

MENTORING: PROVIDING GREATEST BENEFIT TO NEW AND SEASONED FACULTY IN AN EXTENSION ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

This descriptive study stems from a pilot mentoring program that served as a small-scale replica of a statewide program. The objectives of the study were to determine benefits and value to protégés, mentors and the Extension organization. Three phases of data collection were utilized. Phase one and two were formative evaluations collected via questionnaires, consisting of open-ended and Likert-scale questions. The third phase was a summative evaluation that utilized four focus groups consisting of one group of each of the following extension positions: District Extension Directors, County Extension Directors, Mentors and Protégés. Data analysis for the Likert-scale questions consisted of a basis statistical test. Qualitative findings were analyzed using content analysis to recognize major and minor themes and were then used to make judgments on the findings and subsequent recommendations. Benefits and value were perceived to be gained by both the mentors and protégés in the program. For example, protégés benefited from the vision and support of being paired with a seasoned agent. The mentors gained personal satisfaction from helping a new agent and they felt rejuvenated by working with a younger enthusiastic protégé that gave the mentor a new fresh look at their job. The participants also provided insight in regards to recommendations, guidelines and procedures towards what would make an effective mentoring program.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Cooperative Extension agents have complex and demanding jobs requiring them to stay abreast of the issues that are affecting families and industries within their county (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000). Most agents are specialized in different areas such as livestock, horticulture, family consumer science, 4-H/youth development, or community development. Within each of these specializations, there are clientele who look to these agents for assistance and education about issues and needs of interest to them. These tasks become evermore complex because of a vast diversity of job responsibilities that involve assessing clientele needs, planning extension programs, teaching, evaluating, providing office support, and serving as technical subject matter experts (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh and Nieto, 2002).

If extension is to remain a viable source of information for a changing world, continued professional development must become a priority. Professional development is vital for veteran

agents in order to educate them on the rapidly changing industry. However, possibly more importantly, new agents need to be effectively educated, so they too can effectively function within the organization and educate the public in their specialized area.

This study focuses on new extension agents who are in the entry stage of their career. Typically, new extension agents may feel overwhelmed with all of the information regarding the organization, job duties, and operational policies and procedures. Extension needs new employees to develop skills quickly to the level at which they can perform their work efficiently and effectively (Kutilek, Gunderson & Conklin, 2002).

The primary focus on training new agents should be based on developing easy-to-use tools for managers and new employees to help them do their jobs. According to Smith and Beckley (1985), new agent orientation and training is one of the first experiences agents have with professional development. However, these orientations are usually very brief, varying from a one or two day orientation to just a packet that is given to the new agent to review. Many orientations cover a large amount of information in a short amount of time. If the orientation process is given more focus, it could be a greater benefit to the new agent as he or she embarked on a new career.

The turnover rate of new agents is still high possibly due to the overwhelming information they receive and insufficient follow-up within the first months they are with the extension organization (Smith & Beckley, 1985). According to Ritchie, orientations consist of topics such as: the mechanics of being a Cooperative Extension Services Employee, required annual reports, official picture taking, history of the organization and the university, and meeting departmental staff (Ritchie, 1996). In addition, topics on stress management, personal growth and development, and how to balance personal and professional life are typically included (Ritchie, 1996). Although new agent orientation was well received and provided important information, new faculty who continued were still overwhelmed with their new job and did not know where to start (Ritchie, 1996).

In contrast to the above descriptions of the new agent orientation and trainings, there are states that take a considerable amount of time to train their new agents such as the state of Florida's UF/IFAS Extension. In Florida, the major part of new agent orientation and training is a three-part sequential on-campus orientation and training program. The program consists of three sessions lasting a total of eight-and-a-half days. The program provides basic knowledge and skills to help new faculty members understand and become effective in their role. This structure was developed and implemented to help meet the overall educational goals of comprehensive professional development programs that were based upon the ascribed and perceived needs of new county faculty.

According to Smith and Beckley (1985) data from extension exit interviews indicated something was lacking in the new agents' introduction to the organization. Throughout the literature, in regards to training new employees, there has been evidence that there should be opportunities to extend and expand orientation programs. Mentoring is a method that could successfully introduce the employee to their new job and organization. A mentor provides someone a new employee could feel comfortable asking questions, which would relieve some of the stress that comes with starting a new career. Because the new agents feel more comfortable and confident in their new job, they will typically do a better job for their clientele and the organization.

