



Are you a beekeeper or a watchmaker?

By Leanne Hoagland-Smith, M.S.



The 21st century has changed the landscape of the business world. In forward-thinking small to mid-sized businesses (SMBs), workers are no longer chained to their desks or production lines. This next-generation business and learning model has delivered a new workplace culture—one that represents a 180-degree flip from the business models so effective in the past. Despite these innovations, however, many institutions are still embracing the old business and learning models.

This reluctance to change the business-model paradigm may be one of the primary reasons for some SMBs' lack of growth. And without growth, SMBs, be they tiny or relatively large, will eventually wither on the vine and die.

"What is this new business and learning model?" you might ask. That is a fair question, best explained by a story that James Fischer recounts in his book *Navigating the Growth Curve*.

The book opens with a story of two business owners, one a beekeeper and the other a watchmaker. The beekeeper functions in a world of chaos, constant change, and uncertainty, in which every bee is an independent agent. The beekeeper must therefore be flexible and adaptable to ensure continued honey production.

In the watchmaker's world, on the other hand, everything is consistent, precise, and orderly. The watchmaker has control over everything relevant to producing the highest-quality watches, although his business cannot adapt quickly to outside forces.

In today's marketplace, Fischer contends, it is far better to be a beekeeper than a watchmaker.

The business world of the last century or so has contained both capitalists and industrialists, as well as players who combine both styles. Extending Fischer's analogy, today's industrialists are the watchmakers, while the capitalists are the beekeepers.

Seth Godin recently blogged about the difference between industrialists

and capitalists. I'm not sure whether he's read Fischer's book, but the affinity between his comments and Fischer's beekeeper/watchmaker analogy was unmistakable.

Many entrepreneurs start out as beekeepers, then, due to the dynamics of economy of scale (scalability), turn into watchmakers. Later, they may attempt to return to being beekeepers, especially if they have failed to stay ahead of the innovation flow. Firms like Gateway come to mind in this regard.

When it comes to leading a business, being a "beekeeper" suggests an ingrained attitude of abundance. These individuals continue to see opportunity after opportunity, even if they have encountered significant challenges; beekeepers do not fear chaos or change.

Years ago I read a story about a couple's two sons. One son was a child with an average temperament; he experienced emotional highs and lows in relatively equal measure. His brother was the eternal optimist, always seeing the good in even the

worst situations. His parents viewed his upbeat attitude with concern—they didn't want their son to be disappointed by life.

Finally, these highly pragmatic parents enlisted the help of a child psychologist, who agreed that having an unrealistically optimistic attitude was not healthy. So one afternoon, the parents took their two sons to a room where, through windows, they viewed two smaller rooms. One room was filled to the ceiling with toys, the other with horse manure.

The brother with the average temperament was placed first in the room with all the toys, as his overly optimistic brother stood by and watched. Then the child psychologist led the second brother to the room filled with horse manure.

The parents and the child psychologist were surprised beyond their wildest expectations—they had thought the more optimistic child

would be devastated at facing the horse manure, given that his brother had received a room full of presents. But their attempt at behavioral training was not going as planned: instead, this lad was wildly digging in the pile of horse manure, flinging it in all directions. They hurriedly opened the door and asked the optimistic son what he was doing.

The young boy replied, "With all this horse manure, there has to be a pony in here somewhere."

Those with an attitude of abundance are the beekeepers of the world. They acknowledge reality in all its opportunity and messiness and work with it. Taking risks is part of their nature. These individuals do not crumple in the face of formidable circumstances. Instead, they run up the hill of chaos, shouting, "Give it to me, world!" and move forward.

Scarcity thinkers are more inclined to be industrialists. Every

resource is maximized; variation is unacceptable. Security reigns supreme with these individuals. Change is good for the other person, but not for the industrialist.

Examining the structure of both models reveals that the beekeeper model is a living, organic system that embraces other living, organic systems. This setup allows beekeepers and their organizations to work with the past and the present while looking toward the future. Their behaviors become more proactive, more accepting of change.

The other model—that of the watchmaker—is inorganic. In watchmaker organizations, the employees work in their designated roles. They are restricted from reflecting upon the past and the future; all they see is the present. In such organizations, reactive behaviors become far more the norm, further solidifying change resistance.

The beekeeper/watchmaker analogy can even extend into the generations currently employed in the workforce. Many Traditionalists and Baby Boomers may initially have been beekeepers; however, the security of a weekly paycheck yielded by respecting authority has rendered many of them watchmakers.

Then there are Generation X and the Millennials. Embracing change and taking risks is part of their mindset, especially given their affection for technology.

The challenge of creating a beekeeper mentality lies in talent development and ongoing operations management. When employees understand all the policies and see them being consistently enforced, they then know what they *cannot* do, allowing them to focus on what they *can* do. We see the results of this phenomenon in the concept of flex



time, where as long as the employee finishes the job within the proper parameters, then the employer does not care if the employee works from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.

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Creating a culture in which all the independent agents work together is not easy: it may mean removing from the workplace, or “hive,” those bees who are less productive than the other bees. These less productive “bees” are the employees who are just barely engaged or actively disengaged—a group that comprises around 75

percent of most SMB organizations. The truly actively engaged employees, who give eight hours of work for eight hours of pay, number around 25 percent.

If an SMB lacks consistent policies and procedures, removing those disgruntled workers may appear to require more effort than it is worth. As a result, no action is taken, and those actively disengaged employees make life miserable for the other 25 percent. In that misery, profits are slowly drained away.

How to fix it? The beekeeper must truly be in charge.

Moving away from the traditional model to one more reflective of today’s business environment begins with how you create solutions. If you approach the solution from a problem-solving perspective, this may suggest that you are working “in the business,” and that you have an existing opinion or bias embedded in the solution.

What may work better is to craft the solution from a model approach such as Appreciative Inquiry. This technique allows you to work “on the business” while preventing bias and opinionated thoughts from entering into the solution.

Other strategies, along with changes in your existing paradigms, must be faced as well. However, as with any decision, the first step is usually the hardest. Here is that first step, in the form of a question to answer: Do you want to be a beekeeper or a watchmaker? **N**

Leanne Hoagland-Smith is the heurist for the next generation of talent management. She guides forward-thinking leaders, at all levels and in all industries, who are facing new and repetitive problems—from people to operations—to achieve sustainable results. Leanne looks forward to hearing from you at leanne@processspecialist.com.