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ADVANCED COMMUNICATIONS

"Mastering the Secret Etiquette of Golf" is third in an occasional series titled Advanced Communications. These articles feature practical advice designed to help you improve the communication skills you need to succeed as managers and leaders.

Mastering The Secret Etiquette Of Golf

Tiger Woods may have nothing to fear from you, but you still have to know the (unwritten) rules of the game.

BY THOMAS WAILGUM

You may golf well. Or, you may stink up the course every time you put on your soft spikes.

But one thing is certain: Golf outings are as integral to corporate life as board meetings, annual reviews and holiday parties. And if CIOs want to play along, they have to know the subtle points of the game—not necessarily the rules or basic playing techniques but how to behave on the course and avoid perpetrating the cardinal sins of golfing etiquette.

Among the most egregious missteps: There's lying, of course. People lie about their scores; they lie about their handicaps; they lie about their lies.

There's rudeness—such as moving when someone is teeing off, talking when someone is about to swing or casting your shadow where someone is putting. There are errors of omission: failing to rake sand traps, fix ball marks on the green or replace divots in the fairway.

In fact, that serene golf course can actually be a minefield where CIO careers can be made or broken if you happen to believe—as many golfers do—that the sport reveals a person's true character. "Golf tells no lies," says Suzanne Woo, founder of BizGolf

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Dynamics, a company that helps executives better understand the nuances of the game. Golf, she says, "puts you under this weird pressure and expectations—and in this competitive mode."

In such a pressure cooker, CIOs need to be prepared for all types of situations on the links—including strategies for dealing with a cheating CEO who's giving you the nod and wink, or a pushy vendor who wants to monopolize the conversation with talk of business. "You learn more about a person in four hours on the golf course than you can possibly learn by only having business meetings," says David Guzman, the former CIO of Owens & Minor who's now chief research officer of The Yankee Group. "No matter how you try to be on your best behavior, your true personality will emerge on the golf course." But CIOs need to watch themselves as well. They are representatives of their companies, and any unprofessional behavior could kill future business deals or crimp their career plans. "If you are acting like a buffoon or cheating, the word will get out," says Woo. "And it won't bode well for you or your company."



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First Things First

Among business golfers, the most debated topic is whether or not players should even talk business. CIOs and business golf experts advise to leave that up to the other people in your foursome—whether it's a vendor salesperson, your boss, your biggest customer or your CEO. "Your customer may use the golf course to ask you a question that's very important to him, and which is equally important for you not to fumble," Guzman says. Of course CIOs should answer, but they should keep it short. "Even when given such an opening, do not use it to drive a Mack truck of business through it," Guzman says. "Simply answer the questions and go immediately back to the casual camaraderie."

Expectations Management

A little bit of communication before a round can help CIOs set and manage the group's expectations for the day. Whether you are the host or the guest, make sure you find out about the expectations and abilities of the others in your group before you head out to the first tee. What are their handicaps? Do they even have one? Are they serious about their games? Or do they consider themselves perennial duffers who just like the outdoors? If CIOs are more interested in "shooting a number" (golf speak for serious playing) than hearing about a vendor's latest product release, they need to make that clear up front. "If the sales guy hits with a pitch on the first hole, it's fine for CIOs to be able to say, 'Let's focus on golf, and we'll talk business at the 19th hole,'" says Woo, referring to the watering hole at the clubhouse. And a good salesperson should always accommodate his CIO guest. "It's not rocket science," says David Collins, a PGA professional and owner of The Business Golf Academy, a company that helps salespeople interact better with clients on the golf course. "If all the sales guy wants to do is talk business, that's not a good sign [for the CIO]."

Playing with the Boss

A CIO who is invited out for a day on the links by the CEO, CFO or other senior executive had better be prepared for anything. After all, those executives may be thinking about promoting him or testing his psychological makeup, or maybe they simply want to get to know him better. "If you're ever invited to go and play with the boss, it's a job interview," says Roger Ham, former CIO of the Los Angeles Police Department and a veteran of many corporate and business outings. "That three-foot putt is the longest yard in business, and it will show them your skills, your tenacity, whether you have good sportsmanship, and whether you can lose with grace and win with grace."

