

Everything You Need to Know About Business Can Be Learned in the Game of Tennis*

*** and With a Lot More Fun**

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I am, to paraphrase Michael Lewis in *The New, New Thing*, a "serious business professional." I received my M.B.A from Wharton, worked at blue chip companies including Hewlett Packard and what was at the time CitiCorp, consulted for companies that paid good money for my help in diagnosing their business. I have, in short, spent considerable energy to hone my skills in business.

In my late 30's, when my kids became old enough that I could entertain a hobby one night a week that took me outside of business and family, I took up the game of tennis. I don't know what exactly drew me to the game but in the ensuing 4 years this hobby has bordered on a summertime obsession, as I try to develop my game both physically and mentally. In the course of this effort, I have been struck by how the essential lessons in tennis apply to business as well. Maybe they don't totally replace a Wharton education, but they can certainly improve work performance and overall joy. A small sampling of these tennis lessons follow.

Lesson 1: Play Loose and you will hit the ball better while exacting less toll on yourself. My Tennis Pro would remind me to hold the racquet looser, let my arms "hang like spaghetti", jump out my nervous energy, all with the goal of relaxing as my stroke unfolded. Playing loose is actually difficult, but makes a huge difference in a person's game. You conserve energy, and use your power more efficiently. Conversely, if you "tighten up", you are far more likely to miss the easy shot that would have won you the point; you swing with conviction, but the ball barely passes the service line.

Business Application: I have often noticed that when I speak in public, and I am comfortable with my topic or audience, my words flow, my humor works - in short I am "playing loose." Have you ever been part of a "task force" where the chemistry of the people weren't right, the tension was palpable and the expectation of failure filled the room? Conversely, how many times have great ideas occurred on a cocktail napkin when colleagues were having drinks and just relaxing. Why? They were playing loose.

Now the realities of business are that we can't always slip away to a bar (or a tennis court) so that we can play loose and solve our business dilemma. But we can recognize the symptoms of "tight play" and seek some relief when the answers

aren't forthcoming. Relief can come in a variety of ways - humor, changes of venue, a reduction of pressure - so that performance can flow freely.

Lesson 2: Changing Your Mechanics Begins In Your Head But Culminates When Muscle Memory Occurs. Change is hard in all facets of life. In tennis, every novice will need to learn stroke mechanics to enable clean, consistent hitting. For example, I had to adjust my groundstrokes from a sideswipe to a "low to high" swing. I had to learn, in volleying, to "punch" rather than swing at the ball. In all cases, as I listened to my Tennis Pro, I would try to remember a brief word or phrase that captured what I needed to do. Phrases like "punch", "high toss" when serving, or "show shoulder" when working on my backhand would echo in my head and remind my muscles what they needed to do. In many cases, my muscles eventually reprogrammed themselves so that the mechanics happened naturally which then allowed me to tackle new challenges with new phrases attached. The "head" led and the "muscles" followed until muscle memory occurred.

Business Application: No individual in business is without weaknesses. Some people are too analytical, others too intuitive. Some managers have huge tempers; others never emote. Our limitations in business usually emanate from who we are as people, and are not so easily changed. However, we can begin by using our head to internalize a needed change, and after routine practice, some "muscle memory" will often occur. What begins as an act of consciousness evolves into more natural behavior.

I once had a boss with whom I shared a very candid, but supportive relationship. He was going for a huge promotion and stopped by my office before he went into his interviews. "Any advice?" Dan asked. I replied, "You are very talented, but your ego still gets ahead of you. You will be speaking to people whose egos are even larger than yours. Check your ego at the door, and speak to them about what you've learned over the last year. Think humble." Dan proceeded to his interviews thinking "humble" ... "humble."... "act humble." He did get the job and I know from subsequent conversations with senior managers that his new manner played a large role. The good news was that Dan's internalization didn't end after the interview. He got the job, thanked me for the advice and then proceeded to present himself differently over the ensuing year. He was more real and of the people. Indeed some muscle memory had occurred after all.

