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Mentoring in Action Model—Exploring the Mentoring Process in Nebraska Extension

Abstract

One method used by Extension organizations to orient new professionals is mentoring, yet gaps exist in the research on mentoring within Extension. Through focus group interviews and a materials review, I explored the mentoring process in Nebraska Extension. Using a semistructured interview approach, I asked Extension educators about their mentoring experiences, and I reviewed an organizational mentoring packet. From my findings, I constructed the mentoring in action model, which explains mentorship in Nebraska Extension. The model shows that mentoring is built on two mentoring structures and two primary characteristics of effective mentoring relationships. The study findings can inform mentoring strategies Extension may use to orient new employees to their roles and responsibilities.

Keywords: [mentoring](#), [mentor](#), [mentee](#), [new employee](#)

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Mentoring and Extension

Mentoring is a method Extension organizations use to orient new professionals to their roles and responsibilities. In a mentee role, new professionals can gain valuable knowledge about the organization and about building relationships with important clientele, developing plans of work, and reporting monthly and annual accomplishments (Place & Bailey, 2010). Further, mentees in Extension can increase their skills in program planning and implementation (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001). Acquainting new professionals to their roles is important because uncertainty and elements of the unexpected are inherent in Extension work. Extension jobs are demanding and complex, and the daily responsibilities are diverse (Place & Jacob, 2001).

There are promising implications of mentoring new professionals in Extension, but Denny (2016) concluded that existing research on mentoring in Extension is focused primarily on assessing perceived efficacy. Prior to 2015, there was no formal tool for assessing the quality of peer mentoring in Extension (Denny, 2017). Further, there is a lack of research on Extension mentoring relationships and the behaviors of mentors and mentees. To contribute to addressing relevant gaps in the literature, I explored the mentoring process for new Extension professionals in Nebraska Extension.

Conceptual Framework

The foundation for my study was Kram's (1985) theoretical work suggesting that mentees receive guidance and support from mentors through career and psychosocial functions. For the career function, mentors help mentees increase competence in their roles through coaching, exposure to opportunities, and challenging assignments (Kram, 1985). For the psychosocial function, mentors help mentees increase their self-image through counseling and friendship (Kram, 1985).

Further, Ragins and Verbos (2007) made the case for relational mentoring, which is an approach to mentoring that focuses on close bonds and mutual learning and growing for mentees and mentors. Relational mentoring relies on communal norms, and according to Ragins and Verbos (2007), there is no obligation for repayment of debts with communal norms; rather, benefits are given in response to the needs of another person. Communal norms are the foundation for relational mentoring and fostering close mentoring bonds (Ragins & Verbos, 2007).

Purpose

The purpose of my study was to explore the mentoring process for new Nebraska Extension professionals. A new employee, as defined by Nebraska Extension, has been with the organization approximately 5 years and has not gone through the promotion process.

Research Methods

Subjectivity Statement

I conducted my study as a graduate student pursuing a PhD in agricultural education and leadership. I have been a Nebraska Extension educator since 2014.

Research Design

I used grounded theory methodology to study the mentoring processes experienced by Extension professionals. I used Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach for my study because it emphasizes views, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of study participants over the methods of data collection and other systematic procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I used theoretical sampling and deliberately selected participants to add insight and perspective to a tentative theory (Charmaz, 2014). I selected six participants on the basis of their appointments in the same administrative district and their shared position classification as an Extension educator. Their backgrounds were child development, nutrition and health, crops, and horticulture. Their characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

Participant	Participant gender	Program area	Years in Nebraska Extension
1	Female	Agriculture and natural resources	2.5
2	Male	Agriculture and natural resources	4.5
3	Female	Family and consumer sciences	1.75
4	Male	Agriculture and natural resources	9
5	Female	Family and consumer sciences	4.5
6	Female	Family and consumer sciences	18

Data Collection

I facilitated two focus group sessions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and there were three participants in each session. I used Creswell and Poth's (2018) and Charmaz's (2014) procedures for preparing and conducting interviews, and I asked participants a series of questions about mentoring, using a semistructured interview approach. Both sessions lasted about 1 hr, and I recorded and transcribed the sessions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also reviewed and analyzed (Charmaz, 2014) an organizational mentoring packet for new educators.

