

SO YOU (DON'T) WANNA BE YOUR CLUB'S PRESIDENT?

by SHELLEY STUART



Beekeepers don't die of natural causes; they get clubbed to death. - anon

Of all the tasks that a bee club president needs to accomplish, one stands out as the most important for their club's growth, success and long-term value to its members. The newly minted president should start work on it immediately and give attention to it during every single club interaction.

That one task: Find their own replacement.

This may also be true of other offices, but I speak to the role of club president from personal experience. At the urging of the then-president, I took over the Finger Lakes Beekeepers Club in January 2012. I stepped into the position with a mere three years of beekeeping under my veil, lots of enthusiasm, and dozens of ideas about how to contribute to my beekeeping community. I also made a personal vow that I would not succumb to burnout.

I loved many things about the club, from the veteran members who generously shared their experience and advice, to the bee logo incorporating its eponymous geography. I learned to handle frames at the club's apiary, members calmed my panic when I thought all of my hives were completely queenless late one October, and they voted me to the helm. (I'm sure we all know it was an uncon-

tested election, but still.) I wanted to walk away from the presidency not only with a feeling of accomplishment but retaining that affection. In January 2016, when I said "OK" to another (uncontested) term, I also firmly stated that it was my last year, and someone else would need to be president. And I repeated that announcement in February. And March. And April.

It turned out to be the most difficult project of my tenure.

I even sent a message to the club email list with the subject line of "Job Description — don't pass on this awesome opportunity!"

Title: *President of the Finger Lakes Beekeeping Club*

Start date: *January 2017*

Schedule: *Part-time/occasional*

Travel: *Local to Ithaca area*

Job Type: *Elected Volunteer*

Number of openings: *1*

Job duration: *self-limiting or one year, whichever is longer*

Description:

- *The successful candidate will maintain and grow the vibrant and healthy hobby beekeeping community served by the FLBC. Duties include (but are not limited to):*
- *Administrative tasks necessary to keep a hobby club functioning. Namely (and most by delegation):*
 - *secure meeting space for regular club meetings,*
 - *assure proper oversight of club finances,*
 - *arrange for winter speaker series,*
 - *nurture the mentorship program,*
 - *coordinate the spring bee order,*

- *web site updates,*
- *ensure solid management of the Club hives and equipment,*
- *plan/implement workshops as needed.*

- *Encourage the growth of hobby beekeeping in the Finger Lakes area.*
- *Keep club members informed of best beekeeping practices.*
- *Encourage healthy, civil discussions at meetings and online.*
- *Work with ESHPA [Empire State Honey Producers Association] as appropriate to further beekeeping and the Club's presence.*
- *Generate ideas for workshops, meetings, and outreach.*
- *Encourage club members' increased participation in Club events.*

Qualifications:

Enthusiasm to build club spirit and participation, good organizational skills, good communication skills, at least two years of beekeeping experience. Current Club member in good standing. Also: Majority vote at the January 2017 club meeting.

Cricket.

Cutting to the chase, this part of the story ends well: I handed over the presidency to a couple who coled the club after me and I succeeded in my goal, leaving the club with that warm club feeling still alive and well. But honestly, I shouldn't have needed twelve months of reminders and a gimmicky call to action. The average club member shouldn't have gone through a year of mental "I can't, but I hope someone does" with

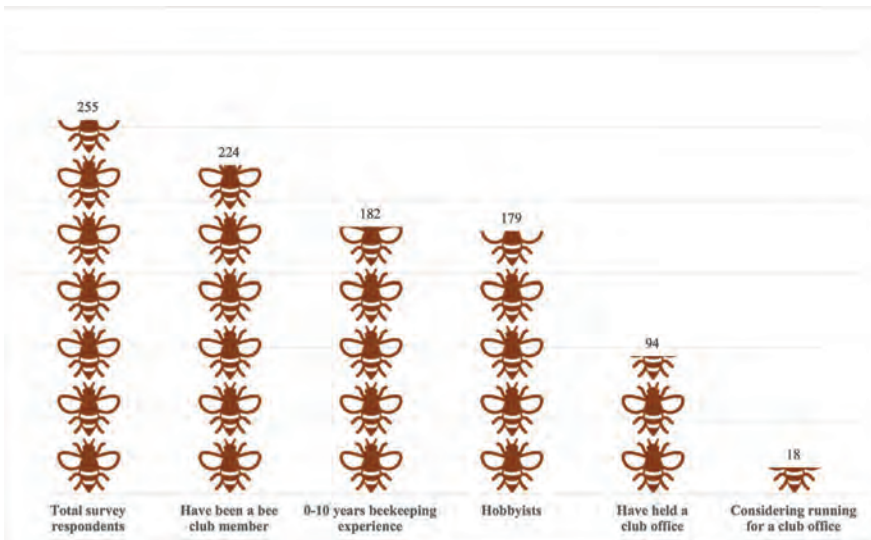


Fig. 1

regard to leadership. I could have — should have — done better. I should have started finding the next potential president (or presidential candidates) in February 2012, not January 2016.

