

THE GRIT FACTOR *in* LEADERSHIP

Leadership Lessons from the Golf Course



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Hole 1: Vision

Start with the Answer

On the Golf Course

Golf tournaments are not won on the first hole or the first day, but they can be lost that quickly. This is why it is essential to have a vision and subsequent plan for the tournament and each round before stepping onto the first tee box.

In golf, vision is about seeing the desired outcome of the competition, accounting for inevitable challenges, and building a game plan accordingly. It requires focus on the process and routine, especially during moments of adversity. When situations get complicated, vision refocuses you on the simple goal at hand: getting the ball in the hole in the fewest strokes possible.

Vision in Leadership

To achieve leadership success, vision is a *must*. What exactly is your end goal? What does success look like in your leadership arena? By first defining a clear vision of your big-picture goals, the subsequent tasks of anticipating challenges, inspiring others, and adapting to change can fall into place. Unfortunately, the hectic nature of daily work can flip this order of events, causing leaders and teams to lose sight of their ultimate vision. Staying focused on a vision can unlock the potential to accomplish almost anything (like resuscitating a lifeless business or helping a group of teenage golfers reach the “impossible”).

I have experienced this multiple times as a CEO and as a golf coach. Having a clear vision has worked for me, and it can work for you in most any aspect of your life. Whether you’re leading a company or aiming for a

championship, having a clear vision will help you align daily work with your goals, navigate the inevitable challenges, and greatly improve your chance of success.

Leaders and coaches need clarity of purpose: a vision. This pertains to the ability to see beyond the present and imagine what is possible. When roadblocks arise (and they will), leaders with a sense of vision can overcome discouragement, as they remain focused on their big-picture dream that stirs excitement. It's the mindset that the world is full of possibilities rather than full of obstacles.

Leaders with G.R.I.T. know where they are trying to go, whether that be achieving a state title or securing a coveted spot on the PGA Tour. They "start with the answer", a vision of their endgame, and then they work backward to determine present-moment steps.

These lofty goals serve as the guiding light that provides the inspiration and strategic direction needed for aligned action. A highly effective leader or coach must have a vision that serves as a beacon for their team. What is the reason you show up every day?

Leaders must not only see the vision but believe in it and inspire their teams to do the same. In my experience as a CEO and golf coach, I did this by establishing a big-picture vision, conveying unwavering belief that my teams can accomplish it, and cultivating a strong team culture based on psychological safety.

A vision cannot be achieved without a strong team culture built on trust. That means showing up for your team every day and reminding them of the ultimate vision, even when it seems impossible. An aligned vision unifies and energizes a team, inspiring everyone to pull in the same direction with each intentional action.

Developing Vision

Vision has always come somewhat naturally to me, but it did not become a true leadership strength on its own. Like any skill, it had to be developed through experience, pressure, mistakes, and repetition.

Early in my career, I was often placed in situations that felt almost impossible at the time, whether it was a looming personnel strike, a company under financial pressure, the possibility of bankruptcy, or leading a group of young golfers who had not yet learned how to win.

In each case, I had to see something before others could see it. I had to picture the outcome, believe it was possible, and then help the people around me take the next step toward it. Those experiences forced me to look beyond the immediate problem and picture the outcome we needed to reach. Over time, that practice helped me build enough vision, and enough confidence in that vision, to lead teams through difficult situations.

Coach's Story

In March 2007, I became head coach of the Cedarburg High School boys' golf program. The team had perennially finished in the bottom half of the most difficult conference in the state and had not been to a state tournament in thirty-three years, since 1984. We didn't have a program, we didn't even have a team; we had individual golfers, albeit some with significant talent.

My first year, on the opening day of the season, we gathered all athletes trying out for the boys' golf teams into the school auditorium. As they entered the room they saw, in very large lettering, the number 576 written on the whiteboard. When we asked the boys what 576 meant, of course, no one knew, but we got some quite creative guesses. Little did they know this currently meaningless number to them would become our shared vision and our rallying cry.

