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**HONEYBEE #43:
COOPERATION IS THE NEW COMPETITION**

Competition has been shown to be useful to a certain point and no further, but cooperation begins where competition leaves off.

- FDR

The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.

- Bertrand Russell (*Of course, he also said, "Life is nothing but a competition to be the criminal rather than the victim." Take your pick!*)

The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries.

- Winston Churchill

No one can whistle a symphony.

- Popular Pinterest quote, origin uncertain

In corporate settings, the word "cooperation" is often spoken with a tinge of disdain. Cooperation is for those nice people who think the world is like kindergarten. But we are grown ups! Business is about competition! (Or if you are Peter Thiel, it's about being so amazing you don't even have competition, because you have a monopoly instead.) Either way, **the implicit message is loud and clear: cooperation is for babies and losers.** Maybe you try it on an annual retreat as some sort of fluffy bonding ritual, but not on a regular workday.

Well, okay, here's a test. Think of your greatest competitive victory – a deal you closed, a match you won, a foe you vanquished. Now think about HOW that victory came about. Did you do it singlehandedly? Really? You against the world? Chances are, even if you were alone in the arena at some decisive point in time, even if you never saw your helpers,

to get to the arena in the first place, a huge web of cooperation was at work, making your victory possible. Whether in business systems or ecosystems, cooperation is the rule, not the exception.

Why is it so hard to admit that cooperation is valuable? Perhaps one reason is that we have, especially in America, been conditioned to confuse success with good fortune. Yes, the Protestant work ethic has a kernel of truth – personal effort does matter, and so does talent. A lot, at times. But these are just ingredients, not the whole pie. I recognize that truth, and I am happy to highlight the many cooperative elements that have contributed to my life – teachers, family, coworkers, capitalism itself – but only to a point. Secretly, deep down inside, I want to think it's me. I am a special snowflake, a snowflake that has earned everything herself, no luck or help required! A-yup.

A second reason is, it's a slippery slope from acknowledging all of the help we've received (and given) to acknowledging that we don't really control very much at all, to seeing that most of our successes are a combination of luck and others' support, with a dash of attribution to our own focus or skill. We are swimming in a vast sea of cooperation, but it's one we don't get to control. This can be comforting, and it can also be terrifying.

Fortunately, there are benefits to valuing cooperation more consistently and explicitly. For one thing, it's less lonely. For another, outcomes are often better – turns out Miss Pichini at Whitfield Elementary was right. **Sharing is good.** If you need a more intellectually rigorous explanation, consider this summary from a recent paper by [Ole Peters](#) and Alexander Adamou, *The Evolutionary Advantage of Cooperation*, which was inspired by discussions at a Santa Fe Institute meeting.

Here we point out a very general mechanism whereby cooperation can evolve. The mechanism is based the following insight: natural growth processes tend to be multiplicative. In multiplicative growth, ergodicity is broken in such a way that fluctuations have a net-negative effect on the time-average growth rate, although they have no effect on the growth rate of the ensemble average. Pooling and sharing resources reduces fluctuations, which leaves ensemble averages unchanged but -- contrary to common perception -- increases the time-average growth rate for each cooperator. (emphasis added)

In other words, sharing is good.

Even Michael Porter, the original [Competitive Advantage](#) guru, he of the [Five Forces](#), is focused these days on his [Shared Value](#) work with Mark Kramer (more detail [here](#); HBR paywall). He actually views Shared Value as another form of competitive advantage, which is a neat insight. **Competition and cooperation are not opposites.** The roots of [compete](#) mean “to strive together” and the roots of cooperate [cooperate](#) mean “to work together” Both sets of concepts include a whole lot of mutualistic activity at the center. And as noted above, **over the longer term, cooperation is a great competitive strategy.**

Yet despite this compelling evidence of its effectiveness, being a cheerleader for cooperation is hard, precisely because we still think the very idea is “soft”. So, here are a few tangible cooperative examples and practices that might inspire your own endeavors.

COOPERATIVE PRACTICES AND EXPERIMENTS

1) PERSONAL PRACTICE – WIDENING CIRCLES

There is lots of evidence that the practice of gratitude is a Very Healthy Thing – yet it’s awfully easy to skip the “practice” part. One exercise that has helped me is to pick something, anything – an object, a friend, a news item – and to trace the expanding circles that have brought that thing into your life. Here is my coffee mug, full of coffee. Just to get that I needed running water, and a way to heat it up... which means I needed water pipes and treatment plants and electricity and a kettle and rain and rivers and we haven’t even gotten to the coffee beans yet.... You can see how the list gets pretty long, pretty quickly. This tracing makes you feel smaller (in a good way), and more aware of the near-magic that has to occur just to get that cup of coffee, before you even begin the day.

I call this my “widening circles” practice, after [Rilke's poem](#) by the same name. To be fair, I think Rilke had more lofty ideas in mind, but hey, you gotta start somewhere.

While you’re at it, the OnBeing episode featuring Joanna Macy, linked in the same poem link above, is worth listening to in its entirety.

2) PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE – ICEBERGS

Just this month, we lost the brilliant [Jay Forrester](#), pioneer of systems modeling. It’s partly through her early work with Forrester that [Dana Meadows](#) created the classic [Leverage Points](#) framework, mapping out all of the possible layers of intervention for systems change.

A user-friendly tool for systems thinking is the [Iceberg Model](#), which encourages us to look beneath the surface of “what’s happening” to identify behaviors, structures, and mental models that form what goes on in those more visible areas. We’ve attached the Iceberg image at the end of this publication so you have it for handy reference, with thanks to the [Donella Meadows Institute](#). (At Honeybee, we often talk about reallocating some of the time spent analyzing “leaves on the tree” towards nourishing the soil that supports the roots.... same idea.)

To learn more about the amazing life and career of Jay Forrester, [this article from the MIT Technology Review](#) is useful. To understand the emergence of the “limits to growth” work that Meadows took on when (at first) working with Forrester’s team, [this summary from the Sloan Review](#) is great.

The short executive summary of Forrester’s career: “He helped develop digital computing. He oversaw the creation of a national air defense system and helped launch MIT’s Lincoln Laboratory. Then he joined what is now the MIT Sloan School of Management and founded the field of system dynamics, which examines complex business, economic, and environmental systems—and the unexpected feedback effects human activity creates within them.” Also, his dad’s name was Marmaduke.

