

By Beth Williams (Written for Future Tycoon)

Perhaps the number one reason golf is such an important tool in today's business world can best be summed up in one simple yet powerful sentence. Golf is all about character. It's not about the best or the worst score, how many strokes it took to hit the green or who made the best shot of the day. Golf is all about how you deal with the constant changes and challenges the game throws your way during 18 holes. How you deal with those twists and turns on the golf course, whether you realize it or not, will reveal more about your character to potential clients and potential employers than you might ever have imagined.

One of the biggest misconceptions about the business world today is the golf course is where the mega-mergers and big deals are struck. However, in reality, a game with potential clients or partners is only the first, and possibly the most important, step to those big deals.

"I've been playing golf for 47 years, and there are not the business deals everyone talks about. They (businesspeople) use the golf course to find a person's true character whether for business or for hiring," Mark Oman said.

Oman should know. A former caddy with the pros, Oman is now a motivational speaker who regularly presents seminars on golf and business including "How to Succeed at Business Golf Without Really Trying." He's also a business and golf columnist for "Business in the West Magazine."

Golf is a great tool to learn how people respond to difficult situations, Oman noted. "When everything is going great, it's easy to have a great attitude. When things are tough, how do you respond then?"

Jeff Wuorio, author of several books including "CNBC Guide to Money and Markets," agrees. "Golf is a way to get to know somebody better. Golf can be a very telling venue to learn about a person. How patient are they? How honest are they?"

In fact, golf is very much like business, and what you learn about yourself on the golf course will prove invaluable in the boardroom. Oman pointed out that there are only three challenges in both business and life: man versus man, man versus nature and man versus himself.

“On the golf course, you get to face all three and get to play it out in 18 holes. In business, it takes years to play through those challenges.”

Like golf, “most of business is out of your control. What did you learn when you got in trouble? What did you find out? Did you fold? Did the pressure get to you, or did you find a creative way to get out?” Oman said.

The right mentality is important on both the golf course and in business.

“Think first what you can bring to this client and not the other way around. Always emphasize what you bring, what you can offer to the other person, and you will be rewarded ten-fold,” Wuorio said.

By caring about the other person, you’re showing your honesty and integrity, and that goes a long way especially since honesty is a major concern in the business world. There’s no better way to gauge a person’s honesty and integrity than on the golf course. When the ball skirts off the green and hits a tree, do you play it where it lies or subtly nudge it into a better playing position? When it takes you what you consider too many strokes on a hole, do you jot down a more favorable score instead? As small as these offenses may outwardly seem, they are very telling and are possible warning signs.

According to industry studies, people who cheat on the golf course are also more likely to cheat in business. Industryweek.com published the findings of a study of over 400 business executives. When asked whether they have ever cheated at golf, 55 percent admitted they had. A third of those executives also admitted they had cheated in their business practices.

That leads to an interesting question. Would you allow a potential client or a potential employer to win just to put yourself in a more “favorable” light? While this is a topic that has often been debated over the years, the general consensus in today’s world is cheating, even with good intentions, just doesn’t make sense.

“If I was playing with a vastly superior player who wanted my business (and was playing badly on purpose), I could tell. I would take that as very patronizing, and I wouldn’t want to work with someone who wants to be patronizing,” Wuorio said.

Oman agrees. “You should never throw a game. You’re trying to cultivate a business relationship.”

To cultivate that positive relationship takes knowledge of the rules of the game. Golf etiquette is important to know if you plan to be on the course—whether for business or for pleasure, but in business not knowing the proper etiquette could potentially cause harm and ruin relationships before they’ve even started.

Contrary to popular belief, there is generally little business talk on the golf course.

“Relationship bonding is done on the golf course. Business is usually not discussed. It can be approached, but you have to keep moving, so you don’t hold the people behind you up,” said Patricia Stephenson, founder and owner of Patricia Stephenson and Associates, Inc., a group that presents, among other things, business golf seminars.

Wuorio believes it’s best to allow the conversation to naturally turn to business on the golf course. “Talk about anything. Talk about family. A round of golf is more exploratory and discovery.”

As Oman points out, golf is naturally a very selfish game. People usually care only about their scores and how they’re playing. If you make a mistake, they’re not very likely to notice or care.

Golf is also a self-policing game, so it really is up to you to make it work to your benefit. First and foremost, think of the other players. If you concentrate on them having a good time, you’ll be surprised at what a positive impact that will have on both the building of your relationship and your golf game.

“You need to learn how to be observant. Compliment them on their game. Be yourself,” Oman said.

He illustrates his point with an example of an excellent golfer who took three very important businesspeople to the golf course. He was so intent on making sure they had a good time that he paid little attention to the quality of his game. It wasn’t until a few hours after the round was over that he realized he’d shot the best game of his life.

However, even if you do play a bad game, suck it up. Make a joke about it. It’s much more important for your business relationship to stink and have a good time than to stink and make everyone else on the course miserable by blowing up, cursing and inevitably embarrassing yourself. After all, you’re showing your potential client or employer how you deal with road blocks, and would you rather work with someone who

has a calm head when dealing with trouble or someone who explodes when something goes wrong?

Stephenson knows firsthand the importance golf plays in business. Through her website [www.missgolfetiquette.com](http://www.missgolfetiquette.com), she's attracted many clients interested in taking advantage of the networking potential that golf allows. In fact, one of her clients has even admitted that 80 percent of his business to date has come through golf.

Golf is a very valuable tool in the business world, but it isn't for everyone. You'll know quickly if it's something you love or not. The best way to find out if golf is a passion is to take a few lessons. Within a month, if not sooner, you'll know.

And what if you don't enjoy golf? Well, it's not the end of the world. In fact, it's a good thing to find out before you hit the green. It might take courage to stand up to your employer and tell him golf just isn't for you, but you'll be glad in the end that you did.

"If you don't like to play golf, don't play. It will really show up on the golf course. I would look at that and say, he's willing to suffer through this. What else is he willing to suffer through?" Wuorio said.

Oman agrees. "Don't do it if you don't like it because you can't have all of your best qualities on display when you're on the golf course."

For those who do love golf or who want to really learn more about the game, etiquette and psychology of golf, there are a vast array of rich resources on the bookshelves including "Golf in the Kingdom" by Michael Murphy, "Golf Etiquette and Rules for Dummies" by John Steinbreder, "Conscious Golf: The Three Secrets of Business, Life and Golf" by Gay Hendricks and "Think and Grow Rich" by Napoleon Hill.

There's little wonder why golf is the number one pastime of corporate America. It is an invaluable tool that is being used to its fullest by successful businessmen and women around the world. The most important thing to remember is, according to Stephenson, "Golf doesn't build character. It reveals character."