

DON'T LET YOUR BEE CLUB MEMBERS ABSCOND — Tony Olekas



A typical meeting with our room setup.

I just walked out of my last bee club meeting (November) as President.

Our club always has its business meeting in November. This is where we make changes to the bylaws based on current events, discuss items like membership dues, training, elections of officers, allocating money to projects and supporting other bee-related groups. It never ceases to amaze me how strongly opinionated people are about how the club spends its money. Funniest thing, the most vocal people have the lowest investment. I have attended lots of meetings and that seems to be consistent among groups. Sorry for going down a rabbit hole.

It was a strange business meeting as I sensed a little tension in the air on the election of officers part of the meeting. It wasn't strange because something happened I didn't expect. It was strange because what I expected happened. Maybe the tension I sensed wasn't in the group but in me.

I have been including the "Remember Elections are in November" verbiage in all my communications for two months prior to the election. I was proactive in holding a Board Meeting to discuss with the group who could be our next President. We jokingly entertained the thought that no one would accept a nomina-

tion. I announced myself available to answer questions about each Board position. I guess that is when I knew I was in trouble when no one asked any questions or showed an interest in taking on the role of a Board member.

Our bylaws specify that the President cannot succeed themselves and the term is for two years. Recommended solution, just change the bylaws. Maybe the term or length in office is a problematic for some people. In my experience, the first year you are learning, the second you are implementing and more comfortable with the decisions at hand. Maybe the commitment or unwillingness to take on work is a factor. So many people are working full-time and value the small amount of free time they have available. I must admit, people had good reasons for not wanting to run for an officer position. The two largest objections for not wanting to take on the responsibility were "I don't have time" or "I don't have enough knowledge to be President". Both valid – sort of.

Let's identify two broad categories of club members who own these positions.

Older club members

I affectionately call this group the old drones. Just like in the hive, you need to have them. They are your

experienced beekeepers who at times come up with that pearl of wisdom. Most of the time they are happy to sit in a meeting, socialize and eat a donut. They don't plan on running for office and fair enough they probably already did that 10 years ago. They should be part of your mentoring team. Even the mentoring commitment some of these people aren't willing to do. This mindset can apply to all ages. Unfortunately I am not entirely wrong in characterizing some people this way, we all know them.

If that is the case, don't invest a lot of time with this group as the return is minimal. In my opinion, the time is better spent mentoring /encouraging new people. I am not saying this applies to all older members so I am sorry if I have offended anyone. If you are in a pinch and ask directly, most will respond favorably.

New Club Members

These are your "high risk of leaving" beekeepers. Basically, they don't know enough to connect all the dots. Hey, let's face it, beekeeping is hard work and expensive. Not only does a new beekeeper have seasonal changes which requires different ways and techniques to handle bees, but there are a thousand variables they need to think about. Without helping this group by making a connection, they



Group of members at Rocky River Nature Park (RRNP), doing inspections and Fall treatments. We partner with RRNP to maintain pollinators in the park and to use as a training area for beginning beekeepers.

are quick to get disenfranchised and for a short time a bee-haver instead of a beekeeper. Yes, that is the value of good club members and a strong State Beekeeping Association.

Bottomline, there is a joy in helping others. We can all have a good laugh about some of the things inexperienced beekeepers do that is just so wrong and maybe a little dangerous but it all worked out. It is not always funny but sometimes it makes a great story. Catching their first swarm is always one of my favorites. Especially when they cohort their family members to help. Their enthusiasm makes it a joy to engage.

So if not for a club, where do prospective and new beekeepers get there information? I would love to say reputable publications and podcasts, but that is a hit or miss. Lets face it, beekeeping is 50% science and 50% art. It is the 50% art that muddies the water. We all heard that saying, “put 10 beekeepers in a room and ask a question and you will get 20 different answers.” I have seen good material and not so good material (videos, etc.) on the internet. That is why in a club you can get a more

direct conversation on the pros and cons of any topic.

What happened in our club doesn't have to happen in yours

First and foremost, we (past Presidents) didn't build our base with new /younger, energized people which would be our supply of future leaders. How did we miss this? Because it is easier to socialize with the people we know then to expand our circle of people that we are not comfortable talking to. At the end of a typical meeting, the officers are tying up loose ends and the people you should be engaging to ensure they attend the next meeting are drifting out without that needed encouragement to return next month. Typically not noticed until your business meeting when you are looking for new officers.

Put this on your to do list whether you are an officer or a member of a club. We all know it, we just aren't good at it. You might be reading this saying “My club is!” and I am happy for you. I belong to three clubs and none of them are that great at making new people feel welcome enough to return. Spend the time, be a good

ambassador. They won't all pan out to be engaged and willing to commit their time. At least not at first.

Try this for starters (in most groups it's all about communication, information and relationships)

- 1.Older members, reengage them. Don't be afraid to ask for someone's help privately. In my experience this works better than asking for volunteers.
- 2.Greet new people (with a smile). Welcome and encourage their attendance.
- 3.Get them involved. Include new people in discussions, introduce them to other club members in their area and check for understanding before they leave.
- 4.In short, take the time early to make them feel included.
 - a.Have them introduce themselves
 - b.Get them a name tag
 - c.Ask about their bees (if they have them)
 - d.Talk to them after the meeting and at the next meeting
 - e.Your goal – Get them to the second meeting!

What is your club doing to be exceptional? (How many of these items does your club do well)

1. Have guest speakers on relevant topics for the month
2. Communicate meetings, State events, new legislation and “What to do this month in the bee yard”
3. Have an email chain, website and Facebook site
4. Develop a mentor contract and Mentor, Mentor, Mentor
5. Have a yearly Beginning Beekeeper Course (long (6 wks.) or short (6 hours))
6. Have Club activities
 - a. Meeting raffles with some nice bee related items (3 to 4)
 - b. Club Honey Show and Contest
 - c. Monthly or quarterly “Hive Dives”
 - d. Participate in educating schools and Ag. Fairs
 - e. Have educational booths at community events
 - f. Cook-outs and/or holiday dinners (Dec) with door prizes
7. Have a 2nd year beekeeping course (half day) splits, queens, treatments etc.
8. Encourage members to get their State Certification, Journeyman and Masters
 - a. Members who get Certified are in a better position to help the club
9. Identify members and help them with their Journeyman packet (activities)
 - a. Assist providing opportunities to obtain their Major and Minor requirements
10. Support your State Beekeepers Club by communicating information from the State
11. Encourage attendance at State Beekeeping Conferences
 - a. Set aside a little club money to send a newbie to a State Conference
 - b. After a State Conference, talk about the Key Note speakers information

Yes, keeping members is a real commitment, but after you get accustomed to doing a few of these items it gets to be routine and easier. Bottomline, do what you can to make people feel included and welcome. They won't want to abscond. Your membership will grow and your next officer elections won't have to be so worrisome. **BC**



How to properly light and use a smoker at RRNP for our beginner beekeepers.

Our club's annual (July) Honey Tasting and cash awards for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place.

