

When I play sports, which is less frequent than I would like, I always have 2 personal guidelines that help govern my actions. Rule #1: don't get hurt; rule #2 try to contribute something positive to the game. As my co-ed volleyball team was playing in the semi-finals of the season ending tournament, I was attempting to block a spike from the other team. I missed. Unfortunately I didn't miss landing on my opponent's foot and injured my ankle.

While I was trying to decide how badly I actually was hurt, I laid on the gym floor, probably for too long. Having sprained ankles many times before, I decided that my ankle wasn't broken and I should get off the floor so the rest of the team could finish the game. So I crawled very slowly and dramatically to the sidelines. Now I consider my teammates friends, and when I asked them later if I screamed like a little girl when I went to the floor, their answer was yes. Then they added "but it looked like it really hurt".

The injury was to my right ankle and driving home was going to be a challenge. After the match my teammates drove me home in my car. I knew I wasn't going to get a lot of sympathy when I got home, so I hopped into the house trying to decide how to start the healing process. Son Ted has had his share of sprained ankles and informed me that the recommended strategy for high school athletes was to put your injured foot in a bucket of ice water for 15 minutes. Ted "encouraged" me to use that method.

Finding a bucket for size 13 feet was our first challenge. We ended up using a small cooler and when it came time to stick my foot in the 33 degree water, I started to chicken out, much to Ted's delight. The first time I was able to keep my foot in the water for about 30 seconds, not even close to the required 15 minutes. The second time I was able to keep my foot in longer by my leg started cramping. By now my wife and youngest son Ben were watching, all trying their best not to laugh at me. Putting my foot and keeping my foot in that ice water is one of the most painful things I have ever done.

As small business owners and managers we are occasionally confronted with painful decisions. It could be letting go of an underperforming employee, changing banks or other vendors that we might have had a relationship with for many years. But we need to weigh the amount of initial, short term pain against the potential long term benefits.

Like a lot of things in management, there is no magic formula to help us make these difficult decisions. But in the end if we consult our advisors and listen to that little voice inside of us that helps us make these decisions, we will likely make the right ones. We can attempt to reduce the pain with good communication and planning.

In the end I was able to tolerate keeping my foot in the ice water for the required 15 minutes. My foot did feel better the next day and I was able to put weight on it. The volleyball team lost the match, but we were losing even before I got injured. As I write this today, my foot is still very tender, but the normal color has returned and I haven't put my foot back into the icy treatment. However, Advil is still being ingested at regular intervals. The next volleyball match for me won't happen at least until next fall where I will be trying not to get hurt and contribute something positive to the team.

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