

What honeybees can teach about decision-making in rep firms

You may know that I am an urban beekeeper. As the weather warms up, we beekeepers are chomping at the bit to get into the bee yard to inspect and tend the colony hives. A few weeks after it is warm enough for the bees to start foraging, they begin swarming — a natural and fascinating phenomenon.

Swarming happens when the majority of a colony's members — a crowd of some ten thousand worker bees — flies off with the old queen to produce a daughter colony, while the rest stay at home and rear a new queen to perpetuate the parent colony. The migrating bees settle on a tree branch in a beard-like cluster and then hang there for a few days.

During this time, these homeless insects will do something truly amazing: They will hold a democratic debate to choose their new home.

Several hundred of the swarm's oldest bees will take on the role of nest-site scouts, exploring the surrounding area for dark crevices. These house hunters will advertise their discoveries to each other by performing lively dances and dance-debate vigorously to choose the best nest site. When they reach an agreement, they will rouse the entire swarm and guide the cloud of bees to the new home, typically a hollow tree several miles away.

Rep firm owners and employees can learn a lot from these site scouts about how to make quick and reliable decisions.

Bee lesson #1: carefully choose group members.

Scout bees respect each other's opinions and constructively debate the options each member brings to the challenge. A human group composed of clashing, stubborn curmudgeons doesn't function effectively. Members need to respect each other so they can evaluate ideas without resorting to defensiveness or anger. Populate the group with genuinely reasonable

people who have a reputation for being respectful and incisive debaters.

Bee lesson #2: minimize the leader's influence.

Power is evenly diffused among the scout bees. No one scout leader tells the others what to do. Even the all-important queen, who is the genetic heart of a swarm, is merely a bystander.

Most human groups/rep firms operate with a leader. However, to promote sound decisions, the rep firm owners/leaders needs to act like scout bees, impartially considering all solutions and not promoting or settling on a particular option at the beginning of the process.

Bee lesson #3: seek diverse solutions.

Bees explore a vast number of possibilities and ideas before deciding on one. Humans can follow their lead with these guidelines:

- Form a group that is sufficiently large to engender multiple ideas.
- Include a range of diverse backgrounds and perspectives in the group.
- Encourage each member to independently gather knowledge on the available options.
- Create an environment where everyone feels comfortable proposing solutions.

Bee lesson #4: debate vigorously.

The bees' decision-making process is a turbulent debate among groups of scout bees supporting different nest sites. These groups compete to gain additional support from bees who are not yet committed, and the group that attracts a quorum of supporters wins the competition. The winners then build consensus among the scouts so they agree on the flight plan when it is time to pilot the swarm to its new home.

Human groups struggle when trying to

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Nicki is ERA's sales consultant, the brainchild and facilitator of ERA's free teleforum programs and the founder of the SalesWise Academy. Every day, leaders wake up knowing that they, their technical reps and field sales engineers need to sharpen their focus and their skills. But they don't have the tools, resources or patience to continually help enhance their strategy, communication and relationship building skills. The SalesWise Academy fills that void and delivers those skill-building lessons. To learn more, go to saleswise.ca or call 416-778-4145

LEGALLY SPEAKING: Court overturns rep contract

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APS was protected against this risk via the contract's one-year non-compete provision. As further protection to APS in case Burford underperformed, the contract provided that poor sales performance gave it good cause to terminate him.

Meanwhile, Burford needed protection against the risk that APS would allow him to spend time and resources developing the territory, only to then reassign it to a lower-paid rep. His risk was minimized by APS contractually agreeing not to terminate him unless he violated the agreement.

It was the parties' careful risk allocation in their agreement that gave the court comfort in reversing the trial court's order granting summary judgment, and concluding that APS breached the parties' agreement by terminating Burford at will. In claiming a right it did not possess under the parties' arrangement, APS upset the balancing of risk in the agreement, an action it could not sustain.

The practical lesson: preserve the taste of peanut butter

An important takeaway from this rep victory is the fundamental concept and benefit of holding principals to the terms of carefully negotiated rep agreements. What is gained at the pre-contract bargaining table ought not be snatched away by a short-sighted principal's greed or hotheadedness.

And a premise of protecting the "carefully negotiated rep agreement" is, of course, to ensure that pre-contract negotiations with the principal include a risk allocation that protects both parties. Burford would have been in no position to prevent the APS termination had he signed a one-sided contract rather than securing the right to be terminated only for breaching the rep contract.

One-sided rep contracts are almost as undesirable as one-sided love, and as Charlie Brown of "Peanuts" fame once remarked: "Nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love." ■

SALESWISE: Honeybees and rep firms

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reconcile strongly held diverse views into a single decision. Here is how to emulate the bee process:

- Have everyone share ideas in an open forum.
- Hold a friendly competition of ideas. Ask questions, clarify positions, and regularly go around the room to ask everyone for input.
- Once everything that needs to be said has been said, take a secret ballot vote. All members can express their true opinions, free of peer pressure and group think.

Bee lesson #5: keep the process short.

Scout bees debate the pros and cons of each site vigorously, but not endlessly.

Here are a few tips from the honeybees on how to speed up decision-making and ensure the best result:

- Take a secret ballot periodically to see how close the group is to consensus.
- If the vote is far from unanimous, continue to debate.
- If 80 percent agree on an option, ask the outliers if they can support the majority position.

Talk back: What do you think about applying honeybee democracy to your meetings? What will you do differently?

DVD: "Queen of the Sun: What Are the Bees Telling Us?" Directed by Taggart Siegel

This remarkable documentary is one of the most beautiful nature films I have seen. Director/photographer Taggart Siegel takes viewers inside hives and follows honeybees as they sip on flowers. We also meet beekeepers in gorgeous settings (Illinois, Germany, New Zealand, Italy) and even on rooftops in Manhattan.

Siegel explores the recent and catastrophic disappearance of bees, weaving the dramatic stories of beekeepers, scientists and philosophers from around the world as they struggle to understand and solve the mystery. Because the pollination work of honeybees is crucial to the production of one-third of the food we eat, their struggles will ultimately be our struggles. I recommend this film to everyone. ■

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