

May 4

Let Them Build the Bookshelf

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I collect books like the last one was printed yesterday. I can never have too many.

When my wife and I moved to our new home last year, I decided it was time to buy new book shelves. I wanted a matching set, and I wanted enough shelf space to hold my ever expanding collection.

When the shelves arrived off the Ikea truck, my wife was surprised to learn I had ordered three. She was even more surprised when I finished building the first one and she saw how much space it occupied.

“Wow, looks like that will hold a lot of books,” she observed.

With the excitement of a kid on Christmas morning, I ripped into the second box and began preparing the pieces to build my next shelf. After all, it was getting late, and I had two more shelves to build.

“You building all three tonight?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

I smiled.

She wished me luck and went to bed.

Before I built the first bookcase, I had all three built in my mind. I knew where I wanted them and could picture how they'd look filled with my vast collection.

Looking back on this moment, it felt a lot like loading my first plate at an all you can eat buffet. With an empty belly and endless options ahead, I'd plan on eating three, four, maybe five heaping helpings. But after finishing plate number two, expectations quickly shrink to meet reality.

In the wee hours of the evening, after building the second set of shelves, I decided to begin unboxing my books. I stacked them carefully, alphabetically by author, cover to cover, one shelf at a time. By the time the first case was full, I had fewer books left than I'd thought.

Halfway through filling book case number two, and I was out of books. Luckily, I hadn't opened the box for the third book case yet.

I sheepishly slid the unopened box under the guest bed and called it a night.

A few days later, I learned how my wife felt about the third book case. She knew we didn't need it. She knew we didn't have enough books to fill it. And she didn't want it taking up unnecessary space. But she knew how excited I was about the shelves. She knew I was *probably* smart enough to figure out we didn't need the third one. And she knew if I wasn't smart enough to figure it out, having the third book case built wasn't the end of the world.

So she went to bed quietly and let me enjoy my happiness. In the end, we both got the outcomes we wanted, and we didn't argue at all.

I have to say, my wife has much more grace than I do. Had the roles been reversed, I am 100% certain I would've told her not to build the third shelf. She's rubbing off on me, but I'm still a work in progress.

What I learned from my wife that night was a powerful lesson in leadership. It translates to management, parenting, romantic relationships, business partnerships, and probably many other situations too.

Just because you know the other person is wrong doesn't mean you have to tell him he is wrong. Letting him figure it out on his own is a stronger lesson and a more harmonious way to manage a relationship.

As long as the outcome won't lead to disaster, let the person be. Let her learn on her own. Let him make his mistakes. Chances are he'll realize before it's too late. Chances are, you'll get the outcome you were hoping for anyway. Chances are, you won't have to argue or hurt any feelings.

If they don't ask for advice, don't give it. If they aren't speeding toward a cliff, don't stand in their way.

Maybe make a subtle observation—*wow, that looks like it will hold a lot of books.*

Maybe ask a gentle question—*you building all three tonight?*

Then let it be.

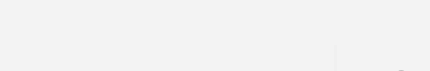
Take a page from my wife's book. Be a better parent, partner, manager, and friend. It won't hurt to let them build the bookshelf.

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