Data Analysis

I analyzed focus group session transcriptions, the mentoring packet, and my research memos to generate codes, categories, themes, and a central phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Applying the constant comparative analysis process, I created codes to represent new ideas, and I identified themes by grouping codes that were similar in nature (Charmaz, 2014). I used the most relevant concepts to form the theoretical model, which clarified the central phenomenon: mentoring in action.

I applied several qualitative research validation strategies suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). For example, I used more than one data source to provide corroborating evidence through triangulation, and I engaged in reflexivity by disclosing the experiences I brought to my study. I also sought participant feedback through member checking, where participants reviewed the expanded codes and the mentoring model, and I provided rich, thick descriptions about the setting under study.

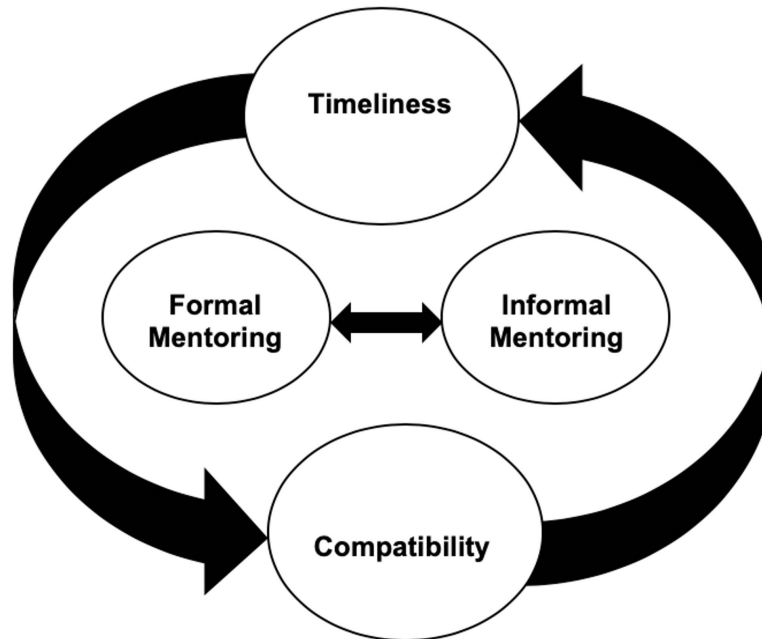
I established study reliability by using a quality recording device, transcriptions of audio recordings, and research memos, and I developed a codebook (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

The Mentoring in Action Model

I used the participants' descriptive and illustrative accounts of their mentoring experiences to form the basis for the theoretical model of my study. The model, shown in Figure 1, explains the mentoring process in Nebraska Extension.

Figure 1.
Mentoring in Action Model



In the center of the model are two mentoring structures: formal mentoring and informal mentoring. The double-sided arrow between the two indicates that both structures are present in the organization and occur simultaneously. The characteristics of effective mentoring relationships, timeliness and compatibility, are shown in the outside circle. I identified both characteristics as essential for a positive mentorship in the organization. The arrows in the outside circle represent the holistic nature of these characteristics in an organizational mentoring program. I describe components of the model in the sections that follow and present associated participant quotes in Tables 2 and 3.

Mentoring Structures

Formal Mentoring. Participants described their experiences with formal mentoring in Nebraska Extension. Formal mentoring, in this context, is defined as the organization-endorsed process for strategically pairing new Extension professionals, also known as mentees, with experienced employees, also known as mentors. The organizational mentoring packet provided critical information about the formal mentor program, including justification for the mentor program, explanation of how the program is initially communicated to mentors and mentees, and the types of topics mentors should address with mentees.