WAS MY EXPERIENCE UNIQUE?

You may assume that the answer to this question is “no” and flip to “The Curious Beekeeper.” Understandable: That’s what I’ve assumed as well for a long time. But a sample size of exactly one club works for an op-ed, not a more thoughtful analysis. So this past January I conducted a survey about bee clubs and their leadership. It went to various email lists, Facebook groups, the online forum I frequent, and wherever else word of mouth took it. I asked beekeepers about their participation in club offices, and their perceptions and experiences about those offices. I wanted to know how problematic other club leaders found succession planning.

THE RESPONDENTS

Over 250 individuals took the time to share their thoughts and experienc-

es, with the largest percentage coming from self-identified hobbyists. Figure 1 conveys a more interesting summary than a litany of numbers. For the purposes of this discussion, 44% of those who took the survey have either held a club office or are thinking about it.

THE VIEW FROM THE PODIUM

Focusing on the bee club members who have held a club office, I dug a little deeper, illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. In short, the majority of club officers were hobbyists with 6-10 years of beekeeping experience.

The role of President was well-represented (57%) among the beekeepers. (The survey title was “Bee clubs and their leadership” so there may be some selection bias in these numbers.) To understand beekeeper motivations, I asked the open-ended question: “Why did you accept that position?” allowing people to express in their own words why they ended up in the office(s) they held. I received an array of responses like these:

- I wanted to have a club that I found interesting and provided information that everyone would find useful.
- Nobody else would do it.
- To teach new beekeepers.
- I thought the club could use new energy and ideas.
- I had a vision of how a club could help beekeepers.
- Volunteered as someone with experience to keep the club going.
- I was happy to get back to agricultural commodity production and husbandry activities. Also enjoy helping others be successful at apiculture.
- I was knowledgeable about beekeeping and also had the technical skill to run meetings.

I then standardized the responses to run metrics. I defined eight different motivators for individuals to become officers. Applied to the list above, I boiled it down to:

- I founded the club
- I stepped up
- To learn or teach
- To improve the club
- I wanted to give back or contribute
- I was asked
- For personal enjoyment
- I was qualified

The winner? “I stepped up” rose to the head of the class, with “I was asked” a respectably close second (Figure 4).

I found myself in plenty of good company with “I was asked.” What else mirrored my experiences was revealed in the open-ended follow-up question I asked, illustrated in Figure 5: “How easy was it (or will it be) for you to step down, and why?” For those who had (or think they’ll have) a hard time leaving their office, the dominant reason is because there are no other volunteers. Yep, that rang true for me as well. (The num-



Fig. 2

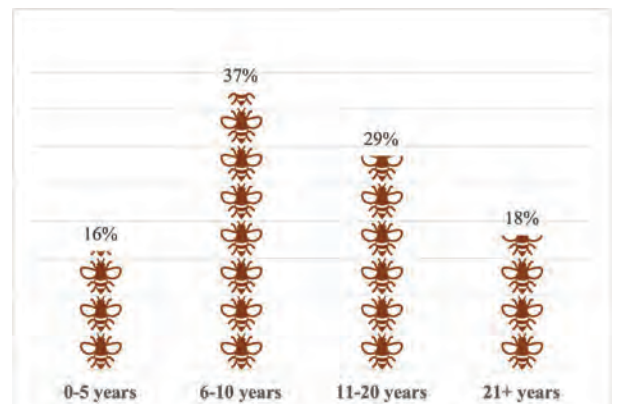


Fig. 3

ber of officers who answered “easy” surprised me at first. Their responses suggest that these officers are part of vibrant, strong clubs, many with succession plans in place, and that they represent the majority, which is a great thing. But the “hard” category competes with it very closely.)

Now let’s go back to that colorful pie chart detailing “Why did you accept an officer position?” and get to that second big slice: “I was asked.” Before I do that, I’m going to take a little side trip.

ABOUT THOSE WANNABEES ...

