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## Mentoring Adult Learners: Implications for Cooperative Extension as a Learning Organization

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## Mentoring Adult Learners: Implications for Cooperative Extension as a Learning Organization

### Abstract

A comprehensive summary of the existing literature on mentoring of adult learners, in the context of the Cooperative Extension System as a learning organization, reveals that structured organizational mentoring is needed in Extension to prepare and develop individuals to be future leaders in the organization. Further inquiry is needed regarding Extension as a transformative learning organization, the role of mentees in Cooperative Extension as adult learners, training needed for veteran Extension agents to effectively serve as mentors, and orientation processes for new hires on making the most of the relationship with a mentor.

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### Introduction

As defined in the literature, a mentor is a seasoned employee who offers advice about the values, beliefs, norms, and accepted rituals of an organization (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). A mentor should also be someone who can teach, guide, and protect his or her mentee (Godwin, Diem, & Maddy, 2011) by providing vocational and psychosocial support and serving as a role model for desired behaviors (Gibson, Tesone, & Buchalski, 2000; Lankau & Chung, 1998).

Regardless of industry, it is agreed on by many that mentoring is important to the success of new hires (Foote & Solem, 2009; Sorcinelli, 1994), and the Cooperative Extension System is no exception (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998; Nestor & Leary, 2000; Ukaga et al., 2002). Smith, Hoag, and Peel (2011) surmised that "all agents could benefit from knowledge about how experienced agents have become and continue to be successful and what is required from the environment around them to cultivate success" ("Introduction," para. 4). Placing new hires, without guidance, into positions and environments that may be unfamiliar and complex often leads to increased stress, poor working relationships, and reduced morale, productivity, and quality of work (Godwin et al., 2011; Place & Bailey, 2010).

Organizational trends toward competency-based training in the workplace have resulted in increased responsibility for providing learning development opportunities and career support to employees (Darwin, 2000). Workplace mentoring is one strategy for facilitating that career development and support (Kram, 1985) and has been shown to effect a wide range of positive outcomes for mentees (Danielson, 2002; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). This type of mentoring can be formal or informal, typically occurs in an organizational setting, and fosters mentees' personal and professional growth (Gibson et al., 2000; Kram, 1985). Many institutions develop mentoring tools to facilitate successful relationships between mentors and mentees (Gibson et al., 2000; Kinsey, Carleo, O'Neill, & Polanin, 2010).

This article aims to provide a comprehensive summary of the existing literature on mentoring of adult learners, first in organizations on a broad scale and then within the context of the Cooperative Extension System. The purpose of this analysis of the current research is to provide suggestions on areas for further inquiry for Cooperative Extension.

## **Mentoring Adult Learners**

### **The Learning Organization**

The learning organization is defined as a place in which employees create and transfer knowledge for the purpose of capacity building and desired behavior change (Garvin, 1993; Senge, 1990). Such an organization would be supported by a well-managed mentoring program that could foster a culture of continuous learning and risk taking (Buck, 2004). Bokeno and Gantt (2000) described the environment that is required:

Weaving learning practices into everyday organizational life involves methodological assumptions and procedures that thematize the idea of "safe places" where the risk taking and experimentation necessary for learning how to learn can happen without the fear and negative sanction associated with mistakes and failures. (p. 240)

### **Adults Mentoring Adults**

Adults' mentoring of other adults does not have the same implications as adults' mentoring of children. Success of any adult mentoring relationship depends on several factors, including a mentor willing to commit his or her time and build trust (Zimmer & Smith, 1992), a mentee committed to learning and growing personally and professionally (Cohen, 1995), and clear expectations and appropriate nurturing (Godwin et al., 2011).

Often, there are ethical issues within mentoring contexts that may challenge the success of the mentor-mentee relationship because traditional mentoring practices may come with unchallenged assumptions about knowledge and power (Darwin, 2000; Hansman, 2009). One way to recognize and address this potential for conflict is through honest communication. Both parties in the mentoring relationship have a responsibility to define openly and clearly their roles, goals, and expectations, but doing so can be difficult, especially early in the relationship, until an element of

trust can be developed and nurtured (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000; Cohen, 1995; Hansman, 2009).

Functionalist views of mentoring assume that mentoring is a power-dependent, hierarchical activity (Darwin, 2000) and may limit or even exclude certain individuals, such as women and minorities, from achieving total benefit from a mentoring relationship. As such, mentors should examine their unspoken power and privilege—as a result of longevity, institutional knowledge, and existing relationships—and consider how to use those elements to help mentees learn and grow (Hansman, 2009). On the other end of the spectrum, radical humanist perspectives of mentoring challenge power relationships of traditional mentoring and encourage creative risk taking, dynamic dialogue, and peer relationships to create new knowledge for both parties (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000; Darwin, 2000; Zachary, 2005).

## **Transformative Learning**

Cohen (1995) identified mentees in the workplace as adult learners. As such, they should experience learning that is transformative, meaning that they gain new perspectives and become more self-determined over time (Franz, Garst, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009; Mezirow, 2000). This goal requires mentors to use critical debate and questioning with mentees to encourage open discourse and analysis of personal assumptions (Cranton, 1996; Mezirow, 2000). Additionally, the acquisition of knowledge through mentoring becomes an active process that encourages curiosity and requires a dynamic, participatory approach from both the mentor and mentee (Darwin, 2000).

