

In Search of the Perfect Swing



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Many years ago I signed up for a series of golf lessons with an instructor who insisted on the series approach to learning the game. He explained that golf was a “process,” and one needed to start at the beginning, with the grip, and continue step-by-step through the follow through before one could move on to understanding an acceptable swing, let alone consider going onto a golf course. The theory made sense, but before I completed the sixth lesson I went onto a golf course and did not come close to hitting the ball squarely. I informed my instructor that I was discouraged, if not humiliated. He counseled me that the reason for my experience on the course was my lack of the full complement of tools needed in order to be anything other than an embarrassment. I continued with my round of lessons, returned to play on a course, and then, of course, continued to sign up for subsequent series of six lessons for many years thereafter.

In addition to remembering a great marketing strategy, I have always remembered the idea that key to learning golf was work through each step of the game.

In Jim Collins’ well known book, [*Good to Great*](#), the former Stanford University School of Business faculty member offers practical advice that is readily adapted to the nonprofit world. Some of my favorite recommendations include:

1. **People are an organization’s most important asset; put your best people on your biggest opportunities, not your biggest problems.** Leaders may be inclined to put the best people on the problems. The opportunities facing a nonprofit, including funding strategies or new program design represent the future of an organization. Opportunities require the efforts and the skills of the best people.
2. **Truly effective staff are self motivated. The key is not to de-motivate them. One way to de-motivate is to ignore the brutal facts of reality.** Repeating mistakes and inconsistently enforcing policies are ways of ensuring that valued staff and volunteers will lose heart and faith and ultimately will walk out the door.
3. **Leadership requires truth-telling. Effective nonprofit leaders work to:**
 1. Lead with questions, not answers;
 2. Engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion; and
 3. Conduct reviews or debriefing sessions without blame;

In addition to making true, two-way communication part of the culture of your nonprofit, look for opportunities to invite your staff to share lessons learned and reflect on their experiences. Schedule exit interviews (conducted by a neutral party to increase the likelihood of candor) for departing staff, volunteers and board

members. Encourage contrary or dissenting views when you are evaluating important opportunities. Look for ways that you discourage input at all phases of the employment or service relationship and vow to turn those around in 2010.

I never found a perfect golf swing. I did find a swing perfect for my skill-set that has kept me returning to the golf course year after year. There is no ideal structure, set of policies or management style that will meet the needs of all nonprofits. But through your commitment to examining and working to improve each facet of your operations and governance, you will make important strides that will strengthen your mission and effectiveness for many years to come. Each day may (and arguably should) feel like a series of lessons, but the reward will feel like a perfect swing.

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