

Try as I might, I could not shake the urge to connect my experience this summer at golf school with my long-time experience with leadership and school reform. Many stupefying metaphors kept flying into my mind. I couldn't help myself. Some of them stuck. I didn't want them to because it seemed to trivialize the complexity of education. Golf is a game about trying to get a ball into a hole using a stick. . . Yet, it has its own set of consequences—business deals, marriages and the self-esteem of thousands hinge on hitting that ball just a little bit better. And still, compare that with trying to get kids to learn something in school.

I was not an eager student. I really would much rather have been sitting by a pool, reading trash. But my husband, Alan, wanted us to do this so he could improve his already very good game and so we could figure out once and for all if I was hopeless and should give it up. I will say that I turned out not to be hopeless, but, sorry to say, there is not a miracle ending to this story either.

I did get a little bit better. But even that was due to a lot of effort, making me wonder all the more; why did I want to do this? Something John Mayher (*Uncommon Sense*, 1990) would say is that it is “common sense” of this game—it is difficult and frustrating and somehow that makes us want to conquer it. This seems to work for some grown-ups; most kids are too smart to want to go that route.

Golf coaches generally teach through feedback. I quickly learned that the proportion was about 90% “warm” feedback and 10% “cool.” And that worked well for me. I realized that all too often in the past (and I'm not naming names) I would be told, do this, try that, remember the other thing. It was just too much infor-

mation and too many things to try to put together. Our golf coach instead figured out what each of us in our (small) class needed most to work on. Mine was follow-through. She stuck to that. I am sure she could have named at least a hundred other things I should have worked on but she bit her tongue and kept on repeating “follow through” for three days and kept on reinforcing it when I (occasionally) did it right.



Nancy Mohr practicing her follow-through.

The big surprise for me was how I dealt with change. Yes, indeed, as someone who advises people to enjoy change for a living, I found that I was not so eager to do it myself even when the change was my own idea. Learning a different way of hitting a ball meant unlearning what I was used to. It meant getting worse before getting better. It meant feeling annoyed, stupid and wanting to go back to what I was comfortable with, never mind if it worked.

Changing meant practicing a lot. Making up my mind to change did not make any difference. Doing it was hard and awkward and I had to do it over and over and even then what I

decided to do was frequently not the same as how it came out.

And raising the stakes—putting on pressure, comparing myself with others, trying to achieve a standard? That only made things worse. I became most painfully aware of the role of self-esteem in learning. And it made me mad to think about all of the cavalier dismissal of its importance for kids. *Self-esteem—please! We have to have rigor and vigor in our learning.* If the world of finance can turn “consumer confidence” into an economic indicator, then I think I feel better about needing to feel confident about myself and my golf game.

And, ironically, trying hard was also generally counter-productive. The harder I tried, the more mistakes I made and the more frustrated I became. I had to work at relaxing more, taking a more holistic approach and keeping my eyes on the prize, in this case that little ball.

I needed a coach to show me what to do differently, but I also needed her to tell me what I was doing right. Often. Her leadership wasn't everything we look for in school reform—she wasn't particularly democratic, she set the agenda and did not solicit our opinions about the way things should be. She did not reflect, at least not while we were watching. She was, however, more than a good golfer. She was a good coach—she was clear about the goals, limited the strategies, knew they had to be done over and over and she loved the game. ❖

*John S. Mayher, Uncommon Sense,
Heinemann, NH, 1990*

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