The number 576 represents even par for the thirty-six-hole WIAA Wisconsin state tournament. We knew this number would easily win a Division 1 state championship since the state record was 596, and only two teams had ever finished under 600 in the 100+ year history of the Wisconsin state tournament.

I'm not sure anyone in the room, including our coaches, believed this could happen, and as you can imagine, we got more than our share of disbelief from a room full of fourteen to eighteen-year-old boys who had not (YET!) bought into this vision. Let's be honest, most of them were here to play free golf at great golf courses and possibly even just screw around with their buddies in a "blow off" sport.

Whether anyone believed in 576 didn't matter to me. If I didn't believe we could do it, why would anyone else buy it? We didn't know (YET!) how we would do it, but we "started with the answer": 576. This vision was the first step away from staying mired in mediocrity and beginning on a path

that would create school history with the first golf championship and only third state championship in any sport in school history.

We didn't have a timeline for when it would happen, but we were laying the groundwork from day one for a specific vision: a state title and record with an even-par 576. This was *our* vision, and it was set aggressively. There was intentionally no time frame put on this vision because it wasn't just a destination, but a new way of life. Over time, "The Cedarburg Golf Way" would become a well-tuned process rooted in a shared vision.

So, what happened? Fast forward six years to 2013, and our team marched through the regular season and improved with each event. As we closed out the conference season and prepared for the postseason, it became crystal clear to me that this *team* was capable of, and likely to, win the state championship. Of course, I told this to no one other than my wife, who was sworn to secrecy (we will cover humility on the back nine).

We convincingly won our Regional (school record 307) and then our Sectional (new school record 306), advancing to our first state tournament since 1984. We shot 297 (the third consecutive school record) on the first day of State, the second lowest team score in Wisconsin State Golf history, and followed it up with 301 on day 2 to finish at 598, two shots higher than the best score in the 100+ year history of the state tournament, and most importantly, win the WIAA state title by a whopping sixteen shots.

As an aside, it was extremely rewarding to see our players from years 1 and 2 of my coaching tenure show up to support us and inspire our players. They were honest with me when they said they didn't think this was possible, and they wished they had another crack at it themselves, because now they truly understood and believed the importance of a vision. We did not hit our vision of 576, but we got closer than all but two other teams in the 100-year history of the tournament. This is proof that a vision of excellence, combined with a solid strategy and daily execution, *will* get the job done.

The CEO Perspective

In business, leaders often make the same mistake as young golfers: swinging hard without a vision. Talent only gets you so far. Vision is the tee shot of leadership. It sets direction, aligns your team, and anticipates obstacles. Without it, you're reacting instead of leading.

Each time I stepped into a new CEO role, it was like being on a golf course with hazards everywhere, bank pressures, cultural challenges, family dynamics, and financial difficulties. Even though I quickly realized I was in a “five alarm fire,” I still had to take the time, a very short time, but time nonetheless, to quickly create a vision that the leadership team and eventually all team members could rally around.

My first task was not to “swing” by launching new initiatives. It was to define a clear, attainable vision for how we would first survive and then thrive.

Perhaps most importantly, I had to help people believe in the vision before I could expect them to follow it. I learned that one of the fastest ways to do that was to win over the strongest skeptic in the room.

In one CEO role, that person was an experienced and highly productive salesman. When I first arrived, it seemed that everything I did was wrong. I did not know the industry. I did not understand the customers. I was moving too fast, or not fast enough. He made sure I knew exactly where he stood.

But I also knew something important: if I could earn his trust, others would notice. So I listened, stayed steady, and kept connecting the vision to what mattered most to him and to the company. Over time, he began to see that the vision was not theory. It could help the business grow, help the team succeed, and help him do what great salespeople want to do: win.

That experience reinforced an important lesson for me. A vision does not become real just because the leader can see it. It becomes real when others begin to see themselves in it.

CEO Story

In the months prior to my arrival as CEO, the packaging company had lost 80 percent of its revenue and more than 400 employees. The bank was nervous, leadership was unsettled, and many people thought the end of the company was on the horizon. My job was to see what the company could become before the numbers supported it: smaller, profitable, growing, and prepared for the next generation to lead. That picture guided us through a plant consolidation and financial recapitalization. A team cannot move toward a future its leader cannot clearly describe. The first step was believing that the future was still possible.