According to Franz et al. (2009), for transformative learning to take place, five specific variables are needed in the learning environment of a mentoring relationship: (a) strong partner facilitation, (b) critical reflection, (c) a critical event, (d) difference between partners, and (e) the coexistence of independence and interdependence. Additionally, peer mentoring, in which colleagues are mutually involved in enhancing reciprocal learning and development without a defined power dynamic or hierarchy, is preferable to a manager-subordinate type of mentoring relationship (Kram & Isabella, 1985; McDaugall & Beattie, 1997).

Franz et al. (2009) and Daloz (2000) suggested that mentees should be paired with mentors who have backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences different from theirs; that both mentors and mentees should be trained in facilitation skills to have a more productive learning relationship; and that mentees should engage in critical reflection activities to make the most out of their transformative learning. However, a study by Allen and Eby (2003) on mentor effectiveness found that mentors reported higher quality mentoring relationships and greater reciprocal learning when paired with a mentee who was similar in gender and other demographic characteristics, along with having perceived similarities in attitudes, values, and beliefs. More specifically, Menges (2015) concluded that matching mentors and mentees with similar levels of openness to experience and conscientiousness produced enhanced outcomes of the mentoring relationship for the mentees.

## **Impact of Workplace Mentoring**

Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, and DuBois (2008) conducted a quantitative review of existing mentoring research in the three primary categories of mentoring—youth, academic, and workplace. They found

that workplace mentoring was significantly correlated to career attitudes, work attitudes, and some career outcomes, such as situational satisfaction and attachment. This finding was supported by prior research conducted by Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima (2004) and Underhill (2006). On the other hand, workplace mentoring had less influence on health-related outcomes, such as psychological stress and strain, and most career outcomes, including promotions and salaries (Eby et al., 2008).

Qualitative research on mentees' positive mentoring experiences indicates that mentors' providing opportunities for networking outside the organization, assignments that offered broad skill development, help in developing relationships within the organization, and personalized feedback and career advice had the most significant impact on mentees (Eby & McManus, 2002). However, the existing measures of mentoring functions of adults in organizational settings do not focus on identifying efficiency of many of mentoring behaviors (Allen et al., 2004).

While mentees certainly can benefit from a formal mentoring program through increased knowledge, guidance, and support, mentors also benefit from being recognized for their efforts and gaining a sense of personal satisfaction (Darwin, 2000). The benefits to mentors in the mentoring relationship, while not well-researched, speak to the mentors' perceived self-efficacy as professionals (Yost, 2002). Findings from a longitudinal study by Weinberg and Lankau (2011) suggest that as formal mentoring relationships develop over time, mentors become more efficient. Additionally, the mentor functions of psychosocial support and role modeling are positively correlated to mentee satisfaction and reports of mentor effectiveness. Peer mentoring can also evolve over time, morphing from formal to informal, while still providing vocational, psychosocial, and role modeling support to both the mentor and mentee (Kram & Isabella, 1985; McDaugall & Beattie, 1997). Finally, the organization benefits from retaining knowledgeable, productive employees; experiencing reduced turnover; and producing future leaders (Darwin, 2000; Lankau & Chung, 1998; Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998; Sosik & Lee, 2002).

## **Mentoring in Cooperative Extension**

### **Expectations Versus Reality**

The teaching profession may offer insight regarding reasons for dissatisfaction and early career exits among new hires. There has long been an understanding that novice teachers form poor understandings and expectations of the reality of teaching because their experience to that point is typically through observation rather than through practice (Danielson, 2002). Cooperative Extension, as a non-formal teaching profession, may involve similar occurrences among new agents who are able to explain why what they teach is important but are unable to articulate why their teaching and outreach methods are appropriate and how they play a role in the mission of the organization as a whole. This is explained by Habermas (1985) and Southern (2007), who posited that successful mentoring between teachers and learners should be about transformative learning, in which technical aspects not only are learned but also are assigned meaning through communicative learning and negotiation of beliefs, assumptions, and information.

Mentoring, as an organizational tool, can help mentees understand their role in the organization and

the professional standards and expectations by which success is measured (Danielson, 2002). Kutilek and Earnest (2001) described several benefits of an Extension mentoring program, including improved proficiency in planning and implementing an Extension program—as reported by past participants; an enhanced understanding of the workplace environment; and an increase in agents' leadership efficacy. Additional benefits include increased commitment to the organization and overall job satisfaction (Bowen, Radhakrishna, & Keyser, 1994).

## Competencies

"Extension needs new employees to develop skills quickly to the level at which they can perform their work efficiently and effectively" (Place & Bailey, 2010, "Background," para. 2). The effectiveness of Extension programs and the overall job satisfaction and productivity of Extension agents depend, in part, on the preentry and career-long competencies of the Extension agents (Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2012).

The career stage approach model—developed by Kutilek, Gunderson, and Conklin (2002) as a modification of Rennekamp and Nall's 1993 professional development model—addresses mentoring in the final stage of an Extension agent's career. The counselor/advisor stage is the point at which seasoned Extension agents participate in the organization's decision-making process, assist with big-picture problem solving, and develop other agents. The career stage approach model identifