



## Leadership As Golf

Don't get careless when it comes to the basics.

By William B. Locander and David L. Luechauer

**THIS SERIES** of articles is based on the premise that metaphors and similes provide a prism for viewing the familiar in new and enlightening ways. Therefore, we'll turn our attention to an activity that many sales and marketing executives have some experience with—golf. Whether you play once a year in the company outing, play once a month with clients, or are a fanatic who plays every day, golf provides a means for exploring leadership and imparting valuable lessons for the leadership journey.

### Grip, Stance, and Alignment

Whether they've just won a prestigious tournament or are struggling to make the next cut, even the greatest players work on the basics of their craft. In fact, a visit to the driving range at a tournament will quickly reveal that seasoned professionals spend as much or more time working on grip, stance, alignment, and tempo as they do on the finer nuances of their games. Why does the professional golfer focus so much attention on aspects that an amateur rarely even considers? The professional knows that the fundamentals are among the first things to break down under pressure even though he or she often repeats them during a round or a tournament. More importantly, professionals know that it's easy to get careless with the basics. Let's see what sales and marketing executives can learn from the notions of grip, stance, and alignment.

Golfers have used three basic grips over the years: (1) the classic interlocking grip, (2) the Vardon or overlap grip, and (3) the 10-finger or baseball grip. Interestingly, no one technique ensures success in either golf or leadership. Leaders might find that some situations require the "control" of an interlocking grip whereas others demand the unconventional-ity of the 10-finger grip. The method of gripping a club has leadership parallels, but grip pressure is of more importance to sales and marketing executives. The player who holds the club too tightly will create stress that reduces both distance and accuracy.

Likewise, the leader who exerts too much pressure through micromanagement or the setting of impossible goals will also end up in such rough spots as decreased productivity and poor morale.

Conversely, the player who holds the club too loosely will run the risk of throwing the club farther down the fairway than he or she hits the ball! Likewise, managers who practice laissez-faire leadership or abdicate their responsibilities will end up with employees who pursue their own myopic agendas rather than contribute to team performance. Thus, golfers and leaders must find both the right grip technique and the correct pressure to retain control—while allowing fluidity in the swing and organization. We addressed a similar idea in a previous article ("Free Reign," July/August 2005, *Marketing Management*), which discussed the importance of leaders having simultaneously loose and tight properties in their organizational, reward, and control structures.

A golfer's stance usually influences the direction in which the ball will fly. Therefore, pros and good amateurs know that standing on an uphill, downhill, or sidehill lie (not to mention having an open or closed stance) will determine the extent to which the ball flies high, low, left, or right. In business settings, one of the most frequent complaints we hear from our students and clients is that they simply have no idea where their leaders stand on everything from mundane to highly important corporate issues. Moreover, they often report that their leaders state one thing but do another. Golfers need to know where and how they are standing when they hit their shots, or they will end up off-line. Likewise, subordinates need to know where their leaders stand, and leaders reveal more by what they do than what they state.

Alignment is closely related to stance. The notion of railroad tracks is the most common golfing metaphor people use to describe the importance of having feet, hips, and shoulders parallel to the desired line of flight. In golf, the target to which one

is aligned has perhaps the most influence on where the ball will end up. However, paradoxically, golfers who align right of the intended target often end up with a ball that lands well left of the desired destination and vice versa. In leadership, one can liken alignment to a number of fundamental processes but the basic question is this: Does the leader align his or her thoughts, words, and deeds with the direction he or she wants to go? Sadly, we have witnessed too many leaders enacting practices that don't align with the visions they espouse and the goals they create.

For example, many sales and marketing executives espouse the importance of teamwork and community, but then implement reward structures that

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provide individual-level incentives. They act surprised when conflict and chaos ensue. It's very easy to "get out of alignment" in business and golf. Some teaching professionals suggest that at 200 yards, a player who is off merely one degree in alignment will end up hitting the ball 20 or more yards away from the desired target. Thus, golfers and marketing leaders must constantly work to see that they align and work to facilitate alignment with key objectives and outcomes.

When it comes to mastering the fundamentals, the approach that the professional golfer takes has much to teach sales and marketing executives. Most professionals will tell you that too many thoughts throughout the swing (arm straight, head down, trees left, water right, blah, blah, blah) distract the amateur golfer. Such players become paralyzed and, if enough of them get on the course at the same time, a simple round of golf can become an all-day experience. Sales and marketing executives often make the same mistake by focusing their teams' efforts on the nonessential and getting too many initiatives going at one time. Fast and furious is not a good method for the golfer or the executive. Keep it simple, and pick a few key fundamental areas of focus and continually work on them. No matter how good you become, never stray far from them.

### **Take Dead Aim**

Harvey Penick was a soft-spoken, humble-but-wise instructor to such golfing luminaries as Ben

Crenshaw, Tom Kite, and Kathy Whitworth. *Harvey Penick's Little Red Book: Lessons and Teachings From a Lifetime of Golf* (Simon & Schuster, 1993) is the best-selling golf book of all time. It's filled with tidbits such as "hole them all" and "take dead aim." What does it mean to take dead aim and why is this notion important to leaders? In golf, taking dead aim means focusing all your attention on where you want the ball to go rather than what you want to avoid and then swinging in a manner that will propel the ball to that place. The easiest way to spot someone not taking dead aim is to watch what happens when he or she approaches a water hole. The poor player will root through the bag, find the least expensive and oldest ball, place it on the tee, and (after 40 or 50 practice swings) hit it right smack in the water. The process will be repeated every time the player comes to a hole with water, and 99 times out of 100 the result will be the same. Why?

