

LEVINE ON LEADERSHIP

Strange lessons lend to both golf and business

The Commerce Bank Championship this month offers an unusual chance to talk with world-class golfers “outside the ropes.”

In anticipation of this event, I was given a similar opportunity to speak with golf great Curtis Strange, who will be competing in the championship, which runs June 25-July 1 at the Eisenhower Park Golf Course.

Strange was one of the best golfers of the 1980s. He won 17 PGA tour events and two U.S. Opens and played on five Ryder Cup teams. What I really wanted to hear about was his experience captaining some of those Ryder teams; as a student of both golf and leadership, I wanted to know the difference between playing on the team and leading it, from Strange’s point of view.

Consider the leadership challenge of captaining the Ryder Cup team, which brings together 12 competitive people who don’t ordinarily play on a team. For one week every other year, in Strange’s words, “everything that’s normal is not normal.”

How did it work? According to him, these were the keys – and to me, they hold a lot of applicability for business leaders:

1) Figure out what motivates them.

“As captain you need to give what you’ve learned to 12 egotistical individual performers – and that’s a compliment in this game.”

Strange needed to motivate them to do something not driven by money, but by pride in the country and themselves. He capitalized on the natural, even desirable, egocentricity of golfers by focusing them on how success

would enhance their careers. He tailored his motivation strategy to them. In business, too, motivation is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Know your people and help them to see the importance of success in personal terms.

2) Give a clear standard up front.

“On the plane over, I laid out the standards. And those guys knew me. They knew that when I say be there at 6:15, it meant be lined up at 6:10.”

According to Strange, the team responded quickly. They were world-class athletes who simply needed to know the expectation in

clear terms. Interestingly, the best of all 12 in terms of performance and discipline to standards was Tiger Woods, according to the captain – first in line, first to get signings done, first to practice. “You have to be that way if you’re going to be so damn good,” Strange said, and it’s a statement about two things: high standards, and where the discipline of meeting them consistently leads.

3) Communicate the environment to help people adjust.

“Of course you already know how to play golf when you go to your first Ryder Cup. But by going back again and again, you learn about the event, the environment, the expectations – those are the things I needed to help the team understand. The players that do well are the ones that adjust best and quickly. They need to understand the environment to adjust.”

The agility to make adjustments is critical in business. We can make it easier for our team by giving them quality information about what to expect – from competitors, from cus-

tomers, from the market.

4) Let your team succeed.

“On the course, I was hands off. If they prepare properly and I’ve done my job in putting the right people together so they could succeed, then nothing I could say during play would help. They knew I was there if they needed me.”

I so often see leaders managing work instead of results. Strange knew the difference – his job was to set strategy and provide support.

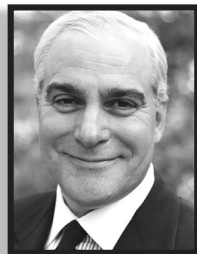
5) Remind them of how good they are.

“Even the best guy on that team needed to be reminded that he was a world-class golfer and that he was chosen for a reason.”

Friday night – the first night – Strange showed a highlight film he’d had put together showing them each in their moments of highest professional achievement. Similarly, as business people, we face such pressure to perform that it’s tempting to keep moving without celebrating success. Our job as leaders is to “run the tape” on great achievements to infuse confidence in our team.

Effective leadership is a lifelong practice that requires a willingness to seek the performance and leadership lessons in everything around us. Fortunately, sometimes those lessons can come on a beautiful day the week of June 25 in East Meadow, where we might be lucky enough to learn something about leadership and golf.

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