Thoughts on Mentoring

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus appoints Mentor to be the sage guardian of his son before he departs for the Trojan War. The term "mentor" has since come from the Greek through Latin to be the English work for "a wise and trusted teacher or guide."

**TYPES OF MENTORING**

Some mentoring, particularly within an organization, is about *assimilation*, where the seasoned employee passes on the subtleties and secrets of the organization (Cooperative Extension) to the new hire. Other mentoring is about *education*, about learning to do something more quickly than if learned on one's own. This might concern understanding scholarship or developing management skills.

An emerging style of mentoring is about *dialogue* between mentor and faculty member where the focus is on bringing the mentee's knowledge and skills to the service of the organization. This form is particularly appropriate when employees have years of experience. This form recognizes that individual growth comes from awareness of how new knowledge and skills will serve the individual and the organization. The dialogue is intended to not only change the mentee, but the mentor as well.

The dialogue model is built on three assumptions. 1) Faculty bring extensive knowledge and skill to the program and their institutions. 2) Faculty are highly motivated and will grow their knowledge and skills if engaged in a dialogue about leadership. 3) Organizational change -- at all levels in Extension -- occurs through growth in its people.

**MENTORING IN EXTENSION**

Mentoring plays a major role in Extension for several reasons. Extension is, compared to other agencies, highly complex. There are faculty on and off campus, program leaders and coordinators, county office managers and staff, support staff, and administrators. Administrative, budget, and academic authority often flow through different channels. Leadership, decision making, communication, motivation and control are often dispersed or occur through both formal and non-formal systems. The distribution of Extension organizations across the geography of states exacerbates the complexity.

In all, Extension in most if not all states is what educators call "loose coupled." In a loose-coupled system it is often difficult to understand systems and relationship. Mentoring is a means to create that understanding and to develop the skills to work within such a system.

Extension is also a relatively old institution, dating in most states from about 1914. It has a deep history and strong traditions. The challenge for leadership -- which is ultimately about change -- is to promote the type of change that sustains what is good about the present organization and changes that which is needed to better serve goals and clients. There is a necessary and desirable tension about what to keep and what to change. Emerging leaders are a primary source of that tension and a capable mentor will be open to exploring how the faculty can best create positive change.

Both new faculty and mentors benefit from the dialogue. New faculty gain knowledge of themselves, the institution, and strategies to be leaders. Mentors gain recognition, enhance their own ability to lead, and know they are helping the institution grow new leaders.
FOCUS ON THE MENTOR

The ideal mentor, as reported in the literature, meets seven criteria:
1. Is outside one's chain of command
2. Has programmatic experience similar to that of the mentee
3. Is geographically proximate
4. Is able to meet frequently -- about monthly
5. Possesses a great deal of organizational experience
6. Is willing and able to share this information; can assure that the dialogue is effective
7. Has an understanding of self and the organization and is not defensive of the status quo

The mentor may take on many roles: learner, teacher, coach, guide, advisor, counselor, sponsor, role model, validator and motivator. About motivation, the need is not to give the new faculty a "pat on the back" but rather to help the person find intrinsic motivation from doing the job well.

Mentors don't: a) tell the faculty member what to do; 2) encourage the faculty member to follow in his or her footsteps; 3) allow the faculty person to develop dependency; and 4) divulge the essential discussion that occurs in the relationship.

There is risk in being a mentor. For example, bad advice may hurt a new faculty member as a person or professional or advice may be misconstrued due to differences in culture or learning styles.

The mentor may need to take the lead in developing the dialogue. For some mentors this will require no preparation, for others, however, they may wish to focus on special topics to encourage discussion. Some of these might be: reasons for joining Extension, career highs and lows, professional hopes, motivators, changes in the organization, one's own leadership strengths and weaknesses, and blending work and family.

Some mentors and new faculty may wish to select a book on leadership to read and discuss.

MENTOR PROCESS

Soon after hiring, the new faculty member will initiate contact with potential mentors. In this discussion an agreement, formal or informal, should be reached that includes at the minimum:

a. duration -- typically for the first year
b. frequency of contact -- once a month is a norm but the range is very wide
c. forum for contact -- in person, over the phone, by email, etc.
d. format for interaction -- an open dialogue with questions and issues raised by both new hire and mentor is the norm
e. mediation if required -- protocol for resolution of conflict.

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