Mincemoyer and Thomas have defined a mentor as being an influential senior organization member with advanced experience and knowledge, who is dedicated to providing upward

mobility and support to a protégé's professional career (Mincemoyer & Thomas, 1998). Generally, a protégé is an individual who is new to a particular job or career and would benefit from the knowledge, guidance, and support of a senior member in the organization.

The overall outcome of a formal mentoring program can result in benefits for the protégé, mentor, and the organization. The protégé will benefit from the program by gaining knowledge, guidance, and support while the mentor will gain personal satisfaction, assistance on the job, and loyalty from the protégé, and the organization benefits by having knowledgeable and seasoned employees, reduced turnover, and increased productivity (Mincemoyer & Thomas, 1998).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to determine how a pilot mentoring program could benefit protégés, mentors, and the Extension organization. The study will also identify effective guidelines and procedures for a potential statewide UF/IFAS mentoring program. The key objectives of this study include:

- Objective 1: To document the benefit and value of mentoring to new extension faculty (the protégés).
- Objective 2: To document the benefit and value of mentoring to seasoned extension agents (the mentors).
- Objective 3: To determine guidelines and recommendations for a structured mentoring program for the UF/IFAS Extension System based upon results from this pilot program.

Methods

This study consists of four population sets: A) protégés, ten of the newest county faculty in Florida extension who had not yet gone through the new faculty orientation between October 2003 and April 2004; B) mentors (ten), which were selected by the DEDs (District Extension Directors) within the particular district that the protégés and mentors were located. The selection of the mentors were based upon protégés needs, the geographical area, and a similar program area; C) CEDs (County Extension Directors) (13) were automatically selected if they had a mentor or protégé in their office and they were then asked to participate in evaluating the pilot program; D) The DEDs (four) were also automatically selected if there was a mentor or protégé in their district. The program had mentors and protégés in four of the five districts in the state.

The research design of this study is descriptive by nature since the goal was to describe participant's perceptions of the mentoring program. Three phases were utilized to collect the data. Phase one and two were formative evaluations. These two evaluations were implemented to provide ongoing information about the pilot program. These formative evaluations for phase one and two were collected via questionnaires consisting of open ended and Likert-scale questions to develop guidelines and recommendations for a structured mentoring program.

The third phase was a summative evaluation conducted at the end of the study. This evaluation documented the overall value or worth of the program. The findings from this evaluation provided information for the researcher to make decisions and recommendations for the future of the program (Guskey, 1998). This third phase used four focus groups consisting of one group of each of the following extension positions: DEDs, CEDs, Mentors and Protégés. These focus groups collected the participants' perceptions, benefits, and values that resulted from the pilot mentoring program.

Since this was primarily a descriptive study, mainly qualitative methods were utilized to collect the data. Objective one and two were accomplished through a questionnaire and focus groups. Perceptions of the orientation, trainings, guidelines, and procedures of the pilot program were all collected in these focus groups. The third objective was accomplished through focus groups in the third phase. The focus groups allowed the participants to openly share their perception of the program and what they thought was achieved through the pilot program.

Results and Conclusions

Objective one of the study was to document the benefits and values of mentoring to new extension faculty.

Each of the four participant groups were surveyed in phase one and phase three to determine the benefits and values the new extension faculty gained from the program. From these two phases, common themes emerged that the participants benefited and gained value from the mentoring program. It was noted that the protégés in this program were very happy to have a mentor that was designated for them who was not a supervisor such as a DED or CED. First of all, having a mentor that was designated for the protégé decreased the stress of the protégé having to find a person they could trust to talk to about their problems, questions, and concerns. Second, the protégés felt more comfortable going to someone who was not a supervisor because sometimes the protégé might feel uncomfortable going to their supervisor to talk about something they do not understand. The protégés expressed that there are questions they needed to ask someone but they felt like their supervisors would look down on them for asking such a simple or uneducated question.

Other than the comfort the protégés gained from having someone to talk to, they also gained valuable knowledge that will help them in their extension career. It was documented that protégés gained knowledge in areas such as: learning how to find and build relationships with important clientele in the community, learning how to manage their volunteers, gaining more knowledge of how the extension services works, learning technical information about their program area, learning how to develop an advisory committee, and gaining knowledge on creating systems to report on the ROA and POW more effectively.

The only negative comment from this program was in the case of the protégé that did not want to meet with the mentor because she thought she had enough experience and she did not need help. Therefore, the protégé did not participate resulting in no benefit or value from the program. Overall, the participants (protégés, mentors, and CEDs) that participated in the program perceived that the protégés benefited and gained a great amount of value from this program.

