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The entrepreneurial edge

Like a great golfer, a business leader needs to continually sharpen his skills

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

Do you think Tiger Woods can get any better? Halfway to a “true” grand slam after forging a victory in the United States Open (his second), only in his sixth season as a pro, at age 26.

It’s easy to ask “How much better can he get?” Even before we get the words out, we know he will get better. We know he will keep breaking records, keep amazing us with his Houdini-like escape from troubled lies, keep adding creativity to his shots around the green. The Monday after his masterful victory at Bethpage, I bet he was watching a video of the Open and making notes about tuning his swing, reading his putts better, figuring out why he ever missed a fairway.

Even the weekend golfers I know — and I include myself here — are passionate about getting better. After a round yesterday, on a car parked at a county course I saw a license plate that read “BN80s”. I’d be happy to be in the 90s every round, yet I’m sure when I hit that mark I’ll be thinking of adopting the slogan on that license plate.

We expect people in any profession to keep sharpening their skills - our doctors, our attorneys, our kids’ teachers. Most of us are required to fulfill continuing education requirements. Beyond that, most of the professionals I know are driven to keep up with the latest research, to consult with each other about working more efficiently and intelligently, to share new ideas.

Many business owners have the same mentality. It might even be part of the American culture, this energy toward continuous improvement. Whether we’re selling products or services, we need to pay as much attention to continually refining those products and services as we pay to growing our profit margins. The two are as closely related as two sides of a thin dime.

I just ordered my second BOSE radio/CD so I can have the same great sound at the office as at home. This company has a “hit” product, there’s no question about it. Yet the people at headquarters don’t sit around and give each other high fives. They are continually improving the acoustics of these compact units and

continually making it easier to buy them with free shipping offers, accessories thrown in, free financing. They get it that having a “winner” in the marketplace is only the starting point.

For all business owners, one area that begs for continuous improvement is leadership. It truly is an art, as Max Dupree said. We expect organizational leaders to be visionaries, and that in itself requires extraordinary sensitivity to changes in the environment, solid confidence in self, and imagination that knows no bounds. With all of that going for someone, the vision will go nowhere without the leader’s ability to inspire others to invest time, energy, and sometimes capital. Lacking the leadership components to make that happen, he or she may well be written off as a “kook”.

Those aspects of leadership, the skills that fire up the passions and loyalty of others in the organization, are precious indeed. And they are the ones that need to be sharpened more often than an accountant’s pencil. I think some aspects of leadership have to be in place first, and don’t respond to any “skill-building” techniques. Some of those basics are integrity, humanity, and better-than-average intellect. Much of the rest is communication, that one area that we all can keep refining as long as we live.

Communication is actually a big fluffy word that doesn’t mean much in itself, but is an umbrella term for the myriad of ways we express ourselves. Infants and toddlers are pretty good at getting what they want out

of their limited means of self-expression, but as we grow older we can’t rely on a doting mom to interpret our every whimper or use of body language. So we can dip into the rich store of resources for building this most valuable set of skills called communication, and thereby sharpen our ability to lead and influence others, in our organizations, our families and our communities.

Do you ever feel misunderstood? Do people listen to you attentively? (This is especially important to assess if you are the boss, since people who report to you might become quite good at faking it, but be a million miles away.) Do you envy people with a large vocabulary? Do you labor over writing letters or e-mails? Do you dread a public speaking opportunity? Do you have to repeat yourself and then get annoyed that no one “got it” when you said

it the first time? Do you cringe when you see a tape of an interview you gave for television?

If any of these hit home, you can do yourself a favor by investing your time and perhaps some money in reaching out for help. There are thousands of books on communication. You might start by leafing through them at a bookstore or library. Just this morning I heard Jack Valenti promoting his new book, *Speak Up With Confidence*. A coach can speed things up and most of us spend a lot of our coaching time helping clients sharpen the ways they express themselves. Many times it is simply learning language that is more likely to get results. Your colleagues can be of inestimable help if you open up to them.

Some day we may find that we do indeed have the ability to read minds, even remotely, and the challenge

of communication may be reduced to being sure that we want to broadcast the stuff in our heads. Until then, it is a lifelong gift to ourselves to continually learn to be more precise, to be sure our body language and tone of voice match our intended message, and to do our utmost to polish our communication skills so that messages express our true visions, indeed our true selves.



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