

Emotional intelligence on the green: Leadership lessons from Golf

By Eric Niu

AUTHOR BIO

Eric Niu is a 17-year-old grade 11 high school student from Mulgrave School in Vancouver, Canada. His research focuses on the intersection of golf and leadership based on his experience as a competitive junior golfer. His research was done in collaboration with Professor Marco Aponte-Moreno, Professor of Clinical Management and Organization at the USC Marshall School of Business.

ABSTRACT

This research paper highlights the leadership lessons Eric has learned from golf as an aspiring junior golfer. The author uses Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence model to explore how its five components – self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills – are relevant in the world of competitive golf and business leadership alike. Given the overlap in attributes of emotional intelligence required in both contexts, the author finds that golf is a training ground for leadership competence in the business world. Other research opportunities remain, however, including the psychological training required for golf and its relevance in stressful situations in the business world.

INTRODUCTION

Golf is often regarded as a game of skill, precision, and patience. A fraction of a millimeter can determine whether the ball soars down the fairway or veers into a bunker. Precision is impossible without accounting for unpredictable factors like wind direction, slope, and distance. Rational decision-making and strategic execution within the finest margins between victory and defeat are an inescapable reality.

However, golf is more than just a game—it serves as a powerful platform for personal growth and leadership development. Beyond mastering the mechanics of the swing, the sport demands mental toughness, emotional intelligence, and decision-making—qualities that are also essential for effective leadership. This essay focuses on emotional intelligence as a key component of leadership, exploring how the challenges of golf align with the traits that define exceptional leaders.

According to psychologist Daniel Goleman's framework on Emotional Intelligence, what sets effective leaders apart is their high levels of competence in the five skills required for emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These components are critical for leadership and are closely mirrored by the mental and emotional demands golfers face on the course.

Over the past two years, golf has become a central part of my life, with countless hours of training and dedication shaping not only my game but also my mindset. I started playing golf casually about three years ago, practicing sporadically for just 3–5 hours a week. Progress was slow, and I found myself stuck, unable to achieve the level of performance I envisioned for myself.

Six months ago, everything changed. I began working with a new coach who understood my goals and pushed me to reach new heights. Under his guidance, I adopted a

rigorous training schedule, dedicating approximately 40 hours per week to improving every aspect of my game. This shift in mindset and commitment yielded remarkable results. In just six months, I progressed from consistently shooting in the 80s to achieving a personal best of 64 in competitive rounds. I now consistently shoot scores from the mid 60s to low 70s.

Through this journey, I discovered the profound connection between the mental demands of golf and the principles of emotional intelligence. The qualities that helped me improve my game—self-awareness of my strengths and weaknesses, self-regulation during frustrating moments, empathy toward my coach's feedback, and strong social skills in networking through tournaments—are the same qualities that define effective leadership. Drawing on these experiences, this essay explores how the lessons learned on the golf course offer valuable insights into leadership development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A survey of existing literature on the connections between golf and broad leadership skill development yielded a number of sources on the topic. These sources discuss - among other topics - how mental discipline, emotional regulation, and self belief developed in golf can translate into leadership contexts, which is demonstrated by the themes below.

In *A Confident Mind*, Nate Zinsser (2022) argues that confidence in golf is not an inherent trait but a skill that can be cultivated through deliberate practice. He outlines strategies for managing self-doubt, reinforcing positive self-belief, and maintaining composure under pressure—qualities that are equally essential in leadership. Like elite athletes, leaders must navigate stress, handle setbacks, and demonstrate resilience in high-stakes situations.

Raymond Prior's *Golf Beneath the Surface* (2023) delves into the subconscious thought patterns influencing a golfer's

performance, emphasizing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and trust. These skills are also critical for effective leadership. Prior's research aligns with Hogan and Wind (1957), who describe how the mental discipline required in golf mirrors the cognitive control necessary for executive leadership. The ability to remain calm under pressure, make strategic decisions, and recover from mistakes is just as vital in corporate environments as it is on the golf course.