Participants indicated that although the formal mentor program exists, they received little instruction and guidance as new employees. Participants shared that the formal mentoring process is intimidating and overwhelming for new professionals yet the process requires new professionals to take action and reach out to assigned mentors. Participants believed it is the responsibility of new professionals to initiate contact with mentors.

Informal Mentoring. Participants also shared their experiences related to informal mentoring in Nebraska Extension. Informal mentoring, in this context, is defined as the organic, unstructured process that occurs

between new Extension professionals and experienced employees. From the participants' accounts, informal mentoring tends to occur more frequently and effectively in the organization as compared to formal mentoring.

Participants noted that informal mentoring had positive impacts on their experiences as new Extension professionals. They explained that informal mentoring is built on healthy relationships and trust and that it fills needs that otherwise would not be filled. Informal mentoring continually occurs in the organization, and participants identified colleagues within their offices or in close proximity who fulfilled the roles of informal mentors.

Table 2.
Participant Quotes About Mentoring Structures

Structure	Representative participant quotes
Formal mentoring	<p>"I did get a list, and I was told that I had to call each one of them and meet with them . . . And so, yeah, it was pretty overwhelming . . . And I think I had to probably be with Extension longer to understand what they were talking about."</p> <p>"I just remember getting a packet with [the mentor list] in there, and it didn't really come with, I guess, a lot of explanation . . . so I don't think I actually did anything with it."</p> <p>"They would give you a list and assign you mentors based on mentors' strengths, so that ends up being 30 people. And so that is a little overwhelming . . . I think that's intimidating as well . . . I'd rather have had one or two people assigned versus a detailed spread [list] of who you could reach out to. . . ."</p>
Informal mentoring	<p>"Informal is sometimes . . . ends up being . . . your best people that you go to, and that is because, in my opinion, is because you trust them, you're probably friends with them, and you built a relationship already. And you're comfortable asking them the questions . . . the hard questions."</p> <p>"Well, the biggest mentor that probably I've had in Extension was not even a real mentor. I mean, it's just kind of the informal mentoring fills in the gaps that you need, I think . . . So I think informal mentors often become the longest-lasting mentors. . . ."</p> <p>"Formal mentoring, no, it hasn't really had an impact on me. I think the informal mentoring, I've learned lots of things and ideas, ways to work, ways to be successful in Extension from a number of different people along the way . . . it's turned into more of a reciprocal relationship and less of maybe one, one direction . . . At some point in time, you turn from being the mentee to the mentor without even knowing it."</p>

Characteristics of Effective Mentoring

Timeliness. Timeliness is a structural characteristic of effective mentoring in Nebraska Extension. Timeliness is defined as the urgency or quickness with which a mentoring relationship is built between a new professional and an experienced employee. Timeliness is also connected to geographic distance between mentees and mentors. The closer in geographic location the members of the mentoring relationship are, the timelier and more functional the relationship can be, especially if there are in-person interactions.

Timeliness of mentoring is critical for ensuring that new Extension professionals receive answers to their questions. Participants noted that the reality of Extension sets in quickly but the work itself takes time to understand. Participants also relayed that mentors help new employees understand their roles and responsibilities locally and in the organization.

Compatibility. Compatibility is the second characteristic of effective mentoring in the organization. Compatibility refers to the suitability of or bond between mentees and mentors. Participants identified compatibility between new Extension professionals and mentors as an essential component of the relationship, and they noted the need for the relationship to be built on a natural connection. Participants indicated that not all experienced professionals are well suited to be effective mentors.

