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Keys to Successful Mentoring Relationships

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Abstract: Mentoring is an effective method of helping inexperienced individuals develop and progress in their profession. Extension staff have many opportunities to mentor volunteers and other community partners. The keys to establishing a successful mentoring relationship include creating a relationship of trust, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, establishing short- and long-term goals, using open and supportive communication, and collaboratively solving problems.

Keys to Successful Mentoring Relationships

One of the first records of a "mentor" is found in Homer's *The Odyssey*. A wise man named Mentor is given the task of educating Odysseus' son, Telemachus. When Odysseus went to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted the care of his kingdom and his son to Mentor, a wise and trusted counselor.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines mentor as a trusted counselor or guide. A mentor is an individual, usually older, always more experienced, who helps guide another individual's development. The mentor's role is to guide, to give advice, and to support the mentee. A mentor can help a person (mentee) improve his or her abilities and skills through observation, assessment, modeling, and by providing guidance.

Extension has a rich history of mentoring through its relationship with volunteers and community partners. The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension is currently offering a mentoring program to child care providers in southern Nevada. Mentors work with teachers at child care centers providing support and guidance. The focus of the program is on improving the quality of child care by enhancing classroom environments, broadening curriculum experiences, and encouraging positive adult-child interactions. The following are four keys to establishing successful mentor-mentee relationships.

Key #1: Develop a Relationship of Trust

1. Develop a relationship of trust. Relationships need to be built before any effective mentoring can take place. An environment of trust and mutuality must be established. It is important for the mentor and mentee to become acquainted with each other (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998).

- Begin each relationship with a getting-to-know-you session.

- The mentor should greet the mentee warmly and help the mentee identify his or her professional needs and goals.
- The mentor should learn about the mentee's educational background and experience, and share information about his or her own background and experience.
- The mentor can then continue to build upon the mentees strengths, needs, and goals throughout the mentoring period.

Key #2: Define Roles and Responsibilities

2. Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of both the mentor and the mentee. Typically, a mentee is more receptive to feedback if he or she feels like an active participant in the relationship (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Questions to consider include:

- What will the role of the mentor be?
- What types of mentoring will be most effective?
- What are the responsibilities of the mentee and mentor? For example, the mentee may be required to attend specific training given by the mentor or complete a certain number of mutually determined goals during the mentoring period.

Key #3: Establish Short and Long Term Goals

3. Establish short- and long-term goals. Mentors and mentees should work together to develop mutually agreed upon goals (Podsen & Denmark, 2000). These goals become the basis for the mentoring activities. For example, a mentor and mentee might determine they want to improve math and science experiences within the preschool classroom. A short-term goal could be to create new interest centers within the classroom featuring items such as sea shells, pine cones, rocks, and magnifying glasses. A long-term goal could be to facilitate ongoing classroom activities using the materials in a variety of experiences. The mentor would then support the mentee in reaching these goals.

Mentors need to provide constructive feedback to mentees on goal progression. Mentees should have an opportunity to be reflective on their actions and be given written feedback to review. The mentor can note their observations in a positive, constructive manner and describe any actions taken by the mentee in connection to the established goals. Later the mentor and mentees can review the observations and determine the next steps. Open, respectful, and supportive communication is essential to this process and should include the following:

- Active listening. Mentors must be skilled at actively listening to concerns. Feelings are important, and greater trust is established when a mentee feels he or she can safely share thoughts and feelings with the mentor (Starcevich, n.d.).

- Timing is everything. Mentors must be sensitive to the timing of feedback. If emotions are high or a mentee seems defensive, mentors need to back off and reschedule another time for giving feedback or address the perceived barriers.
- Value each other's feedback. Even experienced teachers can learn new ways of thinking and doing things. Mentors and mentees must value and be responsive to each other's feedback.

Key #4: Collaborate to Solve Problems

4. Be collaborative in solving problems. Mentors need to allow mentees the opportunity to identify concerns and potential solutions. Mentors should encourage mentees to take risks and do things differently by implementing creative solutions (Podsén & Denmark, 2000). Mentors can improve the outcome of their mentoring by doing the following together:

- Identify the specific concern.
- Brainstorm possible solutions. The mentor can offer ideas, but the mentee should be allowed to choose which plan to put into action.
- Select a plan to try, and discuss desired outcomes.
- Implement the plan. The mentor should be supportive and encouraging, and reinforce successful completion of the plan.
- Assess the outcome together. The mentor and mentee should be reflective and discuss the effectiveness of the activity and make adjustments as needed.
- Try another solution, if needed. It is important for mentors to remember that there are many different ways to address an issue and that the mentor's way may not be the most effective solution for the mentee.
- Celebrate successful results.

Benefits of Mentoring

There are many benefits to successful mentoring relationships.

- Mentees are able to learn and grow under the mentor's guidance.
- Mentees are able to experiment with creative solutions to problems within a safe and supportive environment.

- Mentees become stronger and more intentional in their teaching.

Summary

Mentoring is an effective method of helping inexperienced individuals develop and progress in their profession. Extension staff have many opportunities to mentor volunteers and other community partners. The keys to establishing a successful mentoring relationship include creating a relationship of trust, clearly defining roles and responsibilities, establishing short- and long-term goals, using open and supportive communication, and collaboratively solving problems.

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