Practical Takeaway

Leaders and teams achieve their goals by visualizing success, identifying potential obstacles, communicating a clear vision regularly, and consistently checking for team alignment. Connect to your vision often and create your own “576” rallying cry for your team. When difficulties make a situation murky, return to your vision for clarity. These practices ensure everyone stays focused, prepared, and united in pursuit of the vision.

Reflection Questions

G — Getting Better Each Day

What is my current leadership vision, and how clearly can I articulate it in one or two sentences? In what ways am I intentionally sharpening or refining that vision as I learn and grow?

R — Resilience

When obstacles, setbacks, or resistance show up, how well do I stay committed to the vision instead of reacting emotionally or abandoning it altogether?

I — Intentionality

How intentional am I about communicating the vision—early, often, and consistently—to ensure clarity, alignment, and belief across my team?

T — Tenacity

When progress is slow or belief wavers, mine or my team’s, do I stay disciplined, patient, and persistent in pursuing the vision, even when results are not immediate?

G.R.I.T. Check

If I were watching myself lead from outside the ropes, would my actions clearly signal the vision, or would they create confusion about where we’re headed?

How can you get there if you don’t know where there is?

— Jeff Van Straten



Hole 2: Strategic Thinking and Planning

Failing to plan is planning to fail

—Attributed to Benjamin Franklin

On the Golf Course

Visualizing and having a strategy for each round and each hole before the tournament starts is crucial. By anticipating challenges and mentally mapping each shot, often working backward from the hole (the answer) to the tee shot (the present moment), a golfer prepares for and expects success. Planning your strategy should play to your team's and each player's individual strengths, while avoiding their weaknesses based on the layout and difficulty of the hole.

Strategy in Leadership

We've started with the answer and have a vision, great. That said, a vision is worthless without a strategy and a game plan to execute against. Being strategic involves planning with foresight, making informed decisions, and continually aligning actions and people with the vision.

Strategy is about having steps that connect the present with the future (vision). The leader must understand their team and the end game and how to play to the strengths of the team and the company. A CEO needs to see around corners to anticipate potential pitfalls so they can be avoided. The effective CEO carefully balances optimism with realism. A solid strategy is nonnegotiable if you are to navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and achieve sustained success if you are in a leadership role.

Developing Strategy

I have always operated based on setting goals and immediate action steps to get there. I speak the language of to-do lists and deadlines. While this aspect of short-term strategy came easily to me, it was sometimes difficult to use my strategy to effect long-term change.

The importance of a strategy hit home for me early on, most notably when I went off to college at the University of Wisconsin. As an eighteen-year-old, I juggled a full course load pursuing a difficult double major along with two part-time jobs so I could pay for school. There are only so many hours in a day, so I needed to develop a strategy to use them wisely. That meant carefully planning out the week in advance and prioritizing well.

I thought the school part was hard, but the pressure was amped up when I was lucky enough to marry Kathy and become a parent in my mid-20s. Perhaps it was not a strategic decision to have three children born in three years, while also trying to establish my career and put food on the table, but it did demand that I cultivate my sense of strategy.

A working parent really has little choice but to become good at planning and adaptability. It is one thing to have to take care of yourself, but it is a whole new level of responsibility to care for and provide for a family of five. I very quickly learned what is most important in life and how to identify and cut out “stuff” that is not as important. Some things must go.

If you are in an executive leadership role and coach competitive sports at a high level, you quickly figure out that after vision, strategy is a key driver for success. In my five different stints as a CEO, my executive team and I created a vision, followed by a strategy and plan to move toward that vision. The strategy had to be aligned with company values and adaptable to the complexities of the business world. This strategic mindset that I needed as a CEO carried over to my role as a golf coach when building a winning game plan each season that optimized each player’s performance.

When working with boys and young men, a strategy is needed to channel their raw talent and often-rogue energy and poor decision-making into a well-oiled golf machine. Knowing your player’s maturity level is critical to developing the right strategy for them and the team. Many of my high school players had unbridled talent while NCAA scholarship golfers and PGA professionals were far more disciplined and refined. Whatever their level, they needed a plan if they were to perform at their best.

Coach’s Story

At the beginning of each season, I asked each player to write out their goals for the season to provide me with a baseline of their mindset. I was intentionally ambiguous about this request, and as you can imagine, responses were diverse. Since golf is such an individual sport, most responses included individual goals, some quite unrealistic and some as unfocused and selfish as “play free golf.”

I seldom received answers in terms of team goals; golf can be a selfish sport because it is so individual. Not only was there little thought about team goals, but the crickets were deafening when I asked follow-up questions about players’ strategies to reach their goals.

This was a tall task to turn individual goals without a strategy into team goals with a good strategy for reaching those goals. It was my responsibility as head coach to not only create a strategy for the team based on my own goals but also guide our players to understand and learn the importance of having a strategy for themselves. If they wanted to reach their goals, in golf and in life, they were going to need to build a strategy that held up when they were standing alone on the course.

This wasn’t easy, especially in my first years as a coach. For most upperclassmen players, buy-in to a vision-aligned strategy wasn’t in the cards, at least at the time. A player named Matt from my first team told me six years later (when the team and our players were consistently successful each year) that he wished he would have listened to my “lecturing” at the time. This shows that sometimes your words may fall on deaf ears at the moment, but those words do plant the seeds for future change.

With most people, especially young people, the future is now, so the concept of planning didn’t resonate as well as it should; they wanted immediate success. The seasons were consistently short, not much more than sixty days, and often less because the program traditionally had little postseason success.

I knew we had to change the losing mindset, starting from the ground up. That would take time, so I began emphasizing it every day into the culture of current and upcoming golfers, as young as grade schoolers. Building a strategy to support your vision requires patience and “going deep” to increase the odds of future success.

The CEO Perspective

Vision doesn't do much for your team without a strategy and a plan that they can buy into. How do they buy into that plan? They need to experience little victories every day—progress that proves the plan is working and inspires teams to keep working in alignment with the vision. Attaching progress to your strategy becomes a daily role in leadership success as a CEO. Your team wants to know the plan, how they can contribute, and how to feel the progress.

Leaders must work with their team to set achievable milestones for the team and each team member. I have found many people do not think strategically; they think only here and now, especially in today's world of instant gratification. Thinking strategically and helping your team understand the importance of a strategy is the leader's responsibility.

As we discussed in chapter 1, it is often effective to “start with the answer,” the vision, and then work “backward” to the present moment to build a strategy that identifies milestones and goals along the way to reach that vision.

CEO Story

At that same manufacturer, vision alone was not enough. Survival depended on doing several difficult things in the right order. We needed to bring in friendly private equity, recapitalize the business, and reach agreements with the banks before a bankruptcy or sheriff's sale ended our options. Each move impacted the next. Strategic thinking meant resisting the urge to react to the loudest problem and instead following the sequence that gave the company its best chance to survive. Doing the right things in the wrong order can still lead to the wrong result.

Practical Takeaway

Strategy and planning are often overlooked by weaker leaders, but strategy provides the road map necessary for accomplishing the big-picture vision. Strategy involves building a clear game plan. Being strategic is not just about planning; it's about making informed decisions that align with long-term goals and allow you to adapt to changing circumstances and expect the unexpected.

Reflection Questions

G — Getting Better Each Day

What small specific milestone can I move forward this week that proves the strategy is working?

R — Resilience

When the plan hits resistance, how quickly do I adjust and keep moving instead of getting stuck, frustrated, or reactive?

I — Intentionality

What are the one to three highest-impact actions I will prioritize each day that directly support the strategy (not just the urgent noise)?

T — Tenacity

When progress is slower than expected, do I stay committed to the plan long enough for it to solidify, or do I abandon it too early?

G.R.I.T. Check

Are my day-to-day decisions aligned with the vision and strategy, or am I drifting into short-term activity that looks busy but doesn't move the scoreboard?

Act how you want to be (Future), not what you currently are (Present), and certainly not what you were (Past).

—Jeff Van Straten

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