

Money & BUSINESS

DETAIL: LAYING IT DOWN

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Golf guru wins believers among executives who find business lessons at his tees.



Joey McLeister/Star Tribune

Golf pro Dan DeMuth holds the padded club his students throw to find their "true swing." Some report lowering their business handicaps, too.

The golf whisperer

By Deborah Caulfield Rybak
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Two years ago, Twin Cities commercial roofing salesman Greg Johnson signed up for some lessons to improve his golf game.

His handicap came down, and something else went up: His income doubled. "I did attribute it to my lessons," he says.

His teacher is someone who speaks heresy against traditional golf instruction and business coaching. Inside his elegant Golden Valley golf studio and conference center, Dan DeMuth doesn't fiddle with people's stances, shanks or slices. Nor does he want to talk about their "emotional intelligence" or other business buzz words.

Instead, sounding a lot like the mystical golf pro Shivas Irons in Michael Murphy's 1972 classic novel, "Golf in the Kingdom," DeMuth discusses "awareness," "possibilities" and "commitment to the tar-

get." His technique — he describes it as falling somewhere between karate, Zen and the Golf Channel — is winning an increasing number of converts among Twin Cities executives.

DeMuth, 36, a PGA golf professional, spent years teaching traditional methods at golf courses and country clubs throughout the country. Then, in 1994 the Minnesota native was tremendously affected by a series of courses he took from renowned teacher and author ("Extraordinary Golf") Fred Shoemaker, who focuses heavily on the mental aspects of the game. DeMuth found that his students learned faster when he incorporated Shoemaker's philosophy.

In 1995, he started Better Golf, where students can pay as little as \$200 for a four-hour session to more than \$5,000 for a year's worth. Word of mouth has grown over the years to the point where corporate clients now make up nearly two-thirds of the clientele.

GOLF continues on D8:
— Putting blind.

Participants putt with eyes closed in DeMuth's studio

That's up from 30 percent when DeMuth started out.

"Corporations are about 60 percent of our business now," he said.

His focus on golf's mind-game gives rise to proclamations such as "Golf is a game of misses; it's how we manage those misses around the course."

His main mantra hangs in a frame on the wall: "How can you stay 100% true to the intention, while 100% unattached to the result?"

Former student Johnson loves DeMuth's Zen-like approach. "When you're playing golf with Dan, he's never talking about the techniques," he explained. "He's not afraid to address them, he just sees them as a Band-Aid. There's no real advancement by understanding that your hand goes here or there. You just fall into other bad habits."

In Better Golf's hole-studded golf studio, which features a colorful wall-length mural of a mythical course, participants putt with their eyes closed and swing, then release, padded clubs in order to discover their "true swing." Out on the actual course, DeMuth will often make them play holes backward, without speaking, or putt with a driver just to shake up their perceptions and expectations.

For DeMuth, most of golfing has little to do with the game anyway.

"Say you shoot 90," he said.

"That's about 15 minutes spent actually hitting the ball. You better find a way to enjoy the other four hours and 15 minutes."

Students are not instructed in a "right" or "wrong" way to play the game. Instead, DeMuth encourages his students. "When your regular way has too much interference, try a different way." His job, as he sees it, is to help students identify and overcome their various

"blockages."

In the process, he began to notice that clients were bettering more than just their golf games.

"Some of them noticed that the way they played other sports were changing, then they realized how much it was changing other parts of their lives too," DeMuth said.

DeMuth became fascinated, in particular, with the changes his students experienced in their business lives. He saw parallels with his oft-proclaimed statement that actual golf took up only 15 minutes of a round.

"In an office, you only spend a few minutes doing a deal. What are you going to do with the rest of the day?"

Greg Johnson understands that question perfectly. Before his lessons, he was obsessed with his numbers: "Scoring was my issue." So was making sales at the roofing distributorship.

DeMuth, Johnson said, helped him on both accounts.

"What I realized is that I shouldn't focus on scoring as much as the overall quality of my game."

He applied the same philosophy to his job.

"I decided to make a commitment to a level of service for my customers instead of to just sales.

"I was supportive to my customers or potential customers regardless of their decision to buy from me or not," Johnson recalled. "In the end, nearly all of them did buy from me."

As his handicap dropped, his sales rose: "They improved from day one," said Johnson.

To business consultant Jim Earley, who team-teaches with DeMuth on occasion, "the thing that is really great about this connection between business and golf is that it seems a lot easier to identify the issue in golf because we don't have so much ego invested in it. You

**Dan DeMuth's
BETTER
GOLF**

"How can you stay 100% true to the intention, while 100% unattached to the result?"

— Dan DeMuth



Photo provided by Better Golf

In Better Golf's golf studio, which features a colorful wall-length mural of a mythical course, participants putt with their eyes closed and swing, then release, padded clubs in order to discover their "true swing."

can get to some meaty issues a lot faster."

Earley recalled a financial planner who went through DeMuth's course. "He mentioned that he couldn't hit off the tee with any wood at all, but after that he could play terrifically with his irons."

During the coaching session, Earley said, "He learned that your ability to hit any one club indicates that you should be able to hit them all, because there isn't anything that's physiologically different from one club to the next. So at this point it must be a mental thing."

The man had similar issues in his business. "He was working on making a transition between advising people who

had a net worth in the six figures to those who had net worth in the seven figures," Earley recalled.

"He didn't think he knew what to talk to those people about. There was an obvious parallel in terms of a mental block."

DeMuth's work with individual clients has prompted some of them to bring their entire office staff back for a team-building session.

On a recent morning, mortgage broker John Bull, a DeMuth student and president of eMortgage Center in Eden Prairie, arrived at Better Golf with his business partner Steve Reed and five employees. As the group blind-putted, threw clubs and simulated "first tee

anxiety," DeMuth and his assistant, Clayton Sodetani, interspersed business lessons with the golf chatter.

As one group attempted a tricky shot that involved banking a ball off a second ball to reach the hole, Sodetani explained, "Sometimes if a project gets too overwhelming, we can get stuck."

The solution: Break the task down into tinier pieces to identify the part that's creating the blockage.

By the end of the morning, members of the group expressed some revelations. "I'm playing my game to minimize failure, rather than maximize success. I'm playing it too safe," one employee said.

Another chimed in, "I need

to focus on what I can control, not the end result."

Bull and Reed said they were "blown away" by the session.

"The similarities in personality and character in the way people golfed and worked were amazing," said Bull. "We were able to see people's responses and how they handled stuff because the exercises were conducted in a very non-threatening way."

DeMuth, ever the sage, agreed.

"People don't always know what they're thinking or doing. We just help them figure out where they're getting stuck."

— Deborah Caulfield Rybak is at dcrybak@startribune.com.