

## Three

### *Focus on the Hungriest Gator*

**S**ize does not matter. Hunger, however, does. If one of the gators appears hungrier than the rest, he or she deserves your immediate attention. Do not attack an old, feeble alligator that shows no interest in you while you ignore the energetic one climbing over the others, intent on devouring you. A gator that is flashing teeth, and has its gaze fixed on you, is the one you need to worry about first.

After a strenuous week in the securities business, Ben Seaver arrived home on a Friday evening, ready for a quiet evening and relaxing weekend. That changed when he was greeted by Dominick, his son, who reminded Ben that his school project was due Monday.

“Dad, can you help me finish it, please?”

Dominick and each member of his class had been asked to build a model, planned city: houses, businesses, streets, schools, parks, municipal services, and a mass transportation system. It must also include lawns, trees, and landscaping. To

further complicate the matter, his son's best friend, Dale Matthews, had already completed his, and it was fantastic.

"You should see it, Dad. Overhead monorails, alabaster buildings, an airport, traffic lights, and a baseball stadium with lights!"

Gators crawled into Ben Seaver's living room, eyeing his legs, confident of a rather delicious feast.

Ben sat on the edge of his recliner, removed his shoes, and studied the eager face in front of him. "Yes, son, I'll help you. Let me change my clothes, and we'll get started."

"Great. Thanks, Dad! I'll get the stuff set up in the garage."

Dominick dashed off, leaving Ben alone. Rubbing the back of his neck, Ben stared at nothing in particular and sighed, thinking, "I hope this project is easier than my week."

Walking into the garage, he asked, "Okay, sport, what do we need to do?"

"Dad, remember how we worked on this right after Easter?"

"Right. Let's see what we've already done, figure out what needs to be done, and then make a plan."

Father and son examined the work they started several weeks ago. Ben was sure that it was in the same state as when they last worked on it. "I remember us finishing the foundation board. What else did we do?"

Dominick stared at his dad. "The streets are done, yellow lines and all. We marked the building sites, too."

"What have you done since then?"

"Not much." Hands in pockets and head down, he mumbled, "Sorry. I guess I forgot about it."

Ben shook his head, then smiled, "That's okay. I did the same thing at your age. We'll both have to work on this all weekend, together. No goofing off for either of us. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Find the green material your mom used for the place mats. Then bring it and the buildings from your train set. We need to take an inventory of what we have, figure out what we need to

do, and determine how much time it will take to do it.”

Dominick nodded and ran into the house, eager to get started.

Dale Matthews and his dad Jude, an electrical engineer, build a futuristic geo-city that will overwhelm the class. Ben knows he can't compete with that; he doesn't possess that talent or time to build such a city. But competing with Jude Matthews is not the primary issue. Ben knows he and his son need to focus on completing the project on time, not on outdoing someone else's project.

He also wants to teach Dominick to take pride in his work—to do his best. Ben knows the project should reflect the work of a ten-year-old boy, with help from his father. It should not be the work of a thirty-five-year-old electrical engineer, with help from his son. Ben is concentrating on the hungriest gator—the project.

Dominick and his dad conducted an inventory of buildings, vehicles, people, and the train set (it will serve as the mass transit rail system). For a few minutes, they stood silently and stared at their diverse collection.

They soon realized they didn't have the elements to build a truly model city. The buildings were of dissimilar architectural designs, the vehicles were from two or three different decades, and the train was a late 1960s model. The people who would populate the town included Native Americans in war paint, baseball action figures, football players, soldiers in combat fatigues, and astronauts.

“Son, this will be an eclectic city—very diverse in design and in people. It may not compete with the fancier projects, but it will be the best we can do.”

“I think it is very important for you to understand what I mean by the best we can do. We will combine our talents and resources, but this is your project. I'm here to help you. I'll help you create the best city you can. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yes, sir.” Dominick nodded, “Where do we begin?”

“It looks like we need to paint the buildings and touch up some of the foundation. Maybe add a lake in the park and a river along Main Street. What do you think?”

“Okay. The park needs a baseball field and a soccer field. Oh, and a bike path, too.”

“Good thinking, son.”

That evening Dominick and his dad stand side-by-side painting far past the youngster’s normal bedtime. They both have other things they would have preferred to do, but right now neither seems to mind. Some accidental painting of each other’s arms and hands enhances their time together.

After cleaning the paintbrushes, taking showers, and consuming two large bowls of popcorn, they are ready to turn in.

“Son, you did a great job tonight.”

“Thanks, Dad. You, too.”

“Get some sleep; tomorrow is another day of work.”

