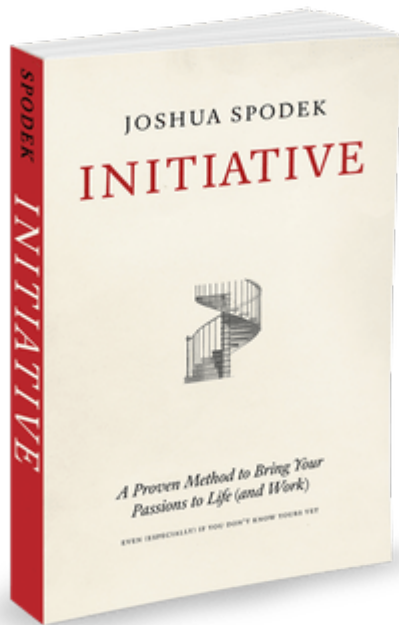




By Joshua Spodek

Chatting about my upcoming book, [*Initiative*](#), a friend and fellow blogger, Joe Byerly of [From The Green Notebook](#), asked if people could learn to take initiative. I saw his question as rhetorical, since he'd read an advance copy, so he knew I'd taught just that, but he wanted to see how I'd answer. A lot of people believe you can't.



First, there's a big reason why, independent of the answer, most of us would believe we can't learn initiative: **mainstream schooling**.

For whatever facts, analytical, and testing skills schools teach, if you look at the behavior they teach, it's compliance — nearly the opposite of initiative: when you have to attend, where, what subjects you study, what about each subject to study, how to study, how to act, how to show what you've learned, and so on. Schools mostly teach the opposite of initiative. They often punish initiative.

Second, bring up initiative in the U.S. and most people will default to talking about entrepreneurship, which is only one subset of taking initiative, and they'll focus on ideas. Most resources that purport to teach initiative teach developing ideas — only one part of initiating.

Since not everyone comes up with ideas out of the blue, many resources *discourage* taking initiative. Reinforcing the myth that you need an idea to start increases barriers to start. Most resources, such as the [Lean methodology](#) and Shark Tank and its peers require an idea and team to start.

Reinforcing barriers keeps potentially able people who haven't yet come up with ideas and teams from starting. Not being able to overcome added barriers doesn't mean people can't take initiative. It may just mean they can't or don't want to overcome the unnecessary extra barriers.

Moreover, focusing on commercial initiative leads many who might initiate noncommercial projects they'd love and might improve the world not to start.

A crack in the foundation

I've taught and coached entrepreneurship for a decade. Before taking my courses, few students or clients knew that my courses would require them to start a project. In other words, many started without an idea or team.

Across the board they succeed. I don't lecture at them. I'll share below what I do. First I'll describe their results.

People who started my course with no expectation they'd start a project, let alone have an idea, have created projects leading to coverage in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Forbes, Inc., and TechCrunch. They've received funding from Harvard, Eric Schmidt from Google, and Mark Zuckerberg from Facebook. One gave a TEDx talk on his project and was named a Dalai Lama fellow. Another spoke at Harvard on hers. One recently returned from Y Combinator.

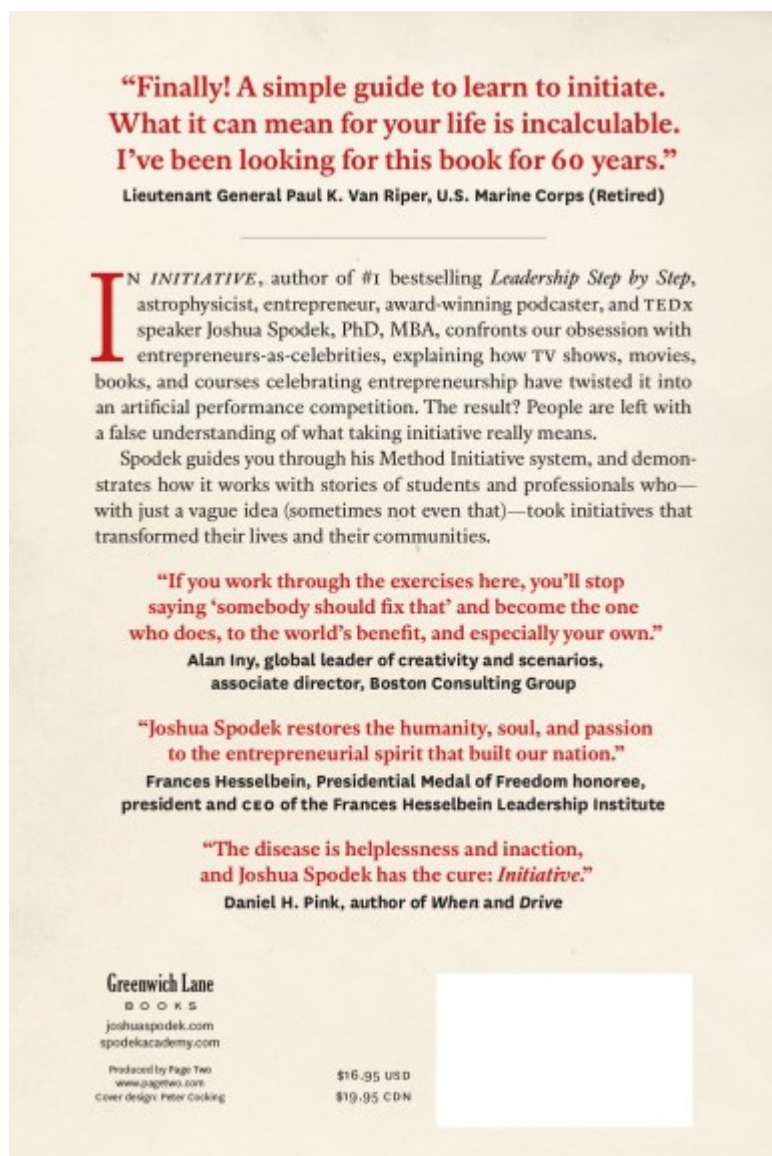
Several clients created projects within firms where they worked that led to new

