

What's good for the goose...

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10 year old son Ben walked into the house visibly upset. His friend Brody did not look quite as upset but his eyes were wide. I came into the kitchen and asked them what was wrong. Ben told us this story and Brody filled in the details when necessary.

Ben and Brody went to meet their friend and ride their bikes around the little lake that is near our house. The private lake has a walking/biking path that runs all the way around. Since it is private, only association members and their guests are allowed on the path, and that is as it should be. We are not part of this association. Ben and Brody's friend lives along the lake so that is not what caused the problem. The problem lies with the geese that like to call the lake home.

Ben and his friends were riding their bicycles around the lake when one of them said something close to "let's run over a goose". Ben tells me that his friend was just kidding, and I believe him. The woman, who heard him from what must have been her house, obviously didn't think they were kidding. Because when Ben and his friends reached the point on the path that is close to a street, she pulled up in her car and got out to confront them.

She stopped them and demanded to know their names, addresses, phone numbers and if they lived in the association. According to Ben she said, "I saw you guys trying to run over the geese. I am going to call your parents, and the police. This association believes in providing a safe and caring environment for animals." About that point when Ben and Brody were telling us the story, the phone rang. On the other end was the woman telling how disrespectful my child was and that if she did catch them trying to harm geese again, she would indeed call the police.

For my part, I tried to be pleasant and understanding on the phone. From her tone, I could tell that no matter what I said, her mind was not going to change about the situation. I politely listened, thanked her for calling and hung up the phone.

As small business owners and managers, we are often presented with situations where our employees or customers are telling us different sides of a situation. Since we were probably not present, and have to resolve it, we are forced to decipher the stories and take action on what we believe is the truth. Most of the time it is a no win situation. No matter what we decide, one of the parties is going to be at least disappointed, angry at the worst.

Conflict is never fun, and fortunately I do not have to resolve these types of situations very often. But I see these as educational opportunities, a chance for those involved to learn about themselves and how to deal with people. Easier to do with employees than customers. When customers are in the situation we need to quickly evaluate how important the customer is to our business and the ramifications of potentially losing the customer and making them mad.

By the time Brody's parents showed up at our door, they too had received a phone call from the woman. Unfortunately they did not have the benefit of hearing the story before hand. We came to the conclusion that the boys' comments were harmless and no goose life, limb or wing was ever in danger. We also concluded that 10 year olds should not give their names, addresses and phone numbers to a stranger, regardless of how many geese are in danger.

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