An old golf adage says that golf matches are won and lost on the first tee. Translation: Perceptions are everything on the golf course, and CIOs need to be aware of their body language—whether you're having the best or worst day of your life. "You do form opinions of people on the course," says Guzman. "Are they confident and comfortable with themselves? Are they extraordinarily nervous or calm in a stressful situation? Are they too hard on themselves?"

One thing business golf experts universally advise against is tanking a match in an effort to land in your boss's good graces. "If you get caught throwing the game, it will be more embarrassing to yourself and more career-damaging," says Bill Storer, president of Business Golf Strategies, a company that sets up golf outings and seminars for businesspeople. "You ought to be worried about what your CEO is thinking at all times." Besides, Storer adds, if you are a great golfer, most people would want to play with you and see you score well—as long as you're humble about it.

How To Respect The Game

Course manners are just as important as the basic rules. Here are 10 points of etiquette that apply from tee to green.

1. Never talk while a fellow player is teeing off.
2. Take only one practice swing in the tee box.
3. Remain in the tee box until everyone in the foursome has teed off.
4. Always replace your divots in the fairway.
5. Don't slam your club into the ground.
6. Be ready to play at all times (a.k.a. play "ready golf").
7. Rake the sand trap after every bunker shot.
8. Fix your ball mark on the green.
9. Don't walk or cast a shadow in another player's putting line.
10. Pick up your ball for the hole once you have reached double bogey.

If You Cheat, You're a Cheater

While it's OK to exaggerate or underestimate your golf skills, outright cheating is just plain wrong. Many knowledgeable golfers have a sense about how many strokes you have taken per hole and can spot a cheater early on. "People think they're being subtle about cheating," says Guzman. "And cheating may be an indicator of how they will behave in other circumstances." CIOs who witness cheating by a member of their foursome shouldn't hesitate to bring it to the attention of others in their group, so long as the group consists of peers. However, Woo advises CIOs to think twice if the cheater in their midst happens to be a CEO, CFO or other senior executive; cheating is indicative of some

degree of dishonesty, so CIOs might wonder how trustworthy their bosses are.

Lose the Cell Phone


The current hot-button issue in the golfing world is mobile technology. While some golf courses have banned the use of cell phones on the course, many golfers still take and make calls between shots. "If you think of it as a business meeting, it's incredibly rude," says Woo. Perhaps you have to make an important call, especially if you're golfing during normal business hours. The best bet, says Woo, is to warn other players in your group that you may have to use your cell phone, and then try to do so when it's most considerate—such as at the snack bar often located at the ninth hole. Above all, common courtesy dictates turning off your cell phone's ringer so that it doesn't sound at inopportune moments—such as when your CEO is attempting a match-winning putt.

Scott Hicar, CIO of storage vendor Maxtor, finds other devices such as BlackBerrys to be equally distracting. He once watched in amazement as a playing partner (a fellow IT exec) at a charity tournament spent most of his time on his BlackBerry. "On the tee box, he was clicking out e-mails, and his thumbs were twiddling away as we were hitting," says Hicar. If you're that attached to your BlackBerry—and the office—what's the point in even playing? Your miserable day will ruin the experience for everyone else.

The key to any successful business golf outing lies within the participants and their willingness to use the time to solidify friendships and enjoy social relations in a relaxed atmosphere. But don't presume you'll discover business nirvana simply because you're on a picturesque golf course on the company's dime. "You should never believe or behave in a way in which you think you are owed business because of a golf outing," says Guzman. "This is an investment in your relationship regardless of whether there are any immediate business results."

Be a Player

Or just look like one. No, in this case, you'd better **learn the game**. Read **Vices Everywhere** and **So You're Thinking of Playing** and take our **short quiz** for those of you who think you know the game. OK: Are you allowed to spit on the face of your golf ball?

And just because you've heard "business gets done on the golf course," don't bother with the game if you detest it. The investment of your time and psyche is just too great. "You won't be able to get away with saying you love it when you are hating every minute of it," says Woo. Which is the reason why golf bonds businesspeople like few other interactions. "You know each other's pains and each other's victories," says Woo. 

