

Son Ben is 14 years old is playing another season of Ankeny Little League this spring/summer. Ben plays for a team that has a lot of fun, but is not having the best season in terms of wins and losses. Last week was their last regular season game, and unfortunately I got there a little late. I missed the first ½ inning where Ben's team scored several runs, but showed up just as Ben's team was taking the field. The coach saw me in the stands and asked "Did Ben tell you?" Unfortunately I had not seen Ben since I left the bank and he went to the game.

Before their last game of the regular season, the coaches decided to do something they believed has never been done before in the history of little league. Or if not the entire world of little league, at least in the history of Ankeny Little League. They decided to play one player at every one of the nine positions in one game. They decided that person would be Ben, and Ben was excited to try.

Their opponent that night was a very good team, a team contenting for first place. Getting Ben into all the positions would be difficult. He started at pitcher, not his strongest position, but normally he does ok. That night he struggled and didn't last through the entire bottom of the first. He was replaced and went to center field. The good news, he played two of the nine positions in one inning.

In the second inning he played catcher, his favorite position. But things were looking bleak for his team as the score was not balanced in their favor. If they were behind by ten or more runs after five innings, the game would end early. In the third inning, he played first base, and the score was getting closer to the ten run limit. The fourth inning was a busy one for Ben as he played shortstop for one out, second base for one out and third base for one out. It was wild to see him run from spot to spot.

By the time Ben's team took to the field in the fifth, it was questionable if Ben would be able to play all positions. He started in right field and moved to left field after one out. After he moved, the other team went ahead by ten runs and the game was over.

After the game I asked one of the coaches why they did what they did. He answered "because we could, and we knew he could play all the positions and would be willing to try." How many of your employees are willing to try new positions? How many are you willing to train to learn new positions? Why would you care? There are a couple of compelling reasons. First of all the more each employee knows, the more valuable they are and can contribute to your business.

Second, it gives the employees a sense that you care about their growth as a person. Third, and probably most important, they become better at their main job because they have a greater understanding of how their job affects others.

The next day one of Ben's coaches sent me an e-mail "I don't know if it was ever fully explained, but our attempt to have him play all positions in one game was meant to be a tribute to his unselfishness to play wherever we asked him. I hope he had fun with it – it was neat to watch it happen." Ben did very much enjoy that game, and playing for such insightful coaches!

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