responsibilities, promotions, and raises. That is, they didn't start companies, but they the did initiate. Their success reinforces why learning initiative is broader than just learning entrepreneurship.

I conclude that yes, you can learn initiative, but not through lecture, case study, facts, figures, reading papers, writing papers, and other traditional classroom techniques.

How

I teach taking initiative as a performance-based field, like acting, sports, playing an instrument, or the military. No such field starts with lecture, case study, facts, figures, reading papers, writing papers, and other traditional classroom techniques.



Initiative's back cover

They start by having you practice the basics, then intermediate exercises, and so on to mastery. Practicing the basics looks mechanical, like playing scales on the piano or practicing ground strokes in tennis. It looks like magic from the outside, but mastering each level leads people who practice enough to express themselves with genuineness, authenticity, and confidence.

People ask if taking initiative can be learned or taught because nearly no institution or resource teaches it and the ones that try to often inadvertently discourage it.

My book and the course I base it on teach the equivalent of scales and ground strokes for taking initiative — that is, exercises that teach and practice the basics. Actually, a progression of exercises, starting with things anyone can do, advancing to mastery.

You can teach people to take initiative the way you'd teach them to play an instrument, act, practice the military, or play a sport: practice the basics and keep advancing until mastery.

That's why they call it basic training. However basic it begins, keeping at it leads to leadership and mastery of the field.

My book, [Initiative](#), describes a progression of exercises that, if you do them, will develop in you the skills, experiences, and beliefs of an effective initiator.

My passion

Imagine you lived in a world where everyone taught piano by putting the aspiring students in classroom, seated in rows, and forced them to listen to lectures, read and write papers, prepare and discuss case studies, and so on but didn't have them play.

Some might learn but most wouldn't. Even fewer would enjoy it and keep it up beyond what the system coerced them to.

Now imagine in that world, you developed scales to practice, then simple songs, then more complex ones and so on — that is, imagine you developed how to teach as we do today.

You would teach piano effectively. On seeing the results, you might feel inspired to spread

the technique so everyone could benefit from it.

That's how I feel. In a world devoid of effective initiative education (actually filled with effective initiative discouragement), I've found a tried-and-true method that gets results many wish for but thought impossible. I wrote the book not just to answer my friend's original question, "can you learn to take initiative?", but to enable them.

Welcome to my world.

If you want to learn to take initiative, I recommend practicing my book's exercises.

This post originally appeared on JoshuaSpodek.com on 13MAY19 and he's granted us permission to share on FTGN.

Joshua Spodek, PhD MBA, TEDx speaker, wrote the #1 bestselling [Leadership Step by Step](#), hosts the award-winning [Leadership and the Environment](#) podcast, is a professor at NYU, writes a column for Inc., and blogs daily at joshuaspedek.com.

He holds five Ivy League degrees, including a PhD in astrophysics and an MBA from Columbia, where he studied under a Nobel Laureate. He left academia to found a venture to market an invention that showed animated images to subway riders between stations.

He teaches and coaches leadership and entrepreneurship at NYU and Columbia Business School. He has spoken at Harvard, Princeton, West Point, MIT, BCG, PwC, S&P, and IBM.

Appearing on every major network, the NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and more, he has been called "best and brightest" in Esquire's Genius issue, "astrophysicist turned new media whiz" by NBC, and "rocket scientist" by Forbes and ABC.

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