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Extension Mentoring: Steps Leading to Greater Program Effectiveness

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Abstract: Mentoring is frequently used by many Extension programs as an ongoing methodology for helping new educators better understand their roles and responsibilities. This article is based upon a longitudinal mentoring study to determine value, benefit, and steps towards greater effectiveness. The population included mentors, mentees, and immediate supervisors, and the methodology is based upon focus group research conducted over an 18-month mentoring period. The results of the study reported here are focused on the areas of mentor selection, training, pairing, interaction, and recognition. Recommendations are widely applicable to other Extension programs looking to improve their mentoring programs.

Background

A knowledge-based organization such as Extension must have effective processes in place to continually develop its intellectual capital. The rapid development of a global economy and increasingly complex and changing social, economic, and environmental conditions call for a greater need for the intellectual growth of the leaders and employees within every organization. The need for intellectual growth is accelerating because of technological change and changing demographics (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000).

Extension educators have complex and demanding jobs requiring them to stay abreast of the issues that are affecting families and industries within their county (Place & Jacob, 2001). Educators are typically specialized in different areas, such as livestock, horticulture, family consumer science, 4-H/youth development, or community development. Their tasks become ever more complex because of a vast diversity of job responsibilities, which include conducting Extension programs, teaching, evaluating, providing office support, and serving as technical subject matter experts (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). Extension needs new employees to develop skills quickly to the level at which they can perform their work efficiently and effectively.

The primary focus of the study reported here involved new Extension educators who are in the entry stage of their careers (Kutilek, Gunderson, & Conklin, 2002). New Extension educators may feel overwhelmed with all of the information regarding the organization, job duties, and operational policies and procedures. New agent orientation and training is one of the first experiences educators have with professional development. Mentoring is another tool for orientation and training.

The overall outcome of a formal mentoring program can result in benefits for the mentee, mentor, and the organization (Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes, & Garrett-Harris, 2006). Mentees 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 mentee, and the organization benefits by having knowledgeable and seasoned employees, reduced turnover, and increased productivity (Mincemoyer & Thomas, 1998).

A mentor is an influential senior organization member with advanced experience and knowledge who is dedicated to providing upward mobility and support to a mentee's professional career. A mentee 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 (Mincemoyer & Thomas, 1998).

Objectives

The study reported here sought to determine how a mentoring program could benefit new Extension employees, mentors, and the Extension organization. Determining effective guidelines and procedures for a formal University of Florida Extension mentoring program was a secondary objective within the study. There were three primary objectives:

1. To document the benefits and values of mentoring to new Extension faculty.
2. To document the benefits and values of mentoring to seasoned Extension educators.
3. To determine guidelines and recommendations for a structured mentoring program based upon results from this pilot program.

Methodology

Components of the Study

The pilot study consisted of a number of parts, which are detailed in this article. In essence, a group of new Extension faculty (mentees) was paired up with colleagues who served in a mentoring role (mentors). The selection of the mentors was based upon the mentees' area of need, the geographical area, and parallel program areas. The mentors received orientation training on effective mentoring, communication skills, and expectations. An orientation session was held for mentees to help them understand the pilot program, what to expect from mentors, and their responsibilities. A mentoring handbook was developed and reviewed in the orientation sessions. The purpose of the mentoring handbook was to provide a guide for the mentors and mentees as to their roles and specific assignments that they needed to accomplish during the mentoring period. Both formative and summative evaluation methodologies were utilized to collect data that would address the three primary objectives.

Population

The study involved four purposive populations: A) mentees, 15 of the newest county faculty in Extension who had not yet completed new faculty orientation; B) 15 mentors, who were selected by the District Extension Directors (DEDs) of the particular district where the mentees and mentors were located; C) 13 County Extension Directors (CEDs) who had a participating mentor or mentee in their office; and D) DEDs who had a mentor or mentee in their district (this involved four of the five DEDs in the state).

Data Collection and Analysis

Two data collection procedures were used to collect information for the three objectives. The first method was formative evaluation questionnaires, which consisted of open-ended questions to obtain the participants' opinions of and recommendations during the actual program. The second method used was summative evaluation focus groups. Focus groups provided the study with depth and breadth of the participants' perceptions. The data collected from these two methods helped the researcher detect common themes that the participants stated throughout the study.

Because the data was primarily qualitative, a standardized process was utilized for analysis (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). This process consisted of four categories: analysis, interpretation, judgment, and recommendations (Archer, 1987). The data was examined by organizing it into primary categories. The data was further reduced into controllable secondary categories using a cut-and-paste method of organizing data into groupings based on the subject (e.g., selection process, pairing process, etc.) by which the data referred to as well as the type of response (positive or negative) for that subject.

