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Are You at the Top of Your Business Game?

In business, as in sports, you need to know the rules, practice your plays and win the game in your head.

By: Linda Lord | 05/02/2010

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When I was providing corporate training to Ford Motor Co., one of my fellow facilitators told participants that during the week's sessions they were to "practice as they wanted to play." I really liked that phrase. If you want to get really good at anything, you have to be willing to practice for hours and hours before you actually get into the game. I can only imagine how many hours, days, weeks, months and years the world's athletes committed to their sport to be able to take to the ice, the hills or the tracks during the recent winter Olympics--and many of them were only "on" for a few minutes. The gold medal depended on their ability to draw on all those hours of practice to be able to perform when required.

I have to wonder how many of us commit that amount of time to running our [businesses](#). Do we practice as we want to play, so that when we take to our offices, our practices, our "pitch" (the playing field), we are playing our best game? There are several key areas to explore as you begin your [business](#) training:

1. Know the game you're playing.
2. Win the game being played in your head.
3. Accept that practice is boring but that it does predict performance.
4. Develop yourself.
5. Be able to finish what you start.

So, Let's Practice

Have you ever tried to play a board game or a team sport and had no idea what the rules were? It's incredibly frustrating. You're setting yourself up for failure. And yet, I frequently meet business owners who have no idea what it means to own and run a company. When my son began playing soccer at age 4, he was told, in terms he understood, what the rules were. The coach spent a lot of time helping the kids understand where to stand, how to kick, what the lines meant and what the consequences were for violating the rules of the game. After 10 years, he really knows the game. He doesn't have to think about the basics and, because of that, he is in a far better position to just play the game. He is confident and better able to assist his team. When we, as business owners, know our game, we are better-positioned to respond when the [ball](#) comes to us. We know what to do.

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Having said that, the economy in which we find ourselves is unique and changing rapidly. Our ability to respond to those external forces is either supported or diminished by our understanding of the game we are playing. If we know our core business--if we have a mission statement, a vision and a plan--then we can stay in the game. So, if you've never developed any of these documents, now's the time.

The First Game You Have to Win

This is probably the most important lesson to be learned on the pitch or in the boardroom: You have to first win the game being played in your head. If you can't see yourself as a successful [business owner](#); if you can't see yourself learning what you need to learn or doing what you need to do; if you can't see yourself being more than the external circumstances that will come against your business; and if you can't see a winning score, you will rarely be able to deliver the result in real time. I watched my son's soccer team succumb to this just a few weeks ago. The team was playing against boys who were two years older. They expected to lose, and they did.

There are countless stories of famous athletes visualizing their success before they perform. They run the game, shoot the ball, feel the victory, see it play-by-play in their heads first. If you win in your head, it's much easier to win in the real world, even when you are outmatched.

Start to see yourself as a strong, confident, talented business owner. When doubt comes, determine whether it is attitude or aptitude. If it's aptitude, do what you need to do to quiet the voice. If it's attitude, determine what drives that voice and silence it forever. When you can win the game in your head, you can do whatever it takes to be successful.

Practice is Boring But Predicts Performance

My daughter resisted practice when she took piano lessons. My son continues to resist it when it means core conditioning. But the truth is, without practice we can never expect to get better. Practice is also when we explore, experiment and risk failure. Most business owners expect to be expert technicians, managers and leaders without having had any practice in these positions. To practice early in the process means that you are willing to take on the routine, mundane tasks until they are part of your internal operating system. You're building business muscle memory, if you will. The better you get at routine processes, the more time there is for creative thinking, strategizing and being present with customers or clients. I know from my own experience. The more I practice the routines, the more freedom I have to focus on the aspects of my business that I prefer, and the more stable my business is.

Develop Both Sides of Your Body

By practicing, you learn to develop both sides of your body: the analytical and the creative. I do a lot of work with business owners, helping them assess their personality traits, their working preferences and their SWOT--strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Through this process they are able to identify who they are and what they bring to their businesses. Developing both sides of their body doesn't necessarily mean they do all of the work themselves, but they know what has to be done to manage for success.

Finish

I have watched many soccer games, and I have seen the frustration on the players' faces when they dominate possession but are unable to score. I also see this with business owners. They have great goals and awesome action plans, but nothing happens. They can't seem to take those plans and [translate](#) them into execution. So many opportunities are wasted because of an inability to make things happen. It's good to plan and to know what to do; but if you don't ever do it, you'll never achieve your goals. There won't be anything on the scoreboard.

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Your business training can begin by embracing a few simple soccer principles:

1. Know the game you are playing.
2. Win the game being played in your head.
3. Accept that practice is boring, but it does predict performance.
4. Develop yourself.
5. Be able to finish what you start.

Then you're ready for the game.

Linda Lord describes herself as a human agriculturalist and storyteller. "I grow people and cultivate HOPE for the human spirit," she says. She's also author of [The Pitch: Business Lessons Learned on the Soccer Field](#), a fictionalized account that relates principles learned on the soccer field to successful business practices.

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