

Today, as I sit down to write this, I have a nice sized blister on my left ring finger. I wish I could tell you a story that was fascinating and enthralling enough to make you want to read this column with wanton anticipation. But that would be fiction, and this column is not about fiction. So instead, let me tell you about my trip on Easter weekend.

On Saturday morning, the five Friedmans living in Ankeny gathered into the minivan and drove to Lawrence, Kansas to see my oldest daughter, Emily, and her husband, Pete. It had been a while since we have visited them in Lawrence, plus they were having a large Easter egg cracking contest. The contest is a story for another time. When we got to Lawrence, the day was beautiful, and after getting lunch and caught up, I felt a need for a walk.

Emily and Pete have two dogs, Farley, a 9 year old border collie and lab mix, and Lucy, a 3 year old golden retriever and yellow lab mix. Because I didn't want to walk alone and no humans wanted to go with me, I asked Pete if one of the dogs wanted to join me. He said sure, and asked if I wanted a relaxing walk or more of a workout. Since I had been sitting all day, I opted for the workout and very soon thereafter I had Lucy on her leash. Pete did warn me that Lucy might be active and squirrels excite her – a lot.

Eager for the challenge, Lucy and I bounded out of the house and headed right toward the park just a block away. A park filled with squirrels. It has been a while since we have owned a dog, but I remembered that properly trained dogs will walk on the left side and stay close with the command "heel". At the first corner, I told Lucy to "heel" and "sit", and she did as she was told! I crossed the street into the park and not very far away a squirrel was standing on the sidewalk. All of a sudden Lucy jumped what seemed like three feet into the air. Then the leash tugged my left hand, hard.

Lucy lunged at the squirrel and just about every squirrel she saw after that. And she saw a lot of squirrels. Lucy didn't get excited about birds or any other animal or human, just squirrels. As a matter of fact Lucy jumped every time she saw a squirrel. The closer the squirrel, the higher the jump. I tried the "heel" and "sit" commands with only limited success. What worked the best was keeping the leash tight and short. At times I felt like I was in a "Marmaduke" cartoon where my arms were growing longer with each pull on the leash.

As owners and managers of small businesses we love high energy employees, people who take initiative and aggressively solicit prospects or vendors. Sometimes they are so aggressive that they act outside of what we would consider our company limits. Sometimes it is good for us to examine our limits. Sometimes we need to make sure our limits are strong and communicated well.

The hard part is to keep encouraging the energy, but harnessing it and focusing it in the right directions within the comfort limits of your company. Communication and rewards for the proper actions help keep those high energy folks happy and engaged.

I didn't realize I had a blister on my finger until our walk was almost complete and a large piece of my skin was hanging off of the leash. Not an enthralling story, but I think I figured out my limits.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*