Data interpretation involved defining descriptive patterns and associations and linkages among these patterns. This consisted of finding common themes that emerged from the data. Logic comparison was used by the researcher in determining similarities and dissimilarities between the participants' perceptions of the pilot mentoring program. From the common themes, major and minor themes emerged and were used by the researcher to make judgments on the findings and then recommendations were formed.

Results and Discussion

Objective One: Document Benefits and Values of Mentoring to New Extension Faculty

Each of the four participant groups was surveyed to determine the benefits and values the new Extension faculty gained from the mentoring program. It was noted that the mentees in this program were very happy to have a mentor designated for them who was not a direct supervisor, such as a DED or CED. First, having a mentor who was designated for the mentee decreased the stress of mentees having to find a person they could trust to informally talk to about their problems, questions, and concerns. This provided a sense of comfort for discussion of issues that they did not fully understand. The mentees expressed that they did not like to be in a position where their supervisors would look down on them for asking such simple or uneducated questions.

Mentees also gained valuable knowledge in areas such as: learning how to find and build relationships with important clientele in the community, learning how to manage volunteers, 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 effectively report on their plans of work (POW) and reports of accomplishment (ROA).

Objective Two: Document Benefits and Values of Mentoring to Seasoned Extension Educators

The data for objective two was collected from the CEDs, the mentors, and the mentees formatively and summatively. Overall, the results were positive. It was noted that the mentors gained great personal satisfaction by being able to comfort and share knowledge with their mentee. 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. New faculty members were excited and enthusiastic to learn about the Extension organization and their program area; consequently, they brought new ideas and perspectives that the mentors had not previously thought about.

This mentoring partnership between the mentors and mentees 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 mentees have led to working relationships for conducting collaborative and multi-county programs. Mentors were also able to gain recognition from their supervisors for being a mentor. Mentors also benefit because serving in this role will be looked upon favorably as they apply for promotions or engage in their annual evaluation.

Objective Three: Determine Guidelines and Recommendations for a Structured Mentoring Program

The participants provided a clear view of what was valuable and what needed to be changed to make mentoring most effective for the mentors, mentees, and the organization as a whole. For this objective the main aspects evaluated in the program were: selection of mentors, pairing of the mentors and mentees, mentoring handbook, orientation, contact and interaction, incentives and rewards, and the role of state coordination.

Mentor Selection

Participants were unanimous that DEDs and CEDs should work together to choose mentors because they know the seasoned educators and they also know who would be the best quality mentors. There were different thoughts on how and when the mentors should be chosen. Some felt that a group of mentors should be selected once or twice a year and then trained as a group and that this would create a pool of trained mentors who could be called upon throughout the year when new employees are hired and are in need of a mentor. Some DEDs felt that mentors should be chosen and trained on an "as-needed basis" when new faculty are hired.

It was evident that all of the participants wanted someone who had a keen desire to be a mentor. In other words, mentees wanted a mentor who would make the mentoring relationship a priority. The participant groups all described an open, knowledgeable, and caring person to be a good mentor candidate. Senior faculty who had been successful in their own programming tended to also be effective in mentoring new faculty.

Pairing Process

There was some original thought about letting the mentees have a chance to pick their own mentor; however, most of the participants were in favor of the DEDs and the CEDs picking a mentor for the mentee. This would allow the mentees to have someone designated for them to talk to within the first couple of weeks of starting their new position. However, pairing mistakes can be made; consequently, there needs to be an easy

way to exit the relationship.

Overall, mentors and mentees were happy with their pairings. It was evident that the pairs who had similar personalities, were close in location, had similar program areas, and the same type counties (i.e., rural/rural or urban/urban basis) were better able to focus on similar issues and concerns.

Orientation

The orientation for the mentors and mentees was perceived to be a benefit in that it brought everyone to the same point of understanding regarding expectations, guidelines, and procedures to be followed.

Some participants wanted group training, with the mentors and mentees to start the program together; however, most participants wanted to utilize distance education technologies such as teleconferencing, conference calls, or Web modules as much as possible because of time constraints. The participants realized that face-to-face interactions tended to be the most effective way to interact; however, use of technology was the most convenient and efficient.

Overall, the participants made it clear that they preferred having the training delivered as Web modules because training for mentors could be done on an as-needed basis. This method would also allow the seasoned mentors who were already knowledgeable about the information being taught to focus on the specific information they need.

