

Life Lessons Learned from Golf

In a recent New York Times article, columnist Thomas Friedman compared golf to life. He said that golf is the sport most like life and explained that “baseball, basketball and football are played on flat surfaces designed to give true bounces. Golf is played on an uneven terrain designed to surprise. Good and bad bounces are built into the essence of the game. And the reason golf is so much like life is that the game — like life — is all about how you react to those good and bad bounces”.

At the risk of using another tired sports analogy, and in spite of the fact that I’m not an especially good golfer, I can’t help reflecting on Friedman’s article. At a recent golf outing with some members of The Presidents Forum, we discussed the article and I asked what they liked about golf. Most of these business leaders, like me, are infrequent golfers. They gave answers like: “Each shot is unpredictable, which makes it exciting”. Another said, “Golf says a lot about ones character; how you play the game and how you handle the mistakes is what counts”. Another told me, “You can be perfect and still not win”. He told the story of a recent proposal his company submitted. His organization had the skills and expertise, addressed all of the points, had the low price, but still did not get the contract.

The lessons of Friedman’s article have merit in our professional lives. How do we prepare ourselves for the good, the bad and the unpredictable bounces in our workday? Like business leaders, golfers rely on their own skills but also seek help from others to succeed e.g. coaches, mentors, and peers. For professional golfers to succeed, they must have the right tools, the right training and the right attitude. As business professionals, we also need these three:

Tools

Do we have the resources to get the job done? Innovation can help us drive further. Technology can improve our productivity if we know how to use it correctly.

Training

Coaching, seminars and continuing education are all important if we want to stay at the top of our game. Networking can be both a valuable tool and a training aid if we contact knowledgeable, experienced professionals.

Attitude

A winning combination of optimism, enthusiasm and competitiveness coupled with concentration are critical skills. Developing great habits can set us apart if we learn to repeat best practice, day in and day out.

Of these three, developing a great attitude may be the most important but also the most difficult attribute to acquire. Without it we can't deal effectively with the things that go wrong each day. We may plan properly and execute flawlessly and still miss the target. Professional golfers may play a bad hole but must shake it off and move on. We need to do the same: get up, reassess and get back in the game.

I believe that the only way to achieve a winning attitude is through self awareness and mental toughness and I'm not alone in this belief. The members of The Presidents Forum suggested we cover 'developing a winning attitude' in an upcoming meeting. It takes great discipline to control our own feelings, remain focused, and project a winning attitude no matter what happens. As baseball great Yogi Berra allegedly said in one of his infamous sayings, "It's ninety percent mental and the other half is physical".

Even though I golf infrequently, each time I sling the golf bag from the trunk to my shoulder, there is optimism and hope that this round will be better than the last. At least once during a round of golf, I hit a shot better than my talents would suggest. This reminds me that we are all capable of more than we think is possible. Tools and training can help achieve our objectives but it is a great attitude that drives us to attain our stretch goals.

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