

One of our family traditions is to travel to a local Christmas tree farm, select what we think is the best tree, proceed to cut it down and bring it home. This is a tradition that has been going on with our family for over 25 years and one that our children absolutely love. There are unofficial bragging rights to whoever finds the tree that gets tied to the top of the minivan. Occasionally there were tears involved, and rarely does anyone forget who's tree was chosen the year before.

As the kids have grown older, we have become hit and miss with who comes with us on this annual trek. This year it was the three youngest children, Jenni, 23; Ted, 18 and Ben 14. After a relatively short search of 15-20 minutes, we had the tree choices narrowed down to 2. The final decision is made by the most impartial judge in the group, my wife. This year she chose the tree that Jenni had picked out, and there were no tears after the winner was announced. The tree was very well proportioned with the exception that it was a little tall and had the bottom branches trimmed up quite a way. After some discussion we all agreed that the tree would look very nice in our house, and that the height issue could be easily remedied with a saw.

After we cut down the tree, I decided it would be a lot better to make the tree shorter while the tree was laying on the ground. Plus if we cut it in the field vs. taking it home, we wouldn't have to deal with the excess. So I grabbed the tree and eyeballed the appropriate amount of trunk to cut off, and made my cut within a matter of seconds. I was proud of myself for making a quick decision and taking immediate action. Until I stood the tree back up.

Now there are times in my life where the obvious hits me like a cold north wind on a January day. There is a reason I am a banker and not a carpenter. Actually there are many reasons, and standing next to that tree I realized that I was rotten at estimating how much to cut. Prior to me separating the tree from the stump, this particular tree stood almost 7 feet tall. After cutting off the "excess" trunk, it now stood at 5½ feet tall and looked pretty darn short.

We had a momentary dilemma, do we leave the tree that we just cut twice and fall back to our second choice? Or do we suck it up and take this shorter tree home. Actually the choice was easy, we had to figure out how to make the best of the situation.

As owners and managers of small businesses, how good are we and our staffs handle sticky situations? We need to be able to find acceptable alternatives when there appear to be few at hand. In a perfect world we would be able to practice all possible situations, but we can foster an environment where creative ideas are encouraged.

In the end we did get creative and found a sturdy container with a lid that was large enough to put the entire tree and stand on top. We even wrapped it up to look like a present! Granted the tree still looks a little odd from the bottom up, but great from the ceiling most of the way down. Once the pile of actual presents gets started, I am hoping nobody will notice!

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