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## From walking to running – know when to let go

By Ron Kitchens and Heather Smith  
Southwest Michigan First

For those of us with children, we know what it's like to teach them "everything," from eating to holding a rattle to crawling to walking.

Walking. We have all learned and, if we have kids, have all taught someone how to walk. We have protectively held both of our child's arms above their head while we cheered, "Put one foot in front of the other."

We have bought our soon-to-be toddler the proper supportive shoes. Next, we held one hand while our son or daughter carefully balanced with the opposite. We watched them teeter along the furniture.

We cheered when they took their first step alone. We then supervised for a short bit while they got their "land legs," balance and confidence.

Last thing we knew, we were at the park and they were off and running, never looking back.

Did we follow them around? Oh, we might have tried for a while, but we gave up. As they once trusted us while we held their hand, we developed trust and confidence in them. Really, how many of us are still following our kids around?

Think about this: When you see another parent following their kid around the playground or hear that they are doing their child's homework for them, what do you think? Probably what comes to mind is the thought that that parent is overbearing and controlling, and you pity the child for his or her lack of freedom to explore and be his or her own person.

As leaders, how many of us have behaved with our team members like the nurturing parent described above? How many of us have stuck someone at a desk with a phone, provided them a stack of paperwork and given them a stern look if they stepped out from behind it, just like a domineering parent?

At Southwest Michigan First, most of our team has started their tenure by answering the main phone. Similar to the "learning to walk" phase where one's arms are held above one's head, this is where we all have learned what we do, how we do it and what each team member's strengths and responsibilities are.

This is where we, as a team, learn and understand what that new team member's strengths and potential could be.

Once trust is mutual and we are confident the new team member has the basic knowledge and tools — like that first pair of white, soft-soled leather walking shoes that are now bronzed — to succeed, we let them run. We don't hold hands, we don't babysit. Rather, we develop expectations.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done and self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

In today's new economy, this is the only way for an organization to be successful. To be innovative, people have to be allowed to run, to think, to experiment.

That's how we got Post-it Notes. Everyone knows what a Post-it Note is — it's that little yellow self-stick notepaper in your desk drawer. You've got 'em. Post-it Notes were not a planned product. No one was confined to their workspace forced to come up with a way to keep tiny papers from blowing off their desks.

In 1970, while our radios were tuned to Simon & Garfunkle's "Bridge Over Troubled Water," a man named Spencer Silver was working in the 3M research and development facility trying to invent very strong glue. Working on his own, he developed a new adhesive but, unfortunately, it was much weaker than expected.

When applied to objects, it stuck but easily came off. He invented actually quite the opposite of what he wanted — weak glue. Silver invented weak glue because he was given the freedom to innovate.

No one knew what to do with it, but the idea wasn't thrown away. Like many great ideas, it was ahead of its time. Four years later, another 3M scientist named Arthur Fry was singing a different tune; rather, singing in his church choir.

He was using the age-old bookmark technique of saving his place in his hymnal but his markers kept falling out. Remembering Silver's glue, Fry added it to the tips of his markers.

The Post-it Note was born.

One year after 3M placed the Post-it Note on store shelves, the packs of sticky paper raked in more than \$2 million in sales. Post-it Notes, now available in 27 sizes, 57 colors and 20 fragrances, earn \$1 billion annually and dominate the self-stick note market.

Let your team run. They'll find your organization's Post-it Note.

We'll leave you with this last analogy. Most football coaches are intensely focused individuals who like to call all their team's plays, including all of the quarterback's moves.

OK, most are viewed as control freaks. Jim Caldwell, coach of the Indianapolis Colts, apparently is not. He lets his quarterback, Peyton Manning, call most of his plays and look what it gets the Colts:

- A 2009 AFC Championship and Super Bowl XLIV appearance
- A quarterback holding the record for most NFL MVP awards — four
- A team that benefits from a quarterback with NFL records for consecutive seasons with over 4,000 yards passing and total seasons with 4,000 or more yards passing in a career.

Leaders draft well. They train well. They trust well. Then, whether they are Jim Caldwell or Raymond Herzog, CEO and chairman of 3M during the Post-it Note era, they make sure everyone has the proper running shoes.

Then they let their team run.

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