

A Holistic Management Skeptic

by Seth Wilner

My story is one of a skeptic who only came to embrace Holistic Management after trying it on for size personally. I returned home after the first week of training with some significant skepticism about the whole process and its practical utility. I was also somewhat skeptical about the impacts that people claimed were the result of using this process. I believe a great deal of this skepticism was due to the fact that I lacked the “why” behind each step of the model. This skepticism proved an asset though, as it drove my personal exploration.

As an Extension educator with the University of New Hampshire, I decided to try Holistic Management on for size first before I introduced it to any growers with whom I was working. I did not want to teach something if I could not be sure it worked or was practical. I approached my wife and told her about what I had learned in my first week of The Savory Center’s Certified Educator Training Program and about my plans to start managing holistically at home. She too was skeptical, but when I presented to her my null hypothesis that Holistic Management *would not* benefit the quality of our lives, our financial condition, or the environment on our five acres, she said she would indulge me.

My wife and I sat down and went through the steps of defining our whole under management and forming our holistic goal. I brought a flip chart home, set it up in my living room, and served as both facilitator and participant as we went through the publication, *At Home with Holistic Management*. Our conversations were rich, and we learned worlds about each other. It was just like we were dating again, discussing ethics, values, philosophies, life

views, hobbies, skills, etc. At one point, we did an exercise where we wrote down the top 10 things we liked about ourselves and the top 10 things we liked about each other. We exchanged our lists and were blown away by each other’s thoughts and words.

My experiences with defining our whole and forging a holistic goal demonstrated to me that the process of developing a holistic goal was as potent as the product itself. It is worth mentioning that my wife and I found it extremely helpful to acknowledge up front that our whole under management and holistic goal were only for our internal use. This saved us from worrying about the wording or how it sounded or other people’s judgments, which did pose stumbling blocks at the beginning. That freed us to simply use words to capture our true thoughts and feelings, and it allowed us to be playful, silly, serious, spiritual, emotional and philosophical in our answers.

Good Neighbors

With our first temporary holistic goal formed, we took the advice of Jim Weaver and started testing everything we could to learn how to use the testing questions embedded within the framework. We had a great deal of fun with this, and also struggled to figure out what to do in certain situations. One such situation was when we needed to buy a truck.

My neighbor knew I was looking for a truck. We were always borrowing other friends’ trucks, and we could sense this was wearing thin for people. We tested the decision to purchase a truck and decided to do so. We did not want to go into debt, so we limited the cost of the truck to \$1000. My neighbor offered us a deal—his old

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truck and his muzzle-loader for a total of only \$400. The truck needed an estimated \$600 in repair, so the total would equal the \$1,000 Sharon and I had budgeted. It seemed like a good idea, so we agreed. As part of the agreement, my neighbor was supposed to get the truck into the mechanic using his trailer. Well, the truck sat there for months, and then got buried under several feet of snow. I was disappointed with his inaction so decided to actively look for a truck elsewhere.

I found another truck with a plow for only \$1,200, a better truck for about the same money. We had the extra \$200, and I could have the truck now, ending the need to wait for my neighbor to get his truck to the mechanic. We tested the decision and noted the red flags that came up with the social weak link test. If we bought the other truck, it could very well upset our neighbor and hurt our relationship. Likewise, the society and culture

test also made us queasy. We like our neighbor a great deal and felt in our gut that buying the other truck could definitely have the potential to hurt our relationship. As a result of using these testing questions, I decided to go down and talk with my neighbor to see if buying the other truck would upset him. (In our forms of production correlating to the quality of life statement about good relationships with neighbors, we had an open communication process, building respectful relationships, etc.—those statements guided me to go down there and talk with him as well.)

During our conversation, my neighbor said that it would be fine if I bought the other truck, but I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was hurt. I went home and tested the decision again. I decided that the red flags were still there, and I valued having a good relationship with my neighbor over owning a truck. I returned to my neighbor, explained to him my thinking and told him I would buy his truck, as agreed. He was moved by this decision, and he told me that he would get the truck to the mechanic in short order.

This was my first exposure to the potency of Holistic Management. By using our holistic goal

to simultaneously consider the social, economic, and environmental impacts of a potential decision, our quality of life was enhanced. There is little doubt in my mind, or Sharon's, that I would have rationalized how it was my neighbor's fault for not getting the truck to the mechanic, for being slow, lazy, etc. And, indeed, he could have acted far more quickly. And so it could have been that I owned a better truck, not had to wait, and my neighbor would have lost out because he was slower than what we agreed to. Yet a good relationship with our neighbors is far more important to us in our life. Actually the truck situation served to strengthen my relationship with my neighbor, and we are very much closer as a result.

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Small-Town Friendliness

Over the months, other significant impacts to the quality of our life occurred. In one situation, my car died, and I needed to replace it instantly. After finding

another car to buy, I approached my bank for financing. Since the vehicle was a 1996 model, they would only offer me a 9.9 percent interest rate. If the car were newer, they would have offered me a much lower rate. This was quite disturbing to me, so I chose not finance my car through that bank and went home.