Beverley (2014) found that executives who play golf report enhanced strategic thinking, patience, and adaptability. Her study highlights that golf fosters a commitment to ethics, accountability, and resilience—qualities that closely parallel the demands of executive leadership.

Multiple studies support the use of experiential activities, including sports, as valuable leadership development tools. Collins and Holton (2004) conducted a meta-analysis that identified experiential learning as one of the most effective methods for leadership training. Golf's structured challenge-and-reward system encourages leaders to refine their decision-making, persistence, and risk assessment abilities in a low-stakes yet competitive environment. These findings align with Northouse's (2012) definition of leadership, which emphasizes self-awareness, adaptability, and effective decision-making.

Beyond skill development, golf serves as a powerful networking tool. MGT Open (2012) found that 90% of Fortune 500 CEOs play golf, with many leveraging the game for business negotiations and relationship-building. Prayag (2012) reported that executive leadership programs incorporating golf facilitate bonding, trust-building, and informal mentoring, further reinforcing the sport's value as a leadership development tool. These insights align with Groves (2007), who identified mentorship, experiential learning, and psychological resilience training as key elements of leadership development.

Despite the strong anecdotal and empirical support for golf as a leadership training tool, large-scale quantitative studies assessing its direct impact on leadership competencies remain limited. Future research should compare leadership performance metrics between executives who play golf and those who do not, accounting for external factors such as industry type and leadership tenure - especially the psychological development required to handle challenging circumstances. There are also many limitations surrounding the game of golf. While some efforts are underway to change the sport, the effects of these limitations and other ways to overcome them could be explored in future research. Examples include access to golfing equipment, tee times being limited by broader inequality, how long a round of golf is and how that could negatively impact your life outside of golf. While this paper is primarily based on my personal experience with the sport, I hope to offer valuable insights on how to develop leadership skills through golf.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DANIEL GOLEMAN'S EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE MODEL

Daniel Goleman (1998) argues that emotional intelligence (EI) is a key factor in leadership effectiveness, even more significant than technical skills or intelligence. He defines EI in terms of five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions, strengths, and limitations, making leaders more realistic, self-confident, and open to feedback. Self-regulation refers to controlling impulsive emotions and reactions, allowing leaders to remain calm under pressure, adapt to change, and avoid rash decisions.

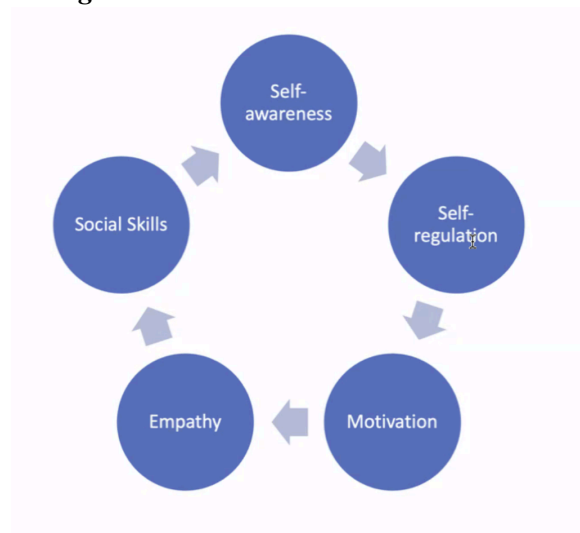
Motivation is a deep internal drive to achieve beyond external rewards like money or status, leading emotionally intelligent leaders to be passionate, persistent, and committed to their goals.

Empathy enables leaders to understand and relate to others' emotions, fostering strong relationships, effective team management, and social awareness.

Social skills involve the ability to influence, communicate, and manage relationships, helping leaders build networks, resolve conflicts, and promote collaboration.

Goleman emphasizes that while IQ and technical skills are important, emotional intelligence is what truly distinguishes great leaders, enabling them to inspire and manage people effectively while fostering a productive and positive work environment. Unlike IQ, which is relatively fixed, EI can be developed through practice and self-awareness. This paper will use Goleman's model to show how leadership skills can be developed through golf.

