

A WEEK IN *Learning*

THE LEADERSHIP SECRETS OF BEES

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I am always game for a strange hobby. So, when I found out that the Backyard Beekeepers Association of Arizona meets monthly near my house, my instant reaction was: *count me in*. Fast forward a few months, and I am still *actively learning* about honeybees; how they organize, behave, and produce honey. The monthly meetings are pretty routine: coffee, cookies, and a lot of discussion from the experts in the room about what it takes to create and maintain a healthy hive. As I've listened quietly in these meetings, it's hard not to notice that the language we use to describe a healthy hive sounds a lot like the language we use to describe effective leadership. Think that sounds like a jump? Let me explain.



The Pheromone Factor

All hives begin with just one bee: the Queen. Every member of the hive is her direct offspring. A queen communicates with every member of the hive, in real time, through pheromones. Pheromones are a chemical message made within the bee and secreted through its glands. Through pheromones, a Queen can communicate long-term (primer pheromone) or short-term (releaser pheromone) messages that are perceived immediately by the antennae of each bee in the hive. A long-term pheromone is used to convey a shared identity among the hive, which keeps them partnering closely and from working against their own. Short-term pheromones are used to give direction (sending them into high alert against a threat, increasing efforts to support the hive, or calming them after a disturbance). The importance of these messages are hard to overstate, as the hive receives virtually all information about their environment from pheromones transmitted by the Queen.

“How can leaders invest in those we lead to ensure our leadership legacy outlasts our individual contribution?”

- Libby Johnson

The Leadership Connection

- *How do leaders' words, nonverbals, and tone of voice act like pheromones in bee communities to give direction on tasks, behavior, and identity?*
- *As leaders, how well do we differentiate between the stress we feel and the clarity of the direction we give?*
- *How can we use the vantage point of leadership to connect daily tasks to a shared vision of success?*

Front Porching

Every member of the hive, including the Queen, has a unique task to perform. For example, Scout bees spend most of their time outside the hive collecting valuable pollen and nectar. When they can't collect any more, they park at the "front porch" of the hive. On the front porch, Scout bees transfer everything they have

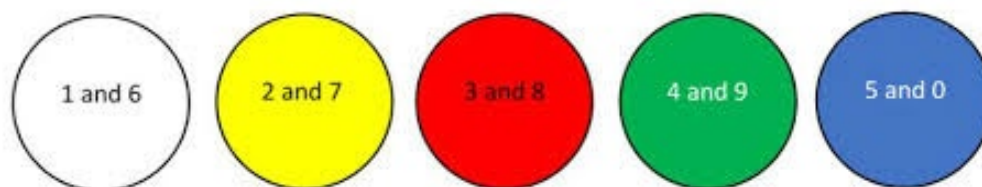
to Nectar bees, who transport it deep into the hive for processing. A healthy hive is built and maintained by dozens of precise tasks that are performed individually, but transferred socially. Any breakdown in these tasks will ruin the hive, yet there is no “oversight bee”. The Queen, who resides in the center of the hive, trusts that each of these tasks will be completed out of her sight.

The Leadership Connection

- *What can be gained by giving those we lead adequate face time to communicate and transfer workload to others?*
- *How much oversight is a necessity for a leader, and how much limits our own productivity?*
- *How do we lead differently if we see ourselves as the center of a system, rather than the top of a pyramid?*

Re-Queening

A honeybee lives about a few months and a Queen typically lives around 2-3 years. However, a hive has the ability to live indefinitely. Even the most industrious Queen will be outlived by her hive, leaving all that she has built vulnerable to aggressive outside influences or internal decay. Beekeepers have a method for managing that change, called Re-Queening. Every Queen’s thorax is marked with a color that corresponds to the last number of the year they were hived (see below). The colored thorax is used to provide a date associated with each Queen. When the Queen enters her third year, she is plucked from the hive and replaced with a new Queen. The new Queen is selected for traits that will ensure the hive’s continued success.



The leadership connection

- *What behavior is an organization likely to see in a void of leadership?*
- *How does the “Re-Queening” of a hive mirror succession planning within our organization?*
- *How can leaders invest in those we lead to ensure our leadership legacy outlasts our individual contribution?*

As it turns out, I am not the first to draw a comparison between bees and leadership. The similarities are well documented and presented by much more eloquent writers than I. Whether it is communication about tasks and belonging (Pheromone Factor), exemplary task transfer and enabling leadership (Front Porching), or crafting a leadership legacy (Re-Queening), bees can teach us so much about creating and maintaining our own healthy hive.

If you or anyone you know discovers a bee hive on their property, contact your local beekeeper’s association before pest control services. Local beekeepers can remove the hive safely, often free of pesticides and charge, and allow a productive hive to live on.