

Back when my wife and I decided to get married, we were very excited. It took a while to make the payments to get her ring off of layaway, but when I finally made the last payment, it was fun to let everyone know we were planning a life together. A year or so later we married. That was 29 years ago and times have changed.

Apparently in 2009 the tradition of the hopeful groom asking his future father-in-law for “permission” to marry his daughter has been reborn. The reason I am talking about this is because my oldest daughter Emily is getting married. Her fiancé Pete had the unenviable task of talking to me before he actually proposed. I knew it was coming, but that didn’t mean that I was totally prepared for the actual question.

We were all at a wedding a few weeks ago and I knew that I was going to have to leave the reception early. Throughout the day there were opportunities to talk, but nothing materialized. As we got out of our cars heading to the reception, Pete asked me if we could talk sometime. I said no problem, and tried to hide the layer of sweat that was suddenly forming on my forehead. The reception went on and still no conversation with Pete. It was getting very close to the time for me to leave and I was getting more nervous.

Finally Pete was sitting with Emily and a lot of family members when I told him that if he wanted to have a talk, we had better do it now. He happily obliged and we took a walk away from the crowds. When we got to a place where we could talk I asked Pete what was on his mind (although I thought I already knew). After what felt like a year, he asked me if I would like another member to our family.

Of course I was really nervous because I was going to lose my baby girl to someone I knew, but not all that well. In a strange and ultimately unfunny attempt at humor, I muttered something about not having any goats or chickens to offer as a dowry. Everything after that was kind of a blur and I know we talked for a few minutes about compatibility and similar interests.

As small business owners and managers we are often called upon to ask questions that force us out of our comfort zone. Sometimes the questions we are asking also force the person we are talking to out of their comfort zone as well, making the situation even more awkward. My suggestion to you is that you try to work the question into something that you are familiar with. For example, if sales are not in your comfort zone, try to phrase the question into a discussion. Sales are simply talking to the right people about how they can use and benefits from what you have to sell.

If you know your product or service, you simply ask about how the prospect might be solving their problems which might involve your company. Try to find that common denominator. In Pete’s case, it is obvious to me that we both love my daughter. Now that the question has been asked and answered, it is easy for me to say that it might have been easier for my conversation with Pete if one of us started to talk about what makes her so loveable.

In the end it all worked out well and I told Pete that I would be happy to have him join our family and I thought that he was highly compatible with Emily. The really fun part of this process is how Pete proposed to Emily. But you will have to wait until next time we get together for me to tell you the story.

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