



Leadership Lessons from the Golf Course

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene.

I've long tuned out the golf stories told by the avid golfers in my personal and professional circles. "Not my game," I'd tell myself. "If I have three or more free hours on a

weekend day, I'd rather be doing (fill in the blank with myriad other activities)," I'd mutter under my breath.

Until I started golf lessons two months ago.

Since then, I've not only fallen prey to the same obsession with improving my game that I've teased others about all these years, I've also noticed several principles at work that have applicability to another passion in my life – leadership.

Adopt a Growth Mindset. [Carol Dweck's research](#) demonstrates that with few exceptions, most areas of our life can be enhanced by a "growth mindset." Those with a growth mindset see talent and skill level as changeable through effort. Even the most challenging performance situations present opportunities to learn and improve. But oftentimes we act as our own worst enemy by internalizing a sub-par (pun intended) performance as a damning indication of a lack of ability – what she calls a "fixed mindset."

I've struggled with a fixed mindset a shocking number of times in just two months of golfing. Early on, I displayed what I interpreted to be a "natural ability" to putt well on the practice green and to hit the ball from the driving range. A close friend egged me on further by labelling me "the best beginning golfer" he'd ever seen.

Enter my golf coach. And digital analysis of my swing. And several rounds of "real golf." As the negative feedback from my coach and my experiences on the course piled up, I fought my way through disappointment and a nagging sense of "maybe I just don't have it."

Some of you seasoned golfers in my reader audience may be laughing at the audacity

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of a wet-behind-the-ears golfer like me reaching such spurious conclusions of either having it/not having it. But I did. Until I spotted the fixed mindset behind both my positive and negative attributions. I used that insight to reframe my expectations from "I'm a natural/I'm not a natural" to "There's a learning curve here – give it time."

This principle calls to mind debates I have had while teaching leadership classes: the classic "nature versus nurture" argument for leadership. In short, is effective leadership a quality that acts more like a trait (e.g. some people are born leaders) or is it a set of skills that can be developed?

My own personal experience suggests the answer is "both." And that situational demands need to be considered (e.g. the kind of leadership the business or organizational context requires). But since we can't do anything about our possession of a hypothetical leadership gene, we need

to focus on the leadership skills we can cultivate – with the help of a growth mindset.

And I suspect the same principle is at work with golf.

Focus on a Few New Skills at a Time.

I've had a lot of fun sharing my newly found love of golf with friends, family and even clients. As we compare notes on our respective levels of proficiency and experience, typically the other person will begin to give me advice. Well-intentioned tips on various swing mechanics seems to be a favorite area of commentary given I am such a novice.

I could be wrong about this, but based on the massive amounts of unsolicited advice I've received on my swing, there seem to be about 236 different elements to good swing mechanics. And countless online videos back up that observation. Just as there are countless leadership pundits, books, and online resources available to guide developing leaders on the "mechanics" of good leadership.

Yet as the swing advice continued to pour in, I felt overwhelmed. I'd stand at the tee, club in hand, frozen as I tried to remember how far apart to place my feet and where

and when, how in the world my hips were supposed to lead, and what kind of rotation to get in my shoulders – all as I struggled to keep my head down and my left arm straight on my backswing. I'm exhausted just recounting it.

Now, all those elements are important to a good swing. I'm confident of that. But one day, I found myself repeating: "I'm just working on head, shoulders and arms right now" – a sort of mantra as I stood at the tee. (It helped that my golf coach told me as long as my upper body was moving right, my lower body would follow – just like with a cadaver. Very motivational metaphor!) As I did so, my head cleared and the tension eased. After that, I made a pact with myself to take my skill building a few elements at a time. And once I've sufficiently mastered the first three mechanics I've picked out, I'll move on to several more.

As a developing leader, it's important to do the same – to select one, two or at most, three areas of focus for your change efforts. Start with some fundamentals such as having a "why" to share for every significant piece of strategy or decision-making, ensuring you create openings for others in conversations as much (or more) than you talk, and/or mastering the art of telling a great story as a way to inspire. And once

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to position the ball between them based on which club I had, how to move my knees

you've accomplished those goals, take on some more.

This realization isn't just based on my personal experiences as developing golfer and seasoned leadership coach. Some great research has demonstrated that new skill acquisition works best by starting with [one or two new skills](#) at a time. And stick with it until you reach the level of proficiency you want (estimates for new skill acquisition range from [Josh Kaufman's estimate of 20 hours](#) to Malcolm Gladwell's hotly debated "10,000 hours" principle to success in [Outliers](#)...I'm banking on Josh.)

Relax Your Grip. Among the best advice I've received is to relax my grip on the club. As a beginner, I found myself gripping hard as I swung – so hard that the middle joint on my right-hand pinky finger became painfully swollen. I mean, it's called a "drive" for a reason, right? You need to grip that club hard and swing it with force.

Not so fast. One of my well-meaning, unpaid advisors (who doubles as my older

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brother) introduced the metaphor of holding the club with the same amount of pressure that you would hold a bird. A

whole new mental model emerged for me. And my drives got better.

Similarly, I find that many developing leaders struggle with relaxing their grip. Many of them have distinguished themselves as great executors of *stuff*, the individuals on a team who will always deliver. As a leader, the objective is still to deliver but to do so through bringing the best in those you lead to the forefront - to relax your grip on the *how* while providing just enough of the *what and why* to hold them.

Make Peace with the Spotlight. This principle comes directly from my golf coach, Kim. At our first group lesson, he put us to work on making a long putt one-by-one in front of the whole class. Noticing the cringes on the assorted faces around the circle, he said "Listen, you're going to have to get used to it. You can't play golf unless you can do it in front of other people. That's just the nature of the game."

That's not just true for golf pros who make their living by playing in front of crowds. Amble over to your local golf course at most any time of the day to play a quick 9 holes and you will likely be matched up with a couple of strangers in an impromptu act of sports matchmaking...not to mention the folks who are waiting behind your group as you tee off because the course has gotten backed up.

Kim's admonishment has a lot of relevance to the leadership arena as well. As a leader, you have got to get comfortable "playing" in front of others. Your leadership will naturally be a focus when you're formally on stage giving a presentation or leading a team meeting. But what many developing leaders are unprepared for is the extent to which their daily leadership acts will be dissected and discussed by others. As I've said [elsewhere](#), once you are a leader, your employees' eyes will follow most every move you make. So, you've got to find a way to get comfortable with it.

I've found that breathing deeply as I stand at the tee and reminding myself that everyone was a beginner at some point helps (there's that growth mindset again). But I'm still working on this one.

Even the Best Golfers Have Coaches.

This last principle comes directly from a current client of mine (who gave me permission to recount it here). As we discussed my learning process, which includes lessons with a golf pro, he said,

"Listen, even the best golfers in the world have a golf coach. They are never done working on their game. They just keep finding ways to get better." As I signaled my gratitude for that point, he went on, "Just like with your business as a leadership coach, even very experienced leaders still need a coach to keep them sharp, to point out the ways in which their 'leadership game' can get better." I paused in admiration for his deft skills with that analogy.

Then I recalled a memorable [2013 Stanford Graduate School of Business Survey](#) of more than 200 CEOs, board directors, and senior executives which found that while "nearly 100% of CEOs said they would enjoy the process of receiving coaching and

leadership advice...two-thirds of CEOs do not receive [it]." So, while my experience suggests that many developing leaders at other levels have access to coaching, perhaps we have more room to grow in the C-suite?

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