Only 18 of the survey participants indicated that they’re considering running for office, so the sample size is smaller than I’d like for a sound analysis. (It’s a lot smaller than many of those currently holding an office would like as well.) Figures 6 and 7 give a sense of this audience.

There’s a standout difference between this group and those who have held an office; this groups skews heavily toward the newer beekeepers.

You should have a sense of how I standardized the open-ended question “Why do you want to be in that position?” (For those who want to look at the raw data, I’ll provide a link at the end of this article.) I want to examine two points in particular (I mirrored these standardizations to the first set), illustrated in Figures 8 and 9.

In this case, “more open organization” refers to clubs with, as one person put it, “entrenched fiefdoms.” “Others’ support” was a bit harder to nail down but basically includes folks who need reassurance that it’s perfectly OK for them to become a club officer.

Another interesting data point from the survey lies in “What would prevent you from running for office?” The two big roadblocks here are lack of free time (56%) and resistance from incumbents (28%). As a sitting club officer, your best way to respond to the first (time) is to make your job as effortless as possible. (Current officers in the second category have finished “The Curious Beekeeper” and have moved on to “Notes from the Lab” — a story for another issue.)

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

I shared with you my personal experience with stepping up — and down — from a club presidency, which I found strongly mirrored in the collective experiences of others. As a hobbyist (78%) I felt too inex-

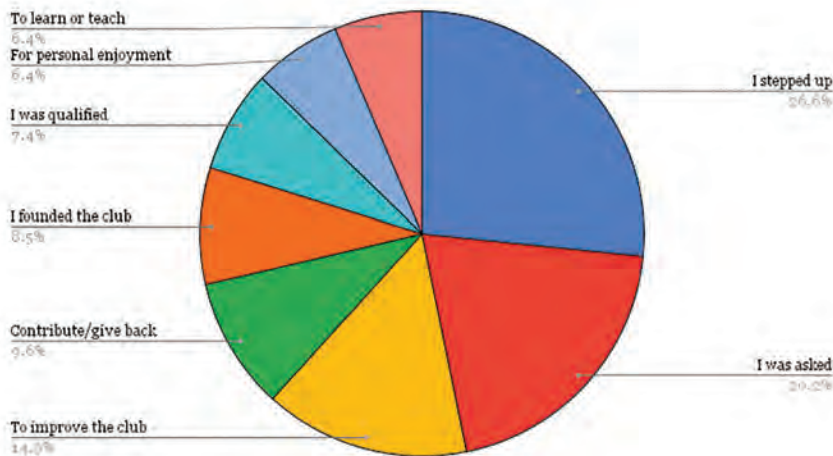


Fig. 4

perienced (78%), but someone encouraged me to run for office (20%). I wanted to contribute to my beekeeping community (44%) and it was hard to step down (40%) because members just weren’t volunteering (62%).

What I didn’t know at the time was that in all likelihood a potential pool of willing successors (8%) existed in the club. That may seem like a very small percentage of club members, but you only need one club president. In order to encourage that one individual, I needed to find them, and then I had to ask — that second-largest reason that officers went into their positions.

I return you now to the charge I made at the onset. The newly-minted officer’s most important job of their tenure: Find their own replacement from Day 1. They shouldn’t rely on the “please volunteer so the club doesn’t fall apart” approach like I

did — the subtext of that is “I need someone to volunteer” colored with increasing desperation up to Election Day. Unless their club falls into that “vibrant” category, this is statistically likely to fail. The new officer needs to find and nurture that 8% and eventually say, “You’ve got good ideas and organizational skills — why don’t you run for president?” where the subtext is, “I think you’re qualified and your contributions would improve the club.” If they use the demographics to their advantage they can tap into the enthusiasm of the beekeepers who have three to five years of beekeeping experience. These individuals are actively thinking about getting more involved in their clubs — in other words, that’s the candidate pool, so don’t disregard it.