The findings from this study were in congruence with Zimmer and Smith. The protégés benefited from the vision and support of being paired with a seasoned agent (Zimmer & Smith, 1992). The findings were also similar to Viator's work. The protégés gained valuable knowledge about the extension organization that enabled them to function productively in the extension organization because they were more familiar with the organization (Viator, 2000).

Objective two of the study was to document benefit and value of mentoring to seasoned Extension Agents.

The data for objective three was collected from the CEDs, the mentors, and the protégés during the third and final phase. The results were overall positive. It was noted in the data that the mentors gained great personal satisfaction by being able to comfort and share knowledge

with their protégé. They did not only gain personal satisfaction, they also gained fresh new perspectives on the way they viewed extension and the programs that they conducted. Most of the time, new faculty members are excited and enthusiastic about learning about the extension organization and their program area; therefore, they bring new ideas that the mentors might not have thought about. This mentoring partnership between the mentors and protégés also provided benefits for the mentors by giving them the ability to meet and get to know someone new who is in their program area. The connections between the mentors and protégés could possibly lead to working relationships where they could conduct multi-county programs in the future. Mentors were also able to gain recognition from their supervisors for being a mentor. The mentors will also benefit from being a mentor because as they apply for promotions or have their annual evaluation, serving in this role will be looked upon favorably in their annual reports and promotion packet.

The findings from this study were similar to Russell and Adams because it was found that the mentors gained personal satisfaction as a result of helping new faculty members through their first year in the extension organization. The mentors also felt rejuvenated by working with a younger, more enthusiastic protégé (Russell and Adams, 1997).

Objective three was to determine guidelines and recommendations for a structured mentoring program based upon results from this pilot program.

Data for the third objective was collected from all participants in each of the three phases. The perspectives of the participants provided a clear view of what was successful and what needed to be changed to make the program more effective for the mentors, protégés, and the organization as a whole. In this objective, the major aspects of the program as well as the major issues and challenges that occurred throughout the program were the main topics examined. The main aspects of the mentoring program were: selection of mentors, pairing of the mentors and protégés, training/orientation contact and interaction, mentoring handbook, incentives and rewards, and the role of the state coordinator, DEDs and the CEDs. Each of these main aspects was analyzed within this study.

Selection process. The first major aspect was the selection process of the mentors. The selection process is an aspect of the mentoring process that the participants agreed on for the most part. The participants were all in agreement that the DEDs and the CEDs should pick all of the mentors because they know the seasoned agents the best and they also know who would be the best quality mentors. It was agreed on that the DEDs and the CEDs would work together to select the mentors for the program.

Pairing process. The pairing process is a very important part of the mentoring program because if the pairs are not matched correctly, the protégé is not going to benefit from the program. It was also decided by the participants that it was best for the DEDs and the CEDs to pair the mentors and protégés because they have already interviewed and become acquainted with the new employee. However, pairing mistakes can be made; therefore, there needs to be an easy way to exit-out of the relationship without any question. The pairing process is more of an art than science to try to match the pairs to get the very best results from the program.

Training and orientation. Overall, the training/orientation programs for the mentors and protégés were perceived as being a benefit because it brought everyone to the same point of

understanding and clearly stated what is expected of them, along with the guidelines, and the procedures that need to be followed within a mentoring program.

The mentoring handbook. A mentoring handbook was issued to all of the mentors and protégés in the pilot mentoring program. The mentoring handbook was an interesting issue because the mentors thought that it was a very helpful tool in the mentoring process to make sure they were staying within the guidelines and following the procedures. The protégés however, perceived the handbook to be more troublesome in that they felt like they always had to log all of their activity within the mentoring relationship, and this made it more like a chore rather than simply having a relationship with their protégé.

The protégés explained that they wanted a very detailed task-list that they could sit down with their mentors weekly or monthly to talk about. They thought having a timeline with tasks that should be completed throughout the first year would be a great benefit. The mentor and protégé would work on this task list throughout the year to ensure the protégé is comfortable in the tasks that they need to accomplish.

Contact and interaction. The participants thought that the contact recommendations were good for a minimum level of contact (phone and email contact at least every other week and three face-to-face meetings during the duration of the program), but they stated that the mentors and protégés should meet more than the recommended level for optimal effectiveness. Overall, the participants were happy with the amount and types of contact that they received during the mentoring program. It was said throughout the study that the first initial contact needs to be face-to-face to start the relationship off with personal interaction. This would build a solid foundation for the rest of the relationship. The initial contact period of the mentoring process is a time that the pair can plan contact times throughout the year. This was said to help because if a time is scheduled in the calendar to meet with the mentor or protégé, it helps the participant make the relationship a higher priority. After this first initial interaction it was commented on that frequent contact is vital to keep the relationship growing and helping the protégé with their growth and development in the organization.

