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Creative Leadership and Golf

By Lori A. Hoffner

Golf is a game I've grown to love. It took me years of practice, countless attempts, and plenty of patience to develop my skills. But like anything worth mastering, success in golf requires **time, effort, support, and dedication**. Along the way, I've learned invaluable lessons—not just from experienced players who challenge me to improve, but also from beginners, as I guide and encourage them on their journey.

In my workshop, *“Professionalism and Why It Matters,”* I emphasize the principle of **Observe, Learn, Emulate**—a mindset that applies just as much to leadership as it does to golf. Leadership isn't about a title; it's about **how we show up in different situations, how we inspire those around us, and how we model the behaviors we hope others will adopt**. Every interaction is an opportunity for someone to observe, learn, and emulate the characteristics we demonstrate.



Every time I step onto the golf course, I'm reminded of the parallels between the game and leadership. And maybe it was my commitment to observing, learning, and emulating that finally led me to achieve that elusive **hole-in-one!**

Here are a few more reflections on how leadership and golf share common principles—both requiring **strategy, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous improvement**.

Creative Leadership and Golf: Are You on Par?

Leadership, much like a round of golf, requires strategy, adaptability, and continuous improvement. Whether you're teeing off on the course or guiding a team, success depends on decision-making, goal clarity, embracing challenges, and recognizing achievements. So, are you leading like a golfer striving for excellence? Let's explore the parallels.

Decision-Making: Choosing the Right Course

In golf, you decide when and where to play, factoring in course conditions and your own skill set. Leadership demands similar decision-making skills every day. Both require **critical thinking and emotional intelligence**, allowing you to assess situations, evaluate risks, and make informed choices rather than blindly following someone else's advice.

Great leaders, like great golfers, exhibit **self-awareness**—understanding their strengths and areas for growth. They rely on strategy, experience, and intuition to navigate challenges effectively, ensuring the best possible outcomes.

Rewards and Recognition: Keeping Score Fairly

In golf, success is measured with a fair scoring system. Whether you birdie a hole or struggle with a triple bogey, you acknowledge the result, learn from the experience, and move forward. Leadership should be no different. Every team member deserves recognition for their contributions, regardless of the final outcome.

Even when we don't achieve the exact results we aimed for, **effort and improvement should still be celebrated**. Effective leaders create an environment where encouragement is part of the culture. Just as golfers cheer for each other's great shots and offer words of support after a tough hole, leaders should foster a workplace where team members recognize and appreciate each other's hard work.

According to a **Wichita State University study**, top employee motivators include:

- **Public praise (81%)**
- **Personal thanks (58%)**
- **Morale-building meetings (92%)**

Are you creating a culture of recognition in your workplace? Do you empower your team to acknowledge each other's successes and provide constructive support when needed?

Clarity of Goals: Aiming for the Green

In golf, the objective is clear: get the ball in the hole with the fewest strokes. The **flag on the green** marks the target, while the scorecard provides relevant details like distance and par. Similarly, workplace success depends on clear, well-communicated goals.

No one can achieve a goal they don't know about. As a leader, do you ensure that your team understands both organizational and individual objectives? Encouraging employees to define their own professional goals—and aligning them with company objectives—keeps everyone focused and motivated.

According to [Workboard Inc.](#), high-performing companies prioritize **communicating business goals company-wide**, ranking it as the most effective strategy for building strong teams. In contrast, businesses that lack clear goals can lose up to **30% of their productivity potential**.

Effective goal-setting strategies:

- ✓ Clearly communicate goals to all team members
- ✓ Provide necessary resources and guidance to achieve them
- ✓ Stay open to suggestions for new approaches
- ✓ Reevaluate and refocus when results fall short
- ✓ Celebrate both major achievements and small victories

Embracing Challenges: Playing the Course with Confidence

Golf is often described as a game against yourself. Mastering a familiar course can become routine, but true improvement comes from **challenging yourself**—whether that means increasing drive distance, perfecting your putting, or tackling a new course altogether. Sometimes, insights from other players reveal new strategies you hadn't considered.



Workplace challenges function the same way. Routine tasks can become stale, but seeking **new approaches and fresh perspectives** can reinvigorate both individuals and teams. Leaders who **foster collaboration and leverage the diverse strengths of their employees** create an environment where people grow, contribute, and thrive.

Taking on new responsibilities can feel daunting, but **stepping outside your comfort zone fosters growth**. The best leaders cultivate a workplace where employees feel **valued, respected, and empowered** to take on challenges—building trust, teamwork, and innovation along the way.

The Power of Recognition: Celebrating Every Shot

In golf, rewards come in many forms—hitting a perfect drive, sinking a long putt, or achieving that elusive hole-in-one. Similarly, **workplace recognition doesn't have to be expensive or complicated**. Simple acts of appreciation can go a long way.

Studies show that **83% of employees find personal recognition more rewarding than financial incentives**. Meaningful appreciation doesn't require a budget—it requires **intentionality**. As a leader, are you making the effort to say **"thank you"**?

Lead Like a Golfer

The next time you're on the course—or engaged in any favorite pastime—take a moment to reflect. Are you making intentional decisions, setting clear goals, embracing challenges, and recognizing those who support you? The same principles that make for a great golf game also make for an exceptional leader. **Set the example, lead with purpose, and inspire those around you to achieve their personal best.**

Lori A. Hoffner, Organizational Development Speaker & Trainer helps people and organizations create open, positive, and inclusive environments through her speaking, training, and consulting. Since 1997, Lori has had the pleasure of working with audiences across the country to help them learn, grow, and develop positive practices for their organizations. If you want to learn how Lori can support your team, please [contact us](#).