Wait a minute — stop the swarm! How can such a new beekeeper be a club officer?! They don’t really know

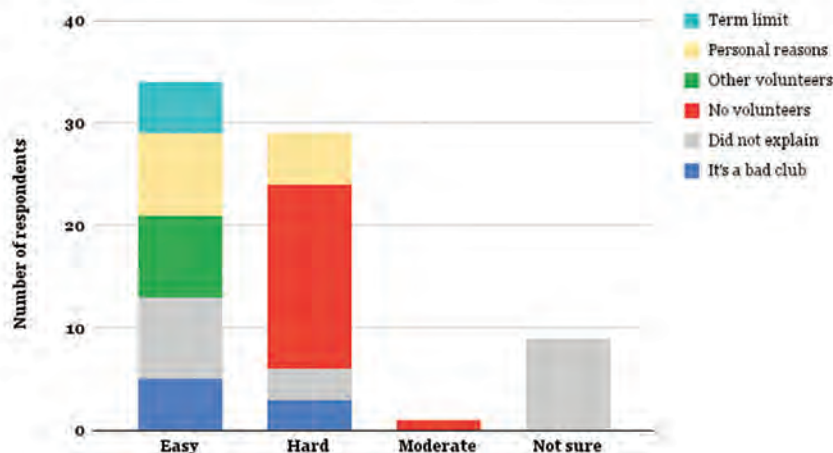


Fig. 5

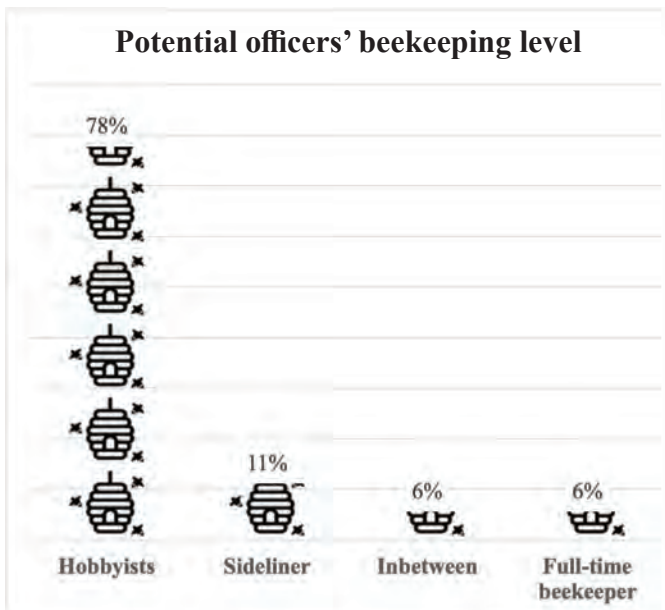


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

anything about bees! At least, that's what I thought to myself in 2012. I was wrong. New beekeepers don't know *everything* about bees. As far as the general (non-officer) club members are concerned, that's third on the list of "What's the hardest thing for bee club officers to do?" (Figure 10) Your club treasurer doesn't need to have the development times for bee castes memorized. Your vice-president doesn't need to be current in the latest queen-rearing research. Your president doesn't need to be fluent in all things *Tropilaelaps*. You want them to have some reasonable knowledge about bees, sure. But do they have organizational skills and people skills? Can they balance the books? Find meeting space? Have well-run meetings with topics that appeal to a wide

range of beekeepers? Heck with their beekeeping tenure — or lack thereof — elect them!

Go back and compare the various graphics between those holding positions and those looking to run for office. The vast majority of the potential candidates want to contribute or give back, or to improve the club. That directly mirrors the 24% of officers who did hold office. (If you argue that "stepping up" qualifies as improving the club, then that number leaps to 51%.) Incumbents worried about the beekeeping side of things have the option to step out of an office and into a mentor/support role for the new officer, bridging the gap between knowledge and enthusiasm.

In my opening, I made the claim that the club will benefit by the of-

ficers actively finding replacements. I can't provide data backing up this statement from this survey. What I can provide are some related comments from the survey that individuals volunteered in a "Share any additional thoughts" option.

[Clubs] need to have people in charge that want to better and continue the club, otherwise the club becomes lost, and membership goes down. They need active and willing members to help, otherwise the leaders will get discouraged, and once this happens it's hard to bounce back.

I do find there is a small core doing most of the work of the club. It becomes unsustainable at times.

Our club doesn't have any heir apparent for president and vice-president, so it meanders on.

It's hard to find proactive leaders. Most are only reactive and don't move the clubs forward.