“Good night.”

The gators began to get bored and one or two waddled back to the swamp.

The next morning, over a breakfast of doughnuts and milk, father and son agreed that the cars and trucks they have just wouldn’t look right in their beautiful city. Properly fueled, they journeyed downtown to purchase new vehicles.

On the way home Dominick asked, “When can we place the buildings on the foundation?”

“Once we make sure the paint is dry.”

Using a finger to test the paint, Dominick pronounced it ready and began to construct his city. After several modifications, he looked at his dad and asked, “Well?”

“Son, I think if you move the bridge closer to the center of the river, you’ll have a winner. While you do that, I’ll heat the glue gun and we can make the arrangement permanent. Good job!”

Ben Seaver creates an environment for success by identifying the objective—complete the project. At the same time, he eliminates an unneeded foe—trying to compete with an electrical engineer and failing. He and Dominick are on their way to completing the project on time.

Ben takes advantage of their time together to reinforce the importance of character. His words and his actions teach his young son about honesty, responsibility, and integrity.

Character is molded in many ways. Working against the clock is a good opportunity to demonstrate the value of character.

Dominick outlined a route for the rapid transit system. It required them to relocate two buildings, but the effect was outstanding.

Most components of the train set were in excellent condition; however, the tunnel needed a coat of paint and the water tower lacked one supporting strut. Dominick spent twenty minutes painting the tunnel, while Ben attempted to repair the water tower support.

“This isn't going to work,” Ben announced. “We'll have to get a new one.”

Dominick was a bit frustrated, because he thought they were almost through.

“Son, we need to keep working. No pouting. The town needs a water system and it is your responsibility to see that they have one.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anyone can work when things are going well. It takes a grown up person, even a ‘young grown up’, to keep working when he doesn't want to or when things get tough. The difference between a boy and a young man is that the young man will keep working, while the boy will quit.”

Dominick nodded and went back to work, intent on impressing his dad by not complaining.

All problems are not created equal—some are subsets of others. Solve the primary ones before attempting to defeat their progeny.

Father and son enjoyed lunch at the local sub shop, then visited the hobby shop in search of new supports for the water tower. The water tower support was not available, but the store owner suggested they remove the other three truncheons

and substitute number-two pencils for the supports. “Paint them grey to match the reservoir and you will have a water tower as good as new.”

“Thanks,” came from both, nearly in unison.

At home they began to assemble the village, placing the green felt on the board to simulate lawns and parks. Next, Dominick determined final positions for the vehicles, water tower, and human figures.

Just before dinner, a tired voice piped up, “Dad, can we finish tomorrow? I’m bushed!”

Stepping back to examine their work, Ben smiled, “We’re finished building it, buddy. What we need to do tomorrow is figure out how to place it in the van so it won’t break when we drive it to school on Monday.

“You did a great job.”

“Thanks, I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Let’s clean up and enjoy the evening.”

Sunday, afternoon Dominick carefully placed the unattached items in storage crates, while Ben cleaned out the back of the van. “Seaverville” would fit securely on the floor for the trip to school.

Ben and Dominick avert a crisis by working together and focusing on the major issues, not the sidebars.

The remaining gators leave quietly and quickly. They are disappointed and vow to take it out on their next victim.

Deal with reality. Working through a crisis demands both physical and mental energy. Don’t waste either by fighting make-believe foes. You have enough problems with hungry alligators without introducing imaginary foes.

Too many people get caught up in a self-defeating mind game. They imagine the worst possible result, such as being fired or publicly humiliated, no matter what they do. Or they beat themselves senseless for perceived shortcomings. Wasting time and energy neither solves nor simplifies a problem.

Focus on the major problems and solve them. Invest your time and energy wisely.

Alligators are attracted to the smell of fear, wasted time, wasted energy, and self-pity. Why work up a lather just to attract more gators?

If Ben Seaver spends his time trying to outshine Jude Matthews by building an elaborate metropolitan complex, it will be an exercise in frustration. He doesn't have the electrical engineer's talent or resources. If he spends the time berating himself because he doesn't have that talent, he will not focus on the important issue—completing the project on time.

Ben and Dominick will not finish a more complex version of the city by Monday morning. Creating a complex city will not be an enjoyable father-son project. More importantly, Ben will waste a prime opportunity to teach his son about integrity and the importance of completing his own work.

Don't attempt to solve all the problems at once. Instead, make an impact by solving the major ones, while keeping an eye on the smaller ones. The problems to solve first are the ones that can consume you first.

Focus on the hungriest gator.