

As I begin to write this, I am sitting with son Ben at a guitar lesson. Ben has been interested in guitar for well over a year and is progressing quite nicely thanks to his teacher, David Crabbs. Of course, I am not qualified to fully comment on his progress. You see I am musically illiterate. I have always been musically illiterate and it is something I am not very proud of. Don't get me wrong, I am not a music hater, I actually really enjoy listening to music, and occasionally singing in the shower.

Although neither of my parents is really musically inclined, they understood the value of learning about music. Both of my sisters took piano lessons as children, and at one time, around 5th grade if I remember correctly, I had an interest in becoming a drummer, but the interest waned when the teacher told me I first had to learn on a rubber pad before I got a real drum set. Plus I found out that I don't really have rhythm, can't sing on key and it was a lot easier for me to focus on sports.

Fortunately I married someone who is musically inclined and easily persuaded me to force all five of our children to take piano lessons and then practice. All five were in band for at least 3 years and the older girls participated in marching band and chorus all the way through high school.

Back at the guitar lesson, David is playing a certain series of notes and Ben is attempting to play the same notes when David gets done. He is doing a good job, as far as I can tell. At least the notes sound the same to me. So why am I talking about this, and how does this related to owning or managing a small business? It boils down to desire and expertise.

I could have been cheap and told Ben to go to the internet and learn to play the guitar from some of the free programs they offer there. But that would not have been very good because while he probably would have figured out how to hold his fingers to play certain notes and chords, he would not have known if he was producing the proper sound. In short he would not have been receiving the proper feedback to know if he was doing it right.

I have been known to tell the people at the bank that I have labeled my style of management as "a democratic dictatorship". In other words, I want input from the staff, but in the end I realize that the decision and the effects of that decision are mine to bear. It is important to seek feedback to know if you are doing something correctly. Let me rephrase that, it is important to seek feedback from knowledgeable people to know if you are doing something correctly. People are almost always willing to give you an opinion, even if they don't know what they are talking about!

So where do you go for that expert opinion? Professionals such as accountants, lawyers and bankers often offer good advice. Trade associations, and don't forget about your customers and employees. Depending on the topic, they might be the best resource available. We must listen and react properly.

I don't plan to be musically illiterate for my whole life. It would be nice to be able to follow along and be able to read music, even just a little bit. Until then, I can still appreciate the music that Ben is making with his guitar.

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