One possible answer is lack of talent. Fortunately, psychologists tell us there might be more to it than that. It's called the power of intention. In this case, the player is more concerned about where he or she doesn't want the ball to go than where he or she wants it to go. Ironically, the more concerned the player becomes about "not going somewhere," the more he or she is actually programming the body to swing in a manner that hits it there. Rarely, if ever, will you hear a great player say, "I am trying to avoid ... ." Rather, the great player is focused on a good result and usually makes the shot.

Sales and marketing executives can learn from taking dead aim and from the power of intention. They should ask themselves, "Am I spending more time avoiding failures and hazards than I am on producing results? Am I focusing more on problems than opportunities?" The answers are "yes" for many of the executives because a long-accepted notion suggests that they typically spend 80% of their time on 20% of their problems. A quick look at your company policy manuals will probably reveal 100 or so pages on what it doesn't want to happen and the incumbent consequences; less than a page or two will be devoted to what should happen or what the company desires. In golf and leadership, we usually end up where we focus our attention. Therefore, stop leading away from what you don't want and start leading toward what you do want.

### **Rub of the Green!**

Despite the players' intentions and attention,

golf is a unique sport because it allows chance occurrences to affect performance. The rule book calls these occurrences the rub of the green. Sometimes the best shots take an unlucky bounce into a hazard and the worst shots bounce off trees, carts, and even people and land in the hole. The outcome has nothing to do with the golfer's talent, intention, or attention. The same is true for leadership. The most noble and best of leaders have been felled by bullets from single narrow-minded opponents. Likewise, years spent in meticulous planning can still result in products that go to market with the wrong timing or that don't address sudden changes in customer preferences.

Golf and leadership are both journeys. Golfer Ben Hogan once stated that in his prime no more than seven to 10 shots came off exactly as planned. There can be no doubt that being a marketing or sales executive is serious business with serious consequences. However, those who take themselves too seriously will sadly find that the rub of the green more often goes against them than for them. So lighten up, learn to take the good with the bad, and remember that sage advice that states that there are only two rules in life: (1) Don't sweat the small stuff and (2) it's all small stuff.

## Play by the Rules

No article that explores the linkage between golf and leadership would be complete without noting that golf is unique because players are ultimately responsible for knowing, playing by, and enforcing the rules—even on themselves. In the 1920s, a self-imposed penalty cost Bobby Jones a fifth U.S. Open title. Jones believed his ball moved during a chip shot. No one else witnessed the infraction, but Jones insisted it occurred and assessed himself a one-stroke penalty. Downplaying his integrity, Jones said, "You'd as well praise me for not breaking into banks. There is only one way to play this game."

Wouldn't it be a wonderful world if our corporate, civic, political, and even not-for-profit leaders applied the same standard of personal conduct to themselves? Obviously, most executives don't seem to embrace Jones' standard because Mark H. McCormack takes the time in his book, *What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School* (HarperCollins Business, 1986), to tell readers that they should never enter business deals with those they see cheating during a round of golf, even

though it will narrow the pool of people with whom to make deals. As a young caddy, David Luechauer sadly remembers the number of doctors, lawyers, and business leaders who were more competent with their "foot wedges" than any other club in the bag. He could never understand why people entrusted bankers with accounting for millions of dollars even though the latter regularly swore to making a five on a hole when it was actually a six, seven, or eight! Perhaps this is why a recent study out of Nebraska found that inmates in a state prison scored higher on an ethical standards and moral reasoning test than graduate business students. If people will cheat their friends over a \$2 Nassau tournament on Saturday morning, it makes one wonder what they're capable of in the high-pressure world of sales and marketing. Instead of the inmates running the asylum, perhaps that sentiment should now read "future inmates are running our corporations, churches, governments, and more." Perhaps we shouldn't spend so much time conducting interviews; maybe we should simply take applicants out for a round of golf.

## How You Play the Game

An often-repeated quote, attributed to numerous people, is: "Nowhere does a person go so naked before others as on the golf course." To this end, playing even a few holes with others will quickly reveal whether they (1) have correct fundamentals, (2) cope with environmental variances, (3) handle fortune or adversity with equanimity, and (4) play by the rules. The same level of nakedness is also true for those who hold or aspire to leadership positions. Sales and marketing executives would be wise to remember that they reveal their light and shadow sides every day and in countless ways to those under their charge. Therefore, after the next round of golf, maybe we should skip the regular 19th hole libations to go ponder, "What does the way we play golf say about the way we lead?" ■

## About the Authors

**William B. Locander** is the founding director of The Davis Center for Leadership Development at Jacksonville University in Florida. He may be reached at [wlocand@ju.edu](mailto:wlocand@ju.edu). **David L. Luechauer** is an associate professor of leadership and the management area coordinator at Jacksonville University. He may be reached at [dluecha@ju.edu](mailto:dluecha@ju.edu).