I stewed on the drive home and thought about options. I got out our Holistic Management materials and looked at these for ideas. I saw in my future resource base that I had described a rural community with small town amenities and friendly culture. It occurred to me that this bank was not meeting my expectations. I had all my accounts there, was a loyal customer, and so on and so forth. I kept looking at my whole under management and saw in my resource base the names of community members with whom I served on various boards. I saw the name of the bank president, as we had served on an economic development board together in town. I decided to call him and discuss my situation and share with him my expectations regarding his bank's services. We set up an appointment and got together.

During this conversation he asked my why I didn't use a home equity loan instead of a car

loan. The rates were better, and the interest was tax deductible. No one had mentioned that option before him, and it sounded great. We looked into this option only to find that I did not have enough equity in my home to get the full amount I needed for the car loan. He waived that restriction, granting me the full loan at a 4.75 percent interest rate. Indeed this was the small town friendliness that I expected from my bank. No doubt this positively impacted the quality of my life, and my decision to contact the bank president helped me advance toward my holistic goal.

Had my whole under management and holistic goal not been written down, I would not have thought to contact the bank president. Seeing things on paper triggered the thoughts. Likewise, I tested several approaches to the conversation. These approaches ranged from calling the bank president and telling him what my expectations of his bank were and informing him that if his bank could not meet these expectations I would find one that did, to a softer approach looking for ways to resolve my problem. Although it is fairly obvious which approach would work better, simply testing these approaches helped me see the probable consequences of calling him in a hot head type manner. By testing the decision prior to implementing it, I was able to craft the tone of my conversation.

Of Septic Systems & Ireland

Sharon and I were rabid budgeters well before we created our first holistic financial plan, so we had most of the data available when we sat down to work through the Holistic Management® Financial Planning process.

Initially, we decided to devote 10 percent of our gross income to “planned profit.” The textbook suggests using some percentage that challenges you, but we decided to be gentle. In short order, we increased our planned profit to 24 percent which was quite a sum of money that started accruing. We monitored our finances monthly, and this gave us firm control over our spending habits. As we were somewhat liberal with our budget allocations, we actually had more money allocated than we spent. The net result is that we were in far better financial condition as a result of Holistic Management.

Our planned profit has proven both helpful and useful, strongly increasing the quality of our lives. In one situation, our septic system failed

without warning. These repairs cost in the neighborhood of \$6,000. Had we not accrued money through our planned profits, we would have been in a tremendous bind. Having these resources unspent and undedicated, we were able to weather the storm and come out the other end with no debt incurred. That event was quite eye opening. Through the Holistic Management® Financial Planning process, we were also able to remodel our house, buy new furniture for the first time in our lives, and plan a vacation to Ireland together.

Connecting with Nature

My wife and I are avid gardeners. I focus on fruit and vegetable production, and Sharon focuses on landscaping with annuals, perennials, and woody shrubs. At first we used traditional methods for raising our crops and then switched



As an extension agent, Seth Wilner set out to prove that Holistic Management wouldn't work. In doing so, he discovered it could actually help him improve his relationships, quality of life, finances, and understanding of nature.

to organic production methods. After learning the skills necessary for organic production, we felt confident that we were producing a healthy food source in a sustainable manner. This confidence was based on our belief that all organic practices were sustainable. With Holistic Management, we realized we needed to look at the effect of our practices on the ecosystem processes to determine if our practices were in fact sustainable.

Such a focus called for a major paradigm shift. First of all, Holistic Management makes one far more connected to nature and all of its complex interactions. Second, it frees one from simply looking to the books to see what the accomplished organic growers were doing and implementing those practices on our land. Instead, we realized we need to monitor our

whole given what we were seeing and the outcomes we wanted.

Through our monitoring practices, we have come to learn so much more about the impact of our actions on the soil and mineral cycles. Likewise, Sharon and I have altered our practices as a result. At one point, we put up yellow sticky traps to see how much erosion was occurring under one set of growing practices versus another. Both practices were considered sustainable, yet one resulted in far more wind erosion than another. We also more keenly scrutinized the mulches we used, and as a result we switched from black plastic to straw mulch for the crops that did not require the added heat. For those crops such as tomatoes and peppers, which benefit from the extra heat units black plastic provides, we turned to recycled plastics and use these over each year, reducing our wastes. We also cropped differently, taking advantage of vertical and horizontal interplanting techniques that more efficiently capture the sun's energy.

So there it was, plain to see; my null hypothesis that Holistic Management would not impact the quality of our lives, our financial condition, or the environment on our five acres of land was clearly wrong. It was obvious to me that the process of defining our whole under management and our holistic goal had brought Sharon and me closer together. Likewise our commitment to produce respectful communication enhanced our relationship and built trust in our marriage. There were also similar improvements in our finances and the way we managed our land and raised our food. In setting out to prove that Holistic Management didn't work, I found out unequivocally that it does indeed improve people's lives, finances, and resources.

Once I was convinced of the impacts of the Holistic Management® decision-making framework, I started working with farmers and teaching them the process. I found my own personal exploration to be most valuable in my work with them. I could use personal anecdotes, I was familiar with some of the common hang ups and reservations, and I was more familiar with some of the “whys” behind various steps. So using it at home first was beneficial in numerous ways.

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