Protégés reported having a variety of contact such as phone calls, email, face-to-face meetings, travel, and programming together. It was said that email and phone was used the most out of convenience, but the protégés also benefited from the hands-on learning from helping their mentors with programming.

Time was the biggest factor that affected the pairs in a negative way. Consequently, the participants recommended that the mentors and protégés schedule time at the very beginning of the relationship to be able to meet or talk weekly or at least monthly. The mentoring program must be high on the participant's priority list from the beginning of the program; otherwise the contact and interaction between the pairs will be neglected. There were also problems with participants who had no desire to participate in the program. This is why it's so important to make sure the mentor and the protégé want to be a part of the program.

Incentives and rewards for mentors. The issue of how to reward mentors to encourage participation in the program was very clear after evaluating the data in the study. It was clear from each participant group that the mentors should not be given any monetary incentives to make them want to be a mentor. Participants noted that if a mentor has to have a reward or incentive to be a mentor, they are not participating for the right reason. They all felt if monetary

incentives or rewards were given then that could attract the wrong type of people. It was evident that the mentors should want to help out and not have to be bribed to be a mentor. The protégés want mentors who naturally have a desire to help them develop into productive faculty members.

There were two incentives suggested for the mentors. The participants thought that simply recognizing the mentors in the state Extension meeting would be beneficial and adequate. It was also suggested that the extension organization could pay for a particular professional development activity that the mentor would like to participate in.

Along with the recognition and help with a professional development activity, it was also mentioned by most of the participants that the mentors should be able to include their participation in the mentoring program to their POW (Plan of Work) and ROA (Report of Accomplishments). This would be a reward in itself if they would not have to add this extra activity to their regular work, but make it an integral part of their planned work. This would also serve to proactively plan on spending time with the protégé and not just fitting mentoring into their remaining work schedule. There were some concerns about including mentoring in a POW. Some of the DEDs felt that if the mentors were able to put the mentoring task on their POW, they might be inclined to drop their least favorite activities to do mentoring.

The roles of the state coordinators, DEDs, and CEDs. The coordination of the mentoring program is very important. The participants made it clear that they liked the statewide uniformity and structure of the mentoring program. This assured that all of the mentors were trained, and all the protégés went through the same orientation. In order to allow this program to continue to be a formalized statewide program, there needs to be consistent statewide training curriculum, procedures, guidelines and expectations.

Another issue related to who a mentoring pair should go to if a problem occurs between the pair. Most of the participants stated that they wanted to go to a third-party person who was not one of their supervisors, such as their DED or CED, because they would not feel comfortable talking about their problems in regards to the mentoring program.

Recommendations

Several recommendations were discovered throughout this pilot mentoring program. These recommendations are divided into each aspect of the mentoring program including; the selection process, the pairing process, training/orientation, contact and interaction, handbook, incentives and rewards, and the role of the state coordinators, DEDs and CEDs.

Basic Characteristics of a Mentor

A person must have the desire to mentor. There are county faculty members who are great in their subject area, but they do not have a desire to help new faculty. If they are pushed to be a mentor, they may agree but then they will only do a minimal amount of work which would not be much of a benefit to a protégé.

A person with technical and organizational knowledge. The mentor will not only need to know the subject matter but they will also need to know about the extension organization because the new faculty could potentially have many questions regarding the extension organization.

An experienced person. Someone who has already been through the tenure and promotion process. This is so that the person adequately knows about the organization and what the protégé will have to do to properly prepare for successful promotion and tenure.

Necessary interpersonal characteristics which include: openness, caring, patient, successful in their own programming, good listener, and positive/upbeat attitude.

Selection and Pairing Process

Allow the DEDs and CEDs to work together to pick the most qualified and willing mentors since they know the personalities and type of work the mentors do.

Select mentors on an as-needed basis as new faculty are hired.

There should be clear communication between all three supervisors involved in the pairing. This includes the DED of the district and the CED of both the mentor and protégé. The pairing should occur within the first two to three of weeks of work. Give the new faculty a day or two to find everything in the office and meet everyone and then the CED or the DED will introduce them to the mentoring program. The mentor should then be contacted to give them the go-ahead to make the first contact with the protégé.

Preferably, the mentor and protégé should be no more than one hour in distance away from each other. The closer the pair is in location should result in increased frequency of contact and also greater opportunity to interact.

