Another Way to Look at Standards

The challenge in setting academic performance standards might better be addressed as is the setting of performance standards in golf. The primary standard in golf—usually a par score of seventy-two strokes over eighteen-holes—is difficult enough to attain that even very good golfers do not routinely achieve it without special effort or discipline. Yet an average golfer should have a reasonable prospect of achieving par from time to time on any given hole. In sum, for standards to be inspiring, they must be achievable by persons of ordinary ability yet challenging to persons with extraordinary talent.

In golf adjustments are made that take talent into account, but these adjustments have to do with the difficulty of the course to be mastered rather than the standard itself. Senior citizens do not have to use the same tees as the club professional, but given this adjustment the senior citizen and the club professional still calculates his or her score relative to par.

High performance standards can be inspiring and motivating, even for golfers of limited ability. There are, in fact, few golfers who expect to score a par on every hole, but most golfers believe that par is possible on any given hole even on a championship golf course. Therefore, every golfer starts on every hole with the assumption he or she can meet a standard of excellence. If the golfer fails, he or she moves on to the next hole to try again, using the same standard—that is, par. Indeed, most golfers know that on any Saturday morning they will be fortunate to have three or four pars, and they will also be lucky if they do not have eight or ten double bogeys (two over par). Furthermore, golfers are not judged on any single performance, and they are provided as many chances as they can want to learn the vagaries of a particular course or hole, so that they can develop greater mastery and more success. The cumulative score one achieves depends on the application of a variety of skills over multiple performances—driving, chipping, putting—and on demonstrating power, finesse, judgment, control, memory, and adaptability in unique environmental conditions.

As the game of golf is organized, high common standards can inspire low performers as well as excellent performers. All players play against a common standard, but past performance against that standard provides the golfer a personal benchmark by which to judge his or her own performance. A handicap system provides a mechanism for including all sorts of players in the game, while at the same time providing incentives for improvement by golfers of all levels of ability and performance. The extremely proficient golfer is inspired to maintain a low handicap, whereas a high-handicap golfer is inspired to lower his or her handicap. Even terrible golfers may experience a sense of pride and accomplishment when their handicap goes down from thirty to twenty-nine. If such a player happens to be playing in a tournament on the day the improvement first shows up, he or she might even win a trophy or be celebrated for making a major contribution to a team effort. Golfers who are masterful putters and whose short game excels can compensate for lack of length in the drives and fairway woods.
The question that must be answered is this: Are we interested in our schools’ producing winners and losers, or are we more interested in developing in our students the will and skills to succeed? Do we want students who are lifelong learners and who enjoy learning even though others learn more quickly and perhaps even more, or do we want to ensure that the vast majority learn that while they can learn, what they learn is not worth all that much? Equally important, do we want to limit valued learning to learning that is only academic, or can we imagine a school in which the meaning of learning is expanded to incorporate the wide range of abilities present among students?

**Multiple Standards, Not Lower Standards**

Organizing schools so that multiple standards come into play—so that a student’s past performance is a benchmark against which later performances are judged, and so that improvement on past performance can become the subject of honor—should not be difficult to achieve if educators set their minds to the matter. Almost all students have some extraordinary abilities, if they can only be identified, nurtured, and developed and if meaningful performance standards and performance measures can be established to support their development. (By “meaningful,” I mean meaningful to the students, in contrast to being meaningful to others but of no meaning to the student.) Furthermore, if these abilities can be identified and developed, creativity can also be developed and will flourish, for the fact is that creativity is more likely to occur in areas where one has clear talent than in areas where talent is limited.

It should be the mission of schools to help students identify their extraordinary talents and develop them to a level of excellence. At the same time, it is essential to ensure that students’ more limited talents are developed to levels at which they can experience personal satisfaction, enjoyment, and a sense of participation in the full range of life that is available in the school and in the larger society as well.

**Leading for Learning: How to Transform Schools into Learning Organizations**, Phillip C. Schlechty

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