intelligence and skills. They don't *guarantee* you'll develop them, but they give direction. From there, you get out what you put in.

Joe: That's great news! So, what are some ways we can improve or increase our emotional intelligence and skills?

Josh: Like all skills, you develop them through practice and rehearsal.

We know what works because we see what works in every similar field:

An integrated, comprehensive progression of exercises starting from the basics to advanced, where you advance to new stages by mastering previous ones.

That's how you learn to piano, basketball, and dance. It's why you start with *basic* training and then *advanced* individual training.

I created my courses because I saw no resources—no book, course, video, or anything—with an integrated, comprehensive progression of exercises for the emotional and social skills of business leadership. My courses are based in such progressions. I see my students develop emotional skills like empathy, compassion, reading emotions, speaking authentically, and so on.

I recommend to those military leaders interested in emotional intelligence to be wary of just reading books or watching videos on the topic and to make sure there is an emotionally, socially active component to their practice. Continuing the lifting weights analogy (or any complex skill), reading about weights doesn't make you strong. Too many people read lots of books about lifting, but *actually lifting* teaches more about what works, anatomy, discipline, resilience, and so on. Plus it creates access to more community and friends. A book or two may help get you started, but then spend more time applying and practicing before reading more books. My book tells you to put it down and do each exercise with people in your life on projects you care about. Most people take months to work through the exercises, which is how long skills take to develop. Through leadership activities you complete on your own, you will begin acquiring and mastering emotional intelligence skills.

In principle, anyone can do them. In practice, only the disciplined and diligent do. Their reward is the ability to know what they want in life and to lead others to help them achieve

it.

Joshua Spodek is an Adjunct Professor at NYU, leadership coach and workshop leader for Columbia Business School, columnist for Inc., founder of [Spodek Academy](#), and author of [Leadership Step by Step](#) (launching February 2017).

He has led seminars in leadership, entrepreneurship, creativity, and sales at Harvard, Princeton, MIT, INSEAD (Singapore), the New York Academy of Science, and in private corporations. He holds five Ivy League degrees, including a PhD in Astrophysics and an MBA, and studied under a Nobel Prize winner. He helped build an X-ray observational satellite for NASA, co-founded and led as CEO or COO several ventures, and holds six patents.

If you'd like to learn more about Joshua Spodek, his book, or take one of his online courses on emotional intelligence, check out his website <http://www.Joshuaspodek.com>

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