

Sometimes I think that my wife should be in line for sainthood. She has put up with and been patient with my idiosyncrasies. One example of her patience is when she sends me to the grocery store to shop. On the side of the refrigerator is a list of items that we either have run out of, or will shortly use the last one. When we run low on milk, which happens a lot, it is time to check the list and go to the store.

Most of the time Joanne goes to the store to buy our necessities. She has a very good feel for what we have and what we need, list or no list. On those occasions when I either volunteer to go, or she asks me to go because she is busy and I am not, the list becomes as essential as my debit card. Because I do not have nearly as many shopping instincts as my wife, the list has to be enhanced.

For example, not only do I need to know that we need bananas, I need to know how many. I need to know if she wants them slightly green or mostly yellow, big or little, on sale or regular price. This is important to me because I do NOT want to have to go back to the store to: a) buy more or something different or b) exchange what I bought for the right thing. I do not want to return to the store only because I really didn't want to go there in the first place. Like most men, I want to shop for what I need (which is why the list is so important) and get back home.

I have also learned over the years that not all brands are the same. I have learned that cooking oil can be anything from vegetable to canola to Crisco, just don't ask me what the difference is. My wife knows, and that is all that is important to me. And she knows the difference between bleached and unbleached flour and when each is necessary in a particular recipe. My job is to buy what she needs and get it home without making a mess.

As small business owners and managers we often have our employees perform certain tasks for us. These may be tasks that we used to perform ourselves, but as our business has grown, we found it necessary to delegate. As we go about the business of delegating, it is important to remember that the people who work with us may not share the same passion or familiarity for the task that we do.

Like my wife's shopping list, she has intimate knowledge of what our family needs and approximately how much longer our current supplies will last. Because of this, her list can be much more vague than a list I need to shop. The same thing holds true in our businesses. We

cannot assume that everything we know, and all our experiences flow via osmosis to our employees. Eventually, with enough repetition and practice, the amount of detailed instructions our employees and co-workers need should be reduced.

While she has never come right out and said it, I am sure that one of my wife's goals is to have me not ask so many questions when I go grocery shopping. I am sure she would like me to take more interest and have a better understanding of what we use and what we need. Personally, I doubt that would ever happen. Does that mean she will become a saint? It might just depend on the requirements that are on the list.

Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, president of 1st National Bank, Ankeny.