Staff Writer Thomas Wailgum can be reached at twailgum@cio.com.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVE WHEELER

Readers Viewpoint

Amazed

Posted: APR 23, 2005 10:12:03 PM

I'm amazed how the simplest pleasures in life are turned into some power game, and a one really needs to be told what appears to be obvious... I picked up the game of golf in my late 30's only because it looked like a fun way to spend time with nature and good company rather than the bar, party, dinner or whatever... I'll probably never make scratch, but since then I've played with vendors, peers, CxO's, teams, mentors, mentees etc. etc. and found a great way to simply interact with other humans, not a means to any selfish end, except perhaps that elusive hole-in-one in front of an audience :-)... Thankfully I've never encountered across anyone acting counter to the article's advice (if you're out there, don't bother coming for a game)... With everything in life the core of whatever advice this article gives, needs simply to state - Act with a purity of motive, simple consistent manners, sense of humor (specially with yourself), and most of all relax and enjoy the fun... everything else that might happen is a bonus.

Coaching on the greens....

Posted: APR 12, 2005 10:04:15 PM

Our practice coaches Teams of C-Level executives on the science of marketing. We also do this coaching anywhere outside engaged in any activity that doesn't preclude a quiet conversation. As such about 70% of our coaching (and rising still) is done on golf courses around the world. An unusual by-product is when executives are drilling into how to mine customer data in their space they many times shoot an incredible round. So getting better marketing ROI from every single C-Level executive and helping your golf game makes a powerful business formula for success.

Keep your head down and follow through (works on and off the course),

Mark Walker
 President/Head Coach
 Marketing Whisperers, Ltd.
 Mark Walker
 Head Coach
 Marketing Whisperers, Ltd.

Golf

Posted: APR 11, 2005 10:25:52 PM

Thankyou for keeping this not so proficient golfers sane. Humour is the best panacea when facing that quadruple bogey 7 on a par 3. I once had a eagle on a par 4. Its amazing how one shot on one hole keeps me coming back for more pain and pleasure. God I love the game. Me against myself. I not sure I'm winning but its fun trying.

Dr. Paul Anderson
 Lecturer
 Curtin University Graduate School of Business

How To Respect The Game

Posted: APR 11, 2005 02:28:54 PM

"The Truly Useful Golf Book" by Wally Pellerite

Chapter 1 - How to Properly Line Up Your Fourth Putt.

Chapter 2 - How to Hit a Nike from the Rough When You Hit Titleist from the Tee.

Chapter 3 - How to avoid the water hazard when you're lying 8 in a bunker.

Chapter 4 - How to Get More Distance from a Shank.

Chapter 5 - When to Give the Ranger the Finger.

Chapter 6 - Using Your Shadow on the Greens to Maximize Earnings.

Chapter 7 - Crying and How to Handle it.

Chapter 8 - Proper Excuses for Drinking Beer Before 10am.

Chapter 9 - How to Rationalize a 6 Hour Round.

Chapter 10 - How to Find That Ball That Everyone Else Saw Go in the Water.

Chapter 11 - Why your Spouse Doesn't Care That You Birdied the 5th.

Chapter 12 - How to Let a Foursome Play Through Your Twosome.

Chapter 13 - How to Relax When You Are Hitting Three Off the Tee.

Chapter 14 - When to Suggest Major Swing Corrections to Your Opponent.

Chapter 15 - God and the Meaning of the Birdie-to-Bogey Three Putt.

Chapter 16 - When to Regrip Your Ball Retriever

Ken Mac Garrigle
ISO
VA

Etiquete of golf

Posted: APR 11, 2005 11:36:40 AM

Hello

It's a very good article you wrote about the "Etiquete of Golf". It applies to everyone i levels, in all sports and events in life.

My two (2) most important point are "1. Avoid to use the foul/dirty language out loud; not throw club when you hit a bad shot". I played with one executive, he did both (and cheated on the score). It was very disturbing.

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"True leaders fear not those with strengths they lack - they seek them out and employ to accomplish 'the vision'. True leaders must be good communicators of that vision. Th Leadership." -HHN

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