I'm pleased with the growth and the direction we steered our club. The president and I brought our club to a higher level of educational service for the members. Now others can lavish in the success.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This next bit of advice assumes that your club is not an "entrenched fiefdom," which is a completely different problem. Are you one of those 8% of club members who are considering

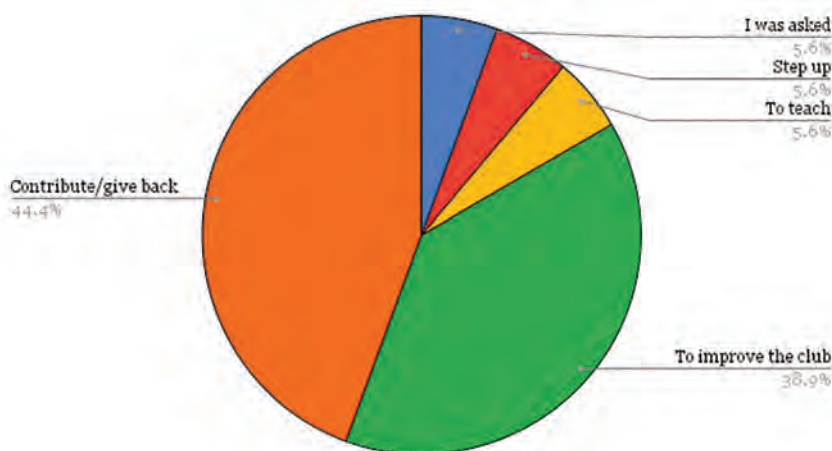


Fig. 8

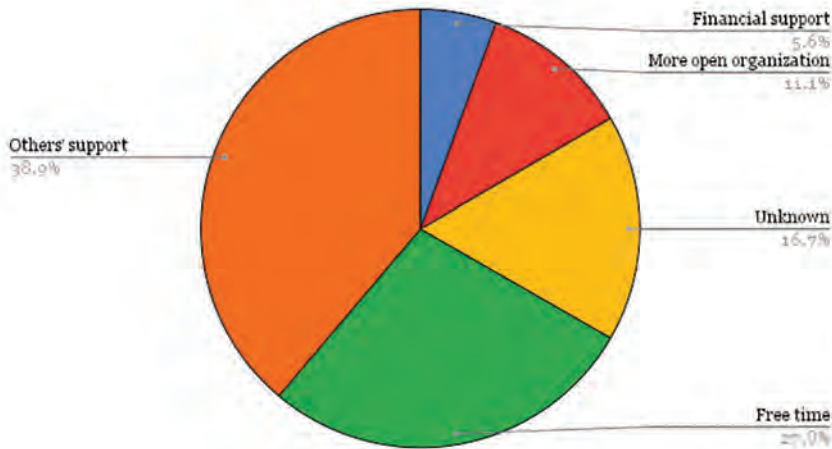


Fig. 9

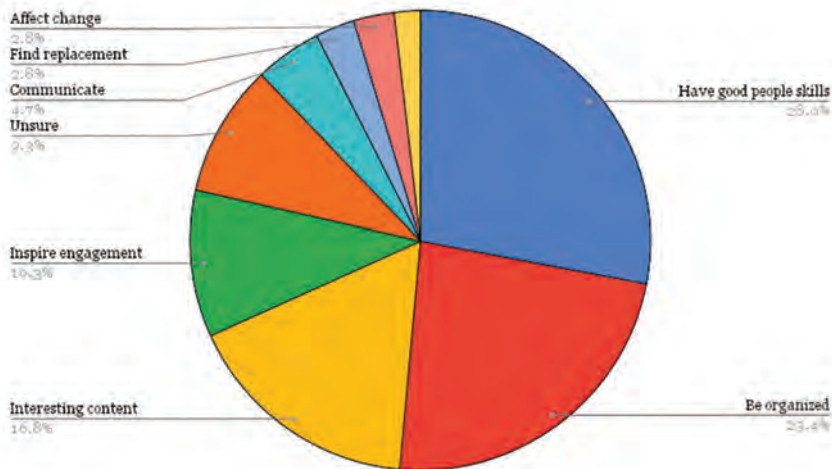


Fig. 10

Be the successor that you eventually want to find.

To the current officers looking for their own graceful exit, statistically you have a highly engaged individual in your club whom you can nurture. They're probably a hobbyist, probably have 3-5 years of beekeeping experience, and most likely are hovering in the shadows. Find them, groom them, encourage them. It may not be Day One of your presidency, but it's not too late to start finding your own replacement.

Raw data for this subject are available at <https://tinyurl.com/2yhsr6m2>. Some responses were edited for anonymity.

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running for a bee club office? Do your club a solid:

Don't wait to be asked.

It's a scary thing to look at the current officers — likely with more beekeeping experience than you—and have the nerve to say "I can do that!" But the data suggest that if someone

asked you to run, you would do so. They also suggest that incumbents anticipate that you will volunteer to run so they won't ask. Don't let this dichotomy stymie you from contributing to your local club. Find a way to let your current officer know you're eventually interested in the position.

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