Figure 1: Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Model



DISCUSSION

Self-Awareness and Golf

Golf can significantly improve self-awareness by requiring players to assess their emotions, decision-making, and physical execution in real time. Every shot demands focus, patience, and an honest evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. The game's individual nature forces players to recognize

patterns in their behavior — whether it's frustration after a bad shot or overconfidence leading to mistakes. Through reflection and adjustment, golfers develop a deeper understanding of their mental state, emotional triggers, and how they respond to pressure, ultimately fostering greater self-awareness both on and off the course.

For example, during a qualifying tournament in San Diego, I was under a lot of pressure. My putting was off, I was rushing through my pre-shot routine, and I wasn't feeling like myself. Adding to the stress, college scouts were watching my scores closely that week. However, recognizing those nerves and acknowledging how I was feeling made a huge difference. That moment of self-awareness — realizing I needed to release the pressure I was putting on myself — allowed me to shift my mindset. I started playing more carefree, and as a result, I played some of the best golf of my life. This experience highlighted how important self-awareness is, both on and off the course.

Self-Regulation and Golf

Self-regulation is a crucial skill both in sports and everyday life, and golf has played a significant role in developing my ability to control emotions and maintain composure under pressure. The nature of golf requires immense focus and discipline because even a minor lapse in emotional control can lead to poor decision-making and performance issues. Every round offers countless opportunities to practice self-restraint, especially after a bad shot or an unexpected setback. Golf has taught me to remain calm, stay patient, and focus on the next shot, rather than allowing frustration to dictate my actions.

Golf has drastically improved my self-regulation in all aspects of life. The nature of the sport demands immense self-control, especially in high-pressure situations like tournaments. For instance, when I hit a bad shot during a competitive round, it takes discipline and patience to reel myself back in and avoid succumbing to the frustration I feel in the moment. Allowing anger to take over would

only lead to poor decision-making and a downward spiral in performance. This need for emotional control on the course has translated into my daily life, teaching me the importance of managing emotions and staying composed in difficult situations.

A more recent example of this comes from my practice sessions. I've been working on significant swing changes—an incredibly frustrating process, as it often feels like all the hard work is for nothing when immediate results don't show. The irritation builds, and there are moments when I question whether the changes are even worth the effort. However, through consistent self-regulation, trusting my coach, and practicing patience, I've realized that the discomfort is temporary.

Whether in a tournament or practice session, the most important prompt is to learn from your last mistake and do better on your next shot. However, this is easier said than done. To combat inevitable spirals of negativity or self-doubt, I use certain breathing techniques that can help calm me down and focus. I breathe in through my nose then out through my mouth before I step up to the ball. When I am over the golf ball about to swing, I take a look at my target then take another deep breath. I find that this helps me clear my mind just before my shot and also helps ease the tension in my body – clear examples of self-regulation improving my performance via techniques I practice off the court as well.

Motivation and Golf

Motivation is a driving force behind success in any field. Unlike many sports, where immediate feedback or quick improvements can be expected, golf often requires long periods of dedicated practice with little visible progress. Persistence in the face of minimal progress is what separates average players from great ones. Staying motivated in golf requires a level of perseverance that few other sports demand. It's one of the rare activities where you can practice relentlessly for hours every day and still feel like you're regressing instead of improving. It would be far easier to revert to old habits, using

familiar swings and strategies instead of embracing the discomfort of change. However, the constant drive to improve, despite setbacks and frustrations, has strengthened my motivation.

Golf has taught me the importance of internal drive and self-discipline. Practicing for up to eight hours a day requires a passion for growth and a deep belief in the long-term benefits of hard work. This lesson extends beyond the golf course; in life, we often encounter challenges that seem insurmountable. When anger or frustration threaten to spiral into poor performance on the course, I have learned to stay motivated by focusing on the improvement process, rather than my score or the previous holes I played. I know I can always get better, and that pushes me to practice extensively outside competitive rounds. That same motivation helps me tackle other problems head-on, whether in academics, personal goals, or relationships. Every tough practice session reminds me that persistence through difficulty is what leads to real growth.