Tennis Lesson 3: To be a winner, approach the net and play aggressively. Now a person doesn't mindlessly approach the net. The moment has to be right which in tennis begins typically with a deep baseline return that puts the opponent on the defensive. For me, when that moment occurs, I am often still standing at the

baseline swapping groundstrokes which means a lost offensive opportunity. Working on my volleying skills and gaining confidence will hopefully allow me to play more aggressively.

Business Application: When you have your competitor on the run, it is not the time to opt for conservative action. Rather take advantage of your position, and play bold. Sitting back and enjoying the lead, can only breathe more life into those you want to defeat.

This lesson was brought home to me in business school when one of our first marketing cases involved a leading toy manufacturer, Fisher Price. Fisher Price was contemplating whether to switch from solid wooden toys that lasted forever to a new, plastic molded "ATV Space Explorer" that toddlers could ride. They wanted a lower price product line and a more contemporary feel. I argued boldly that they had been successful with their strategy to date so why change. The ATV Explorer turned out to be one of Fisher Price's most successful products -- a point brought home to me when I saw my nieces playing with it the following weekend. My marketing professor summed up the case by warning us about playing too conservative in business. The status quo is not an option if you want to remain strong.

Lesson 4: In developing your serves, the first should "go for broke" while your second serve should be reliable with a subtle twist. When you go for broke in a first serve, it can be because you are using more power, or you are trying to place it in a corner, or maybe you've put an unusual spin on the ball. Any one of those factors would make the serve potentially harder to return, but also more likely to result in a fault. The second serve should be dependable and do the basic job when the first one fails. As a player gets better, they can learn to do subtle things to a second serve which makes it harder to return without imposing undue risk.

Business Application: In business we have our stretch goals or "go-for-broke" strategy which we can achieve if everything works as planned. For example, your strategy requires retaining key personnel, achieving an R&D breakthrough, developing operational efficiencies and growing revenues. If any one of those parameters doesn't hold, a "fault" is likely. Now comes the second serve - more grounded in reality and average capabilities. It is a high probability plan that keeps the lights on and allows you to continue working on developing your "first serve." As the organization matures, you might be able to add a twist to the contingency plan that keeps the competition off balance.

Lesson 5: In the order of what you work on to develop a good groundstroke game, first is consistency over net, then hitting deep, then placement, and finally power (called "pace"). Immature players, and particularly men, like to lead by hitting

the ball hard even if it means that a high percentage go into the net. It is amazing how successful a player can be by consistently getting the ball over the net. Then, if the player adds hitting deep, it is all that much harder to "nail" the return.

Business Application: As much as we like to feel that we are in a "sexy" business, or shooting for the moon, "steady" will often win the race. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be trying to improve our skills so that we can master a variety of techniques and outperform with elegance, but step one is still to do the basics well. From there, we can build a broader, richer game. We should not delude ourselves into trying to play with more power than we can reliably manage.

Lesson 6: When you have blown a 40-love lead and are now at deuce, step away from the feeling of defeat and take one point at a time. I was in a game recently against my husband where I was up 40-love, and he beat me. I had been trying all summer to take a game from him and this one felt like the one. After I lost that game, the wind was completely taken from me and I found it hard to recover. When you suffer such setbacks on the court, you need to step away, try to relax, and contain your focus to the next point.

Business Application: In almost every business, there will be setbacks and defeats. How we "take our lickings" says a lot about what kind of business we will be able to grow. If we sulk and feel self-pity, we deserve the beating. A winner will take it in stride, learn from the mistakes and march on. Hewlett Packard taught me this lesson well. In 1989, my first year at HP, its stock was trading in the 20s and employees had lost faith. Furthermore, IBM was on a roll. Dave Packard visited plants across the country to hear from the people what was wrong. He learned that people were not feeling empowered as he had meant them to feel, and that the "HP way" had become lost. His board and president set upon a path to rebuild the company and did they ever. As measured in terms of shareholder value, the stock has split numerous times since then and is trading in the Mid 100s.

Yes, tennis holds many lessons for us, on and off the court. It is a game whose universal truths can help us in many facets of life.