

Golf Strategy as it Pertains to Business... and Vice Versa

INTRODUCTION

It has been my observation that many golfers who stumble their way around the golf course in a haphazard manner could improve simply by applying principles of business strategy to their game. In like manner, business leaders who stumble through daily business happenings could likewise improve their “business game” by observing and applying proper strategic golf practices.

To this end, I will discuss four basic concepts with you: Strengths/weaknesses, long-term planning, short-term planning, and the streetlight concept. I hope you will find this enjoyable and thought-provoking.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Prior to playing a round of golf, it is important to understand your game and its inherent strengths and weaknesses. Each of us has certain parts of our total game that stand out. And, we should capitalize on this whenever the situation presents itself. In like manner, we each have areas that we do not like or handle very well. These should be avoided as much as possible.

If we play a round of golf that generally follows the pattern of maximizing our strengths and minimizing our weak areas, we will in all probability have a better day. But, on those exceptionally poor days, we generally find that we fall into the trap of playing into our weaknesses. This can be the result of losing composure, the golf course layout, or more likely a combination of the two.

As with golf, businesses also exhibit strengths and weaknesses in relation to the market, competition, and the environment in which they operate. It is vital to analyze these characteristics of the businesses and that of the competition. How many times do we see a firm dive into a new business, only to watch them fail for no apparent reason? I suggest to you that had they better understood strengths and weaknesses, perhaps they could avoid miss-matches. As in golf, playing to your weaknesses or a competitor’s strength can have a disastrous outcome.

LONG-TERM PLANNING

The concept of long-term planning as it applies to golf entails developing a strategy for the entire round. A tournament situation might include strategy for several rounds on consecutive days.

The purpose of long-term planning is to review each hole and analyze a strategy for where to be aggressive and conservative, what clubs will be needed, effects of weather changes on the play of the course, etc. In other words, given the known and unknowns, how should I approach this course and its mix of holes, taking into account my strengths and weaknesses and that of the golf course?

In business we conduct the same type of planning. Our goal with long-term planning is to develop a strategy that takes into account the business, its environment and climate, and strengths and weaknesses of both the business and that of the competition.

While the long-term plan for a round of golf covers 18 holes, the plan of businesses will generally cover a period of five to ten years. However, some companies (notably the Japanese) have attempted to develop very long-term plans covering decades of time.

SHORT-TERM PLANNING

Short-term planning is often termed “annual” planning by strategists. In the realm of golf, it involves strategies for each hole, shot by shot. Therefore, one would have 18 short-term plans that add up to the achievement of one long-term plan. Each golf hole strategy must comply with the overall plan and take into account your strengths and weaknesses, and the strengths and weaknesses of the golf hole.

Every hole has an aggressive route and a conservative route. It is the golf architect’s job to show you the hole but not necessarily make it crystal clear to you. It is your task to decipher the layout and determine your best course of action, given your personal strengths and weaknesses.

In similar fashion, we develop short-term (annual) business plans that achieve the goals necessary to carry us to the achievement of the long-term plan. It is our road map. And too often, I see companies spend a great deal of time developing the map, only to throw it out the window as we start down the highway. The thought is that we can find the place we are headed for with some instinct (the Daniel Boone symptom).

The same type of derailment takes place on the golf course. You know you should hit a 3-wood on the tee and lay-up to a safe landing area, but your buddies hit a driver into the trees and so out comes the driver. Misery surely loves company. And, it is no surer true than on the golf course and in the towers of commerce.

STREETLIGHT CONCEPT

The concept of the streetlight says that during a round of golf, there are situations that call for caution, aggressiveness, and conservatism, much like the stoplight with its yellow, green, and red lighting system for traffic flow. In golf, we refer to a situation that favors our strengths a green light situation – go for it! In the case of a situation that lures one of our weaknesses, we call this a red light. Play very conservatively and avoid a pending disaster. Yellow-light situations are

those that hold elements of both your strengths and weaknesses. You should use some caution, but don't be too conservative (a little risk / a little reward). A yellow light situation can also present an opportunity, late in the round, to be aggressive, providing you have the confidence to pull off the shot. If you do, it generally means shaving a stroke off an otherwise routine approach.

Businesses often hold similar situations. And, the streetlight concept can be beneficial, if you understand your strengths and weaknesses. We should be very aggressive in green-light situations that clearly favor us or in which we hold an advantage. In like manner, red-light situations that clearly do not favor us, or more likely favor a competitor, should not take up too much of our time or resources. Yellow light situations should be looked upon as potentially rewarding opportunities, but might not work out the way we plan. It is a calculated risk-situation and may or may not fit into our plans at this time. If it does, then go for it. If not, pass it by. Other opportunities will present themselves in the future.

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing let me thank you for allowing me to share these thoughts with you. I hope you find some wisdom in this approach that helps both your golf game and your business game.

As a final comment, let me leave you with this thought. Golf has been described as a microcosm of life itself. If that is so, then perhaps by applying these strategic approaches and seeing the value in them we can take that approach with other aspects of our being, and in total improve the quality of our lives. Maybe the Scots had more in mind than simply replacing war practice with golf. Perhaps even the Scots did not fully understand the experience that golf would bring to our lives.

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