Empathy and Golf

Empathy, the ability to understand and feel other people's feelings, can be developed through golf. Unlike team sports, where interactions are often competitive and fast-paced, golf offers the opportunity to experience these emotional moments alongside others. This has the potential to make players more empathetic and aware of the emotional challenges faced by those around them. Every round of golf reveals the mental turmoil each player faces, from the highs of making a great shot to the frustration of repeated mistakes.

Golf has also enhanced my ability to empathize with others. Over time, playing with different people has made me more attuned to their feelings. I've learned how their emotional states can influence my own performance and mindset.

For example, empathy comes into play when I notice someone struggling with their game. I understand their frustration because I've

been there myself—every golfer has faced rounds where nothing seems to go right. This shared understanding fosters compassion, allowing me to connect with my opponents not just as competitors but as fellow athletes navigating the same mental battles. Golf has taught me to balance competitiveness with empathy, an important skill that extends into my interactions with people off the course.

Social Skills and Golf

Golf is often considered one of the most social sports in the world, providing endless opportunities for players to develop interpersonal skills. Every round of golf offers the chance to meet new people, engage in meaningful conversations, and build relationships. Unlike fast-paced team sports, golf's slower tempo allows for genuine connections to form over several hours of play. Every round presents a chance to engage with players from different backgrounds, industries, and cultures. While I've played over 80 rounds of golf in the past year, only about 10 of those were with close friends; the rest were with complete strangers, many of whom I had never spoken to before. This constant exposure to new people has significantly sharpened my social skills.

The game has also taught me the importance of networking, especially since golf is often used in business contexts as a way to build partnerships and relationships. Engaging in conversation during a round, learning how to read social cues, and building rapport with people from various walks of life have made me a more confident and effective communicator. I've learned that being open and friendly on the course can lead to lasting friendships and even professional opportunities. This skill has helped me become more comfortable in social situations outside of golf, teaching me how to approach conversations with ease and authenticity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, golf is far more than a sport defined by precision and physical skill—it

is a comprehensive training ground for developing leadership qualities. The game's inherent challenges force players to engage in deep self-reflection, which in turn enhances self-awareness. Each swing requires an honest evaluation of one's strengths and weaknesses, a process that mirrors the introspection essential for effective leadership. This self-assessment teaches us to recognize emotional triggers and adjust our strategies accordingly—much like a leader adapting to changing circumstances.

Moreover, golf's demand for self-regulation plays a critical role in developing the self-regulation necessary for both the sport and leadership. When a single poor shot or a challenging round threatens to derail performance, the ability to control frustration and maintain composure becomes paramount. This practice of managing emotions on the course translates directly to leadership situations where calm, thoughtful decision-making is crucial. Learning to stay focused on the next shot, rather than dwelling on past mistakes, has provided a solid foundation for tackling setbacks in professional and personal contexts.

The perseverance required to practice golf—often with little immediate improvement—also reinforces the value of motivation. The long hours and persistent effort necessary to master the game foster a robust internal drive, teaching us that progress is achieved through continuous effort and resilience. This lesson in motivation is a cornerstone of leadership, where enduring commitment often makes the difference between success and stagnation.

Additionally, the social dimensions of golf contribute significantly to leadership development. Engaging with diverse players on the course not only enhances interpersonal skills but also cultivates empathy. Observing the emotional journeys of fellow golfers—experiencing both triumph and disappointment—helps build a deeper understanding of others' perspectives. This empathetic insight is critical for leaders, who must connect with and inspire their teams while navigating complex interpersonal dynamics.

Overall, the multifaceted challenges presented by golf develop the essential qualities of leadership. Golf has thus served as both a mirror and a window, reflecting not only who I am but also showing me the path toward growing into the leader I strive to be.

generation, paraphrasing, structuring, and formatting guidance in accordance with APA 7th edition style. All final decisions, content, and edits were made by me to ensure accuracy and academic integrity.

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