

ONE-ON-ONE

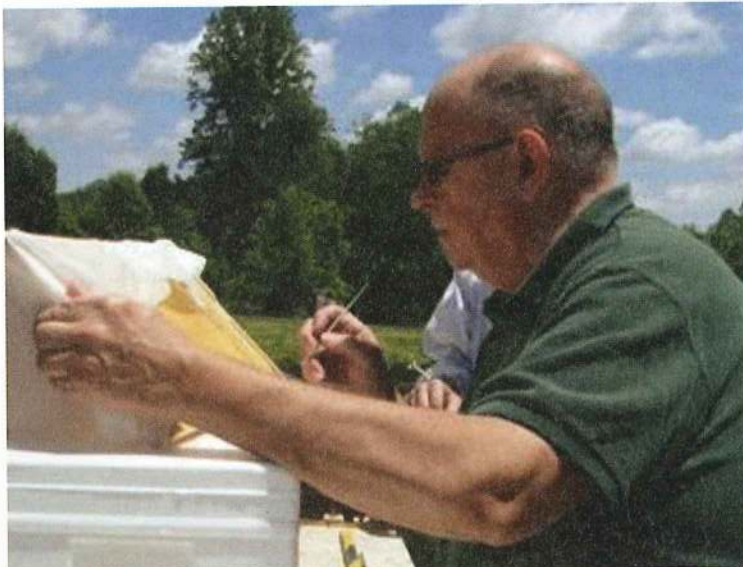
The Success Of Mentoring

Larry Connor

Last night my beekeeping buddy Sheldon and I were getting caught up after many weeks of my travel schedule and his travel schedule keeping us from talking bees-in person that is, since we are always on the phone checking in. We got onto the topic of Mentoring, and Sheldon said "I don't think you know how much I learned that day (several years ago) when you worked with me in my bees. I had read about all of the things we did, but by seeing how you did things really made a huge difference for me." We discussed quite a bit about this, and he wants to develop the entire mentoring theme for some future presentations. His day job deals with training people who work with individuals with special needs and concerns, and having the skills to train or mentor another person is one of his specialties.

It may be a bit risky, but I am going out on a limb with the following statement: **Bee clubs with growing numbers, more young people, women and minorities, are the ones who have a good mentoring program. Clubs without such programs can be described as either old-boy's networks, dying, or just plain dead.**

I know how critical mentoring was for me, first as a graduate student and again when I had to learn queen rearing and instrumental insemination for a business venture. My major professor spent time with me as we worked the Michigan State Apiary. Dr. E.C. "Bert" Martin was a story teller and an instinctive one-on-one teacher.



Certain beekeeping skills, like grafting, require one-to-one attention.

He may not have been the most exciting lecturer in a classroom, but at the personal level he was extremely effective as a teacher. Dr. G.H. "Bud" Cale, Jr was the same way. He was not the writer that his father was (former editor of *The American Bee Journal*), but Bud was a great story teller. He would hold his cigarette in a way to minimize smoke getting into your face, and took great pleasure at showing and telling stories to one or two people.

For many people, learning about bees and how to manage colonies is a lot like riding on a roller coaster. There are periods where everything is going great, and exciting, but then there are periods when nothing goes right, and it is often frustrating. Mentors are there to cheer you on when the ride is going well, and more importantly there to help you during the tough climb to the top to sort through the problems you are having and get you back up to speed.

In the latest issue of *The Bee Line*, Maine State Beekeepers Association newsletter, Anne Frye writes: "The key ingredient needed for learning about bees? Work with bees. That makes sense, right? But if you only have a few hives and have been instructed to only open a hive once every three weeks (and then only keep it open for 15 minutes max), how can you learn what you need to? The benefit of having a willing mentor is incalculable."

Beekeepers who were mentored when they started with beekeeping are more willing to become mentors, and often do an excellent job. They greatly appreciate the benefits of helping new beekeepers learn the basics, and take a huge degree of pride when they see these new beekeepers succeed. Because they were mentored themselves, they have a well-developed sense of the importance of a private teacher or trainer in their own development as a beekeeper,

Individual mentor programs

Nobody set up the mentoring I received a long time ago, but were part of the life-situation I was in, first as a student, and later as a new employee. Not all of us are able to 'fall' into such a situation, or we may not be fortunate as I certainly was to be linked with top-quality mentors. Some new employees find themselves at a desk or work station with a study guide or computer learning guide. Uck. I am sure that someone has spent a great deal of time and money to determine the best way to train folks for adequate proficiency, but I doubt too many people return home to share what they learned

that day. And, when it comes to beekeeping, we need 'way above average' for a new person to master the task of keeping bees.

If you are a new beekeeper, or thinking about starting bees, check around to find your mentor. Start out and talk to the beekeeper selling honey at the town farmer's market and ask who might be able to take on a trainee in exchange for sweat equity. That is a time-tested process, where a new beekeeper works with a medium-sized operator to experience the wide range of chores that face the average beekeeping operation.