Mentoring Handbook

A mentoring handbook was issued to all of the mentors and mentees. 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 completing necessary steps. The mentees, on the other hand, perceived the handbook to be more troublesome in that they felt like they always had to log all of their activity, and this made it more like a chore rather than simply having a relationship with their mentee.

The mentees explained that they would prefer a very detailed task-list that they could go over with their mentors weekly or monthly to talk about. The mentees stated that they did not know where to start, so having a timeline with tasks to be completed throughout the first year was a great benefit. The mentees should be informed that a handbook is to serve as a reference for guidance with the mentoring program. It should not prove to be a hindrance to the relationship.

Contact and Interaction

Contact and interaction between the mentors and mentees provided a significant effect on the effectiveness for the mentoring pair. It was felt that the first initial contact should be face-to-face in order to start the relationship off with personal interaction and build a solid foundation for the rest of the relationship. After this first initial interaction, frequent contact is vital to keep the relationship growing and helping the mentees with their growth and development in the organization.

A great deal of positive feedback was given from the mentees in regards to how much they learned and grew from the contact they had with their mentors. Mentees reported having a variety of contact, such as phone calls, email, face-to-face meetings, travel, and programming together. Email and phone calls were used the most out of convenience, but the mentees also benefited from the hands-on learning from partnering with mentors with programming.

Time was the biggest factor that affected the pairs in a negative way. As a result, the participants recommended that the mentors and mentees schedule time at the very beginning of the relationship to be able to meet or talk weekly or monthly. The mentoring program must be high on the participants' priority list from the beginning of the program; otherwise the contact and interaction between the pairs will be neglected.

Incentives and Rewards for Mentors

It was clear from each participant group that the mentors should not be given any incentives to be a mentor; i.e., they should want to serve and not have to be incentivized to be a mentor. Mentees need mentors who naturally have a sincere desire to help develop them into productive educators.

However, there were two nonmonetary incentives suggested for mentors. The participants thought that simply recognizing mentors in an Extension annual meeting would be beneficial and that perhaps the Extension organization could pay for a particular professional development activity for participating mentors. Along with the recognition and support for professional development activities, it was also suggested that the mentors should include their mentoring work in their annual work plan and accomplishment report in order to make mentoring an integrated part of their position in order to effectively plan and schedule for mentoring tasks.

Statewide Mentoring Program Coordination

Within this mentoring program, a state coordinator was responsible for the overall coordination and leadership of the program, including guidelines, procedures, training curriculum, and the training and orientation sessions. Additionally, the state coordinator was available if any of the participants had a problem or issue to discuss.

The participants appreciated the statewide uniformity and structure of the mentoring program. Consequently, mentors were better prepared to develop effective mentoring relationships.

Recommendations and Implications

The recommendations from the study reported here can serve towards establishing a framework for an effective Extension mentoring program. Overall, it was highly evident that there needs to be consistent statewide training, curriculum, procedures, guidelines, and expectations for mentoring. This comprehensive approach ensures consistency and a higher level of rigor for mentoring. Mentors and mentees will both know what is expected of them as well as what they will obtain from the program.

Participants appreciated the value derived from mentoring in that mentees stated that they were grateful that they could go to a third-party person who was not one of their supervisors. This permitted a mechanism for mentees to discuss various problems or issues that they were facing— particularly those items that they were reluctant to discuss with those in supervisory roles.

Mentors should be those who have a true desire to be a mentor, i.e., those who truly want to assist in the growth and development of new Extension colleagues. They need to have strong organizational and technical knowledge to help a mentee understand the complexities of the Extension organization as well as what it takes to be a successful Extension educator. Mentors must have sound interpersonal characteristics, including openness, caring, patience, and a positive/upbeat attitude, and they must be good listeners. In addition, good mentors must be successful in their own careers to be in the best position for guiding new mentees.

There are a myriad of ways that mentors can assist mentees to be most successful. Some of the most prominent from the study included: guiding the mentee on assessing clientele needs, along with developing programs and being most responsive toward meeting those needs; advising mentees on determining who the key stakeholders and collaborators are and then assisting mentees on how to develop a working relationship with them; guiding mentees on managing their work load and balancing work and family; and helping mentees learn the ins and outs of the Extension organization.

Extension educators and systems would benefit greatly from a comprehensive statewide mentoring program. Such a program would have the potential to decrease stress as well as lessen burnout among new educators. In turn, effective mentoring leads educators to become more productive through opportunities to discuss, share, and observe with seasoned professionals. Moreover, a sound approach to mentoring will result in a highly effective Extension system—one that supports its educators to be their best, which in turn leads to greater customer satisfaction and significant clientele impact.

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