

Last weekend the son of one of our good friends got married. As parents of the groom they were responsible for the rehearsal dinner. They decided that this was something that with the help of their friends, they could do right there at the church. Some of the friends were there six hours before I got there, preparing the room and some of the food.

My first responsibility was to help out at the bar when the guests arrived and then help serve the meal. Of course like any good capitalist, I put out a tip glass and seeded it with my own dollar bill. Serving beer, wine and pop was pretty easy. The real work started when we were asked to begin to serve the meal.

The first course was salad, and between the waiters we were going to handle about 12 people each. Having eaten at a lot of restaurants, I figured that I was an expert at being a waiter. I also have heard my daughter the waitress say that she has served 4-5 tables during a shift, so I didn't think I would have a problem. Now, was it serve from the left and remove from the right or the other way around?

Salad turned out to be the easy part because everyone was served the same salad. The main course was a little different in that each guest had one of two choices. What they wanted was identified by a small piece of folded paper situated in front of them. My job was to try and serve the women first (chivalry is NOT dead) their choice of entrée, then make sure everyone else got their selection as fast as possible. The folks in the kitchen were working their tails off to make each plate warm, look good and ready to go for the servers.

I learned that there is a fine line between hovering over a guest who might be finished with their plate and making them wait with a dirty plate. Add in keeping the guests properly hydrated, being pleasant to the guests and the folks working in the kitchen and I was starting to understand my daughter a little better with each passing minute. This basic job was very fun and hard work!

As managers and owners of small businesses sometimes we rise through the ranks and sometimes we start a lot closer to the top. Problems can arise when we forget where a lot of the basic work gets accomplished. Our job is to manage our business at a higher level, think about and create plans to help the business survive and grow over a long period of time. That is extremely important, but we cannot forget how and where those plans are implemented.

Periodically we need to spend time doing the most basic jobs in our companies. Interacting with our customers at the most common level. That might mean spending a day or week as a server in a restaurant, teller at a bank, bagger at the grocery store or working on the line at the factory. Working those jobs periodically will help us understand how our businesses operate day to day at the most basic levels

After we were done cleaning up after the rehearsal dinner, I found my tip jar. To my surprise, there was more money in there! Feeling a little bit guilty, I decided to give the proceeds to my friends who put on the dinner, figuring with a wedding to help pay for the next day, they probably needed

a couple of bucks more than I did. Only later did I realize that I forgot to take my own seed money out of the jar before giving it away! I guess that is a risk of being a capitalist.

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