

Sometimes it feels like shoelaces and I just don't get along. It may have started years ago when I bought a pair of basketball shoes that included a zipper to hide the laces. Now that was a fashion statement! The last time I changed the laces in a pair of dress shoes, I couldn't find laces the right length. Now a couple of weeks ago I had the need to change again, and I had different problems.

Trying to be just a little bit proactive this time, I changed out my shoelaces before they actually broke and left me scrambling. My wife who is almost always proactive had already purchased black laces that would be a perfect replacement for my worn out ones. Unlike last time when they were too short and I had to leave holes without laces, this time they fit perfectly! I put them in my shoes the night before I was going to wear them and put them back into their regular space, satisfied that I was once again being proactive.

My troubles started the next morning. After tying my shoes and walking down stairs to have breakfast, I noticed that the left shoe was not tied very tightly. So without any further thought I tied the shoe again. About five minutes later, I noticed the right shoe was loose. I tied it again. Only two hours later, I noticed that both my shoes were loose again so I took the time to retie them. This little scenario went on several more times that morning, and I was starting to get just a little bit annoyed. You see I am used to tying my shoes once in the morning and not worrying about them again until it is time to take them off.

When I took off my shoes that night I was not happy with the laces and wanted to put them and the accompanying shoes away as fast as possible. Before I put the shoes on the next time, I tried to work the laces around to prevent that annoying periodic self-untying. You know work off the slippery part that won't stay in the knot. Unfortunately my plans did not work and the shoes still kept coming untied every several hours, sometimes in inconvenient places. Even so, the shoes needed to be tied.

As owners and managers of small businesses, we sometime have the same problems that I have with my shoes. We do everything right in a situation, exactly how it is supposed to be and for reasons beyond our control, the situation becomes unraveled. How do we handle it? Do we act like I did that first day and simply try the same method again and again? In those cases, the fix we apply works, but is only temporary, and the ongoing results are frustrating, very frustrating.

When situations unravel, we need to take a step back from the situation and try and decide where the root causes of the problem lies. Is it with the way we are attempting to solve it, or possibly do we need to try a different approach? We need to make a decision based on what is best for everyone and obtain the best outcome possible. This logic can be used with internal issues such as employee mistakes or external issues such as past due customer accounts. As an optimistic person, I like to try different approaches to problems, not just starting over.

My shoelaces are still giving me problems, though not quite as often. I have decided that I am going to wear them several more times before I finally give up on them ever holding a knot. Maybe they just need to get worn enough to finally hold. Or possibly I will have to give up shoes that tie altogether and only wear slippers. I hope not, because I really do like my shoes that tie.

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