Group supported mentor programs

Or see if there is a beekeeper club nearby that has a reference list of potential mentors, like the ubiquitous swarm list, and start with that. That is a simple way for bee clubs and other organizations (nature centers, for example) to support mentoring without having a formal program. A potential mentor may list the conditions under which they take on a new student: having a meeting, the days of the week and months of availability, rules about phone calls and emails.

Easing into mentoring

The mentor list is a simple, somewhat effortless method of developing a mentoring program within a bee club. Someone will need to contact the mentor list for any changes, perhaps on an annual basis. This could be done by an annual email or mailing.

Steps in building a mentoring program

My first formal introduction to an informal mentoring program was at the Backyard Beekeepers group in Fairfield, County, Connecticut. Prior to each meeting, new beekeepers meet with a mentor (more experienced beekeeper) to review the prior month, project colony needs for the next month, and to discuss issues within the group. While not an one-on-one environment, this is a small group program that many other organizations are using because it does not involve a cost. Just the good support of a local beekeeper willing to give up 45 to 60 minutes before the main meeting and tolerate the same questions year after year.

Scholarships for new youth mentees

Another direction many club are using is to sponsor youth scholarships that require monthly meeting participation in pre-meeting report and Q & A sessions. Usually focused on teens, the programs may provide a colony of bees, a beekeeping course, bee suit (etc.), and a mentor. The club underwrite's the large cost of such a program by various fund-raising events. Groups like the Collin County Hobby Bee Club north of Dallas require a parent or guardian attend each meeting, which has the benefit of involving both child and adult in the bee club. After one year the scholarship student owns the bees and is expected to provide a new colony to another student in the future. At least that is the plan in theory.

Mentor-Mentee relationships

The person being mentored is called the mentee (a relatively new word) or protégé (a word around for hundreds of years), referring to the person being 'protected' during the learning process by a learned person, per-



The author and Stibon in Hawaii last year following WAS meeting. Small group meetings are not the same as mentoring, but offer some people a good learning environment.

haps of some degree of success or fame. Since beekeeping is described as being both an art and a science, the use of the work protégé seems appropriate, at least in describing the relationship the two people.

Time, Days and months, email

Ideal programs have limits for the time of and duration of contact. The invitation to provide service should not be a 24-7 expectation.

Who goes to who's bees

In general, the student should go to the apiary of the teacher. That way there are support hives needed to replace missing equipment or bees. I like the model where the mentee keeps a few hives on the property of the mentor for the first season.

Fees

Rather than a direct charge for service, mentors often offer the sale of the first two hives, a classroom session, maybe a textbook, and related access to equipment for a certain time period. Two hives at \$200 each, bee veil, smoker, hive tool, textbook and other items will go well over \$500 per mentee, allowing the instructor some financial return on the time spent with the student. Should the mentor be required to drive to the student's apiary location, at least the cost of travel should be reimbursed.

Sweat Equity

If a person signs on to work for 20 to 50 hours over the course of the first year, without being compensated, the mentor has a trade for time spent teaching in exchange for inexperienced help. There will be times when the mentee will need to fail, and the mentor needs to be able to stand back and let this happen. Otherwise the mentee will not really learn, or may learn to expect the mentor to stop everything and help when all goes wrong.

When I met Sheldon he had two colonies. With the confidence he claims (or blames) he got from me, he will hit the 40 or 50 colony mark this season, since he still plans to make mid to late Fall splits (he does not always do what I recommend, but thinks for himself). During this four or five year period I have seen him blossom into a confident beekeeper. While our relationship is based on friendship and beer, it is nice to see someone develop into a person who is now very happy to share his knowledge with newer beekeepers.

Earlier I stated that the bee clubs that are growing are the ones with mentoring programs. The concept of the apprentice is ancient. It is one based on a gradual learning process between the experienced craftsman and the inexperienced but enthusiastic novice. These are much to be valued in these relationships, as this is the way in which the gentle art and science of bee husbandry is passed on to those who will someday become teachers themselves.

Club mentoring programs draw a bit of criticism. Too expensive. Nobody signs up as a mentor. The mentees

are too fussy, too demanding. Maybe a few of these folks need to take a chill pill. Others need to relax and enjoy the process. It may not be one hundred percent effective, but it has the success of prior generations behind it. **BC**

For the latest in bee books, see www.wicwas.com, or write Dr. Connor at Wicwas Pres, 1620 Miller Road, Kalamazoo MI 49001.

Make plans to attend the Texas Beekeepers Association Master Class taught by Dr. Connor at the annual convention in November, and make your reservations for the Super Sideliner Symposium to be held in January as part of the American Beekeeping Federation in Hersey, PA.