The counties in which the mentors and protégé are in should be of the same demographics (example: pair a mentor in a rural county with a protégé in a rural county). Rural, urban, and suburban county faculty deal with different issues and challenges therefore pairing the mentors and protégés according to county demographics, will enable them to collaborate on similar issues and concerns.

Mentors and protégés with similar personalities and work styles should be paired to increase the likelihood of them working well together.

Training and Orientation

Train mentors on a case-by-case basis, and utilize distance education to save travel time and cost.

The training should be conducted via two methods such as web modules and phone. All the training material should be available as web modules, and as the mentors are chosen to be paired with a protégé, the mentor will then be contacted and informed of the web modules and how to use them. They will receive a date that they need to have the training completed by, and then they should contact the mentoring coordinator when they have any questions and/or when they are complete.

The training materials for the mentors should cover the vision of the program, guidelines, procedures, expectations, the roles of the mentor and protégé, coaching skills, communication skills, conflict resolution, and successful basic fundamentals for mentoring.

After the protégés' DED or CED informs them of the mentoring program, the mentoring coordinator will be notified to contact the protégé to outline the vision, guidelines, procedures, expectations, and roles of the mentors and protégés.

Contact and Interaction

The initial contact should be face-to-face as soon as possible after being paired. It is encouraged that the mentoring pair schedule several permanent routine interactions throughout the year at this first initial meeting.

The contact recommendations in the mentoring handbook are the very minimum amount of contact that should occur (phone and email contact at least every other week and three face-to-face meetings during the duration of the mentoring program).

Topics Mentors and Protégés should discuss to increase Interaction

Helping the protégé discover their clientele's needs, developing a program to meet those needs and evaluating the program.

Helping the protégés learn how to organize and document their accomplishments throughout the year to help the protégés complete their ROAs in the most efficient and effective manner.

Help develop an advisory committee by identifying the key people that would be effective advisory members and then help the protégé recruit them.

Help the protégés determine key people in the county such as stakeholders and collaborators and then help the protégés develop a working relationship with them.

Helping the protégés work with and manage volunteers.

Helping them understand balancing work and family. Encouraging the protégés in balancing their work load (teaching them when to say no and coach them how to balance office work, programming tasks, and clientele needs).

Helping them learn the ins and outs of the extension organization.

Teaching them how to respond to clientele's needs efficiently and effectively.

Mentoring Handbook

A mentoring handbook should be provided to all participants. It should include a task-list and timeline that consists of what tasks the protégé should start doing from the first day and tasks throughout the year. This will give the protégé some structure in regards to where to start and what to do as they progress through their first year with the extension organization. The mentor and protégé can meet weekly and monthly to discuss and plan the upcoming tasks. Make sure all of the participants use the bio-sketch (it was a benefit to the mentors and protégés at the initiation stage of the program).

Incentives and Reward for the Mentors

Allow the mentors to report mentoring as a part of the POW (plan of work) and ROA (report of accomplishments).

Recognize the mentors at the annual statewide Extension conference.

Salary incentives are not encouraged for mentoring. But, Extension could pay for selected professional development opportunities that the mentors would like to attend.

The Role of a State Coordinator

Throughout the study, it was stated that a state-wide mentoring program is needed to provide consistent structure, guidelines, and training. This person would facilitate:

Developing and coordinating the training programs and web modules for the mentors.

Providing an orientation session about the mentoring program for each of the new faculty coming into the extension system.

Ensuring that every new agent who desires to be a part of the program is paired with a trained mentor.

Being available as a third-party person for mentors or protégés who may have issues with the mentoring program.

Ensuring that the state-wide mentoring program structure, guidelines, procedures, evaluation of the program and expectations are upheld to the highest standard.

Being the key point person between the DEDs, CEDs, mentors and protégés.

Educational importance, implications, and application

For a mentoring program to be effective, it must be purposeful, consistent and well-structured. With the implementation of these recommendations to the framework of the existing pilot mentoring program, UF/IFAS Extension would benefit greatly from obtaining a statewide mentoring program. This would allow each new county faculty member to be assigned with a seasoned extension faculty member who has been adequately trained for the mentoring task. This program could have the potential to decrease stress as well as prevent protégé burnout. Moreover, it would allow them to become more productive county faculty members for educating their clientele to the best of their ability.

Mentoring can be an effective means of supplementing typical Extension orientation and training programs. Benefits result not only for the new agent, but also for the partnering agents and the Extension organization. For seasoned agents, this stems from a renewed interest in Extension and the satisfaction of facilitating someone's professional development. The organization benefits through more effective and efficient training, greater employee satisfaction, reduced turnover, and ultimately greater educational impact among its clientele.

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