Table 3.
Participant Quotes About Effective Mentoring

Characteristic	Representative participant quotes
Timeliness	<p>"And I also think that whoever [is mentoring you], if you don't build that relationship right away or if your personalities are not clicking, you need to find a different mentor . . . you have to find that connection, and you have to find it quickly."</p> <p>"I know I've always had the most success if I've had someone down the hall who's kind of doing the same thing I am. Because then you . . . you talk about it over lunch or crossing paths or peek your head around the corner, that sort of thing . . . But it's harder to make a phone call, if you don't know if someone's there or what they're doing, or if they're busy, so. . . ."</p> <p>"I think face-to-face [interaction] is really critical."</p> <p>"[It goes to show] how quickly you need that [question] answered or how easy it is to walk down the hall and ask the question."</p>
Compatibility	<p>"It was more of a natural connection . . . when they're most successful is when they're, you know, the natural fit . . . It's finding the right connection. . . ."</p> <p>"So I think relationship building and having that personality click is really important . . . I think being honest with them is a good characteristic. Always positive, but being honest."</p> <p>"A lot of people are asked to be mentors, and I don't think everybody . . . that they're cut out for that."</p> <p>"Just because someone's been in Extension for a long time does not mean they have a positive outlook on their position or the organization or they are doing their job in the manner that you would hope a new employee would feel was necessary."</p>

Discussion

The mentoring in action model explains the central phenomenon of my study, and it describes the mentoring process in Nebraska Extension.

Participants noted that the reality of an Extension career sets in early but that it takes time for new employees to understand the organization and/or their roles within it. Their recollections supported Place and Jacob's (2001) stance that Extension work is demanding and complex and that the daily responsibilities vary.

In Nebraska Extension, mentorship occurs through formal and informal structures. Mentees received coaching and exposure to opportunities from their mentors, which stemmed from what Kram (1985) identified as the career function of mentorship. Mentees also received counseling and friendship, which are rooted in the psychosocial function of mentorship (Kram, 1985).

A formal mentor program exists in Nebraska Extension. However, the participants in my study experienced more positive mentorship through informal processes. The continuous nature of the mentoring relationships described by the participants aligned with Kutilek and Earnest's (2001) assessment that the mentoring process is not a one-time event.

Participants noted the transformational experience that can occur through informal mentoring. For example, one participant described how his experience evolved from a one-directional relationship to a reciprocal relationship with his mentor. This reflection matches Ragins and Verbos's (2007) explanation of relational mentoring, which focuses on mutual learning and growing for members of the dyadic relationship.

To fully discuss the study, it is important to note not just findings but also limitations. I used grounded theory methodology, where data collection methods included a setting created by the participants and me. Though I established credibility through triangulation of data sources and methods, different researchers and participants may yield different findings. My sampling methods are consistent with theoretical sampling, but my data have not yet reached saturation.

Implications and Conclusions

The mentoring in action model provides understanding for how mentoring occurs in Nebraska Extension. I encourage readers to consider the context of my study in regard to transferability of the implications.

Extension administrators, human resources directors, and middle managers should explore the mentoring mechanisms in their organizations. In developing formal mentoring programs, decision makers should consider that gaps within the program may be complemented by informal mentoring processes. New employees may seek the guidance and counsel of colleagues within their geographic locations or within their program areas. Further, decision makers may consider that effective mentorship, whether formal or informal, relies on relationship characteristics such as timeliness and compatibility. It takes time for new employees to understand Extension and their roles, and they need assistance and support from the start of their employment. For the assistance and support to be valuable, new employees need people with whom their personalities fit and who they can trust.

Although formal mentoring programs may exist within Extension organizations, decision makers tasked with employee development should recognize the likelihood of informal mentoring occurring within their organizations. Informal mentors may lack training in and understanding of the significant roles they can play in new employees' experiences. Professional development for informal mentors may be a way for Extension to increase capacity, prioritize relationship building, and strengthen how new employees are welcomed.

Exploring informal mentoring, both concept and interpretation, in an Extension context would increase understanding of a process that is likely happening already in many organizations. Moreover, researching mentorship, as concluded by Denny (2016), would help practitioners understand the development needs of Extension professionals and support those needs throughout their careers. The mentoring in action model may

be explored further and lead to the development of additional theories for mentoring in Extension. The model may be used to inform employee development practices and lead to future research regarding important practical implications for Extension.

Author Note

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