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Incorporating Volunteer Mentors to Strengthen Extension Programs

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Abstract: The University of Kentucky Volunteer Administrative Academy established a Volunteer Mentoring program that can be used in all program areas throughout Extension. The program is designed to assist Extension professionals and to provide tenured volunteers an opportunity to use and engage their own leadership talents and skills. The mentoring program is a tool kit that includes a planning aid, position description, and supervision strategy to assist in implementing the program.

Introduction & Review of Literature

The term "mentor" is over three thousand years old and has its origins in Greek mythology (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). When Odysseus went to war against the Trojans, he left his trusted friend "Mentor" in charge of his household and his son's education. Since that time, "mentor" has been linked to the process of

education and care given by an older, experienced, trusted person (Mincemoyer & Thomson).

Mentor is defined as "a higher ranking, influential senior member with advanced experience and knowledge of the organization, who is committed to providing upward mobility and support to a protégé's professional career" (Collins, 1983; Kram, 1985; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998; Roche, 1979). Mentoring has been defined most often by focusing on behaviors mentors perform. These behaviors include teaching, guiding, advising, counseling, sponsoring role modeling, validating, motivating, protecting, and communicating (Zimmer & Smith, 1992).

Formalized mentoring programs and their mentoring relationships can benefit the protégé, the mentor, as well as the sponsoring organization. The protégé receives knowledge and a sharpened skill set, support, protection, and promotion. The mentor provides assistance on the job, prestige, loyalty, and reinforcement of his or her knowledge base. The organization benefits through employee development, managerial success, increased staff productivity, and a reduced turnover rate (Zey, 1984). Phillips and Bradshaw (1999) found that a mentoring program for Master Gardener Volunteers reduced the drop-out rates significantly. The volunteer drop-out rate throughout the training program was 12 less than for the mean of the previous three training classes.

Once a mentoring relationship has begun, the mentor provides the informal link between the protégé and the expectations of the organization. Mentors are a key linkage in building strong employee relationships because mentors support, challenge, and provide vision to their protégés (Daloz, 1986). Additionally, mentors can readily orient newcomers to the culture of the organization.

Increasingly, organizations are incorporating mentoring activities into orientation. Many state Extension programs have integrated mentoring relationships into traditional staff development programs because the objectives of a mentoring program can be accomplished relatively quickly (Zimmer & Smith, 1992). There are a variety of ways that mentoring programs could benefit Extension professionals, their programs, and clients. Often times, the Extension agent is responsible for many program areas and does not have the time available to deliver all programs to those who could benefit (Rogers, 1997).

Mentoring programs have great potential for Extension volunteer programs. The expansion of existing volunteer programs is made possible by involving veteran volunteers as mentors. Mentors welcome newcomers and provide encouragement and personal contact during the program and provide education to help new recruits begin their volunteer service (Rogers, 1997). New Extension volunteers have the potential to become the new life and energy of the organization and its programs. Nurturing this energy is important in order to prevent burnout and feelings of being overwhelmed. New volunteers bring novel ideas and a fresh vision to Extension (Zimmer & Smith, 1992).

To develop a successful volunteer mentoring program, Rogers (1997) suggests pairing two mentors with six newcomers (protégés). The assignment should be done geographically wherever possible to improve accessibility and frequency of contact. Rogers also suggests that the Extension professional recruit a mentor coordinator. The mentor coordinator is a middle manager who provides leadership to the mentors, works with the Extension professional in selecting the mentors, and assists with mentor and protégé orientation and development.

University of Kentucky Volunteer Administration Academy Volunteer Mentoring Program

The University of Kentucky Volunteer Administration Academy established a volunteer mentoring program

that can be used by Extension. The general purpose of the 4-H Volunteer Leader Mentor, according to the position description, is to serve as a friend, positive role model, coach, advisor, self-esteem builder, and teacher to the volunteer. The mentor is available to answer questions and to provide important information and support to the mentee. The Volunteer Mentor is a useful resource, enabling the 4-H agent to use the volunteer's talents and increasing the ability to manage time more effectively.

The mentoring program includes a tool kit comprised of a planning aid, position description, and supervision strategy to assist in implementing the program. After recruiting the volunteer mentors, the Extension professional would schedule a meeting with the mentors to orient them to their mentoring role. For many volunteers, this would be their first experience with a formal mentoring program.

The planning aid includes a timeline of the activities that the mentor and the protÃ©gÃ© would need to undertake during the upcoming year. (Planning aids can be found in the GEMS Toolbox at <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4h/oldsite/gems/engage.htm>). The position description fully explains and outlines the role and responsibilities of the mentor. (Position descriptions are located in the GEMS Toolbox at <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4h/oldsite/VolPosDescription/index.htm>). The supervision strategy is a tool that the agent utilizes to provide ongoing supervision for the mentor. (Supervision strategies are found in the GEMS Toolbox at <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4h/oldsite/gems/supervise.htm>).

An initial meeting between the mentor and the mentee takes place to discuss curriculum, provide a presentation on the ages and stages of youth development, and share requirements for submitting photographs and club and event information to the Public Relations Committee. A schedule of community service opportunities and community events is given to the mentee at this time. At this meeting, the mentor and the mentee exchange phone numbers and email addresses, so that there is constant communication between the two parties.

Every other month, the mentor and mentee meet to review the previous month's lesson and preview the upcoming lesson. This helps the mentee, or new volunteer, to understand how lessons should be conducted and how youth understand what it being taught. At this meeting, the mentee has the opportunity to ask questions or get any help that is needed. The mentor makes sure that the mentee knows when upcoming events are and what is expected of them. Some examples of these are National 4-H Week, Kentucky Volunteer Forum, County Communications Contest, County Fair, and State Fair. These meetings are crucial to the program, because the mentor is able to answer those questions that an agent typically would answer.

Conclusion

The mentor program is a useful tool for all Extension agents to use in their county programs. It will help agents, Extension staff, and volunteers to obtain the information that they desire in a more timely matter. Another benefit is that mentors provide much of the supervision needed by new volunteers and can serve as the first point of contact when questions arise. This frees up the agent from answering redundant questions and provides additional opportunity for program management and volunteer administration. The mentor program is another tool to recognize tenured volunteers by giving them more of leadership within the organization.

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