

Lessons from golf's level playing field

Soapbox

GIO VALIANTE

Competition is at the centre of my life, and the three competitive domains I spend most time in are academic, business, and sport (professional golf). Parallels connect all three.

The measure of success in graduate school is grades, in business it's earnings, and in golf it's score.

Golf is the most purely competitive. It's honest, naked competition, stripped of non-essentials.

Everyone competes on the same course, so the playing field is level.

I am convinced that if MBA students could learn to apply some basic principles used by the best golfers, they could gain competitive advantage in school and business.

Kaizen

The first principle that guides great professional golfers - including Tiger Woods and Camilo Villegas - is what the Japanese call *kaizen*.

Kaizen has evolved from meaning simply "improvement" to embodying a belief system that propels continual, incremental improvement, regardless of achievement.

Those who practice it see the process of striving both as the goal, and the means to a goal.

Tiger articulated his *kaizen* mindset when he explained: "The drive is always to get better. You can always get better, no matter what... It's a never-ending struggle and that's the fun part."

Embrace failure

Research in developmental psychology shows that successful individuals do not avoid failure better than their non-successful counterparts; they cope with it better.

MY DIARY SAYS GOLF LESSON: YOURS SAYS MBA TUTORIAL. WHO CARES? THEY'RE PRETTY SIMILAR



In his book, *Extraordinary Minds*, Howard Gardner suggested that extraordinary individuals "frame" their setbacks so that they become energising rather than deflating.

Steve Jobs, for example, after building Apple into a \$2bn company, was abruptly fired by the board of trustees.

His reaction to failure was to create Pixar Studios, the critically-acclaimed animation studio.

Lance Armstrong was cut from both his swimming and football teams in school, and turned to cycling. He dropped out of his first five Tours de France. His reaction to failure was to refine his training, improve his work ethic, and win seven Tours.

Underreact to criticism

Criticism can quickly undermine the confidence required for excellence. Individuals must be very careful about whose words they let affect them.

Learn how to underreact when people say things that offend you and learn techniques to brush it off.

If you are able to do this, you will bounce back and be more effective as a student, manager, athlete, parent, and person.

Take ownership

Great students are able to overcome mediocre or even bad teachers just as great golfers overcome bad weather, bounces and, yes, bad teachers as well. They realise no one is entitled to success, thus they never blame others for their failures because they take ownership of all aspects of their development.

No teachers will be perfect, so the degree that you can take ownership of your own learning increases your motivation, and also makes you immune to the inherent fluctuation and precarious nature of competition.

The wise do sooner what the foolish do finally

But there are also more basic issues to attend to. The more I am around success in school and business, the more convinced I become that success is about time management.

The best golfers are those who see the most sunrises. By getting their work done early, they rarely get interrupted by phone calls, e-mails, autograph requests, and the regular distractions of everyday life.

Tiger Woods plays all his tournament practice rounds at sunrise. This is the pattern I see in great students - they are always organised and early.

Make it a point to be at least five minutes early to every class and meeting, to cut your academic deadlines in half, and overall to become great at time management. You will find that while your classmates are pulling all-nighters, you will be sleeping soundly, preparing for the next challenge.

Gio Valiante is a professor at Rollins College in Florida. He is author of: Fearless Golf: Conquering the Mental Game

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Online Q&A session

This year has been a crunch year for MBAs as recession-hit employers cut back on sponsorship and managers who can afford to pay for themselves decide it is unwise to leave their desks. Is this the time to invest in your own education and pay the high



On the panel are:

William Kooser, Associate dean of the EMBA, University of Chicago Booth School of Business



Gareth Howells, Deputy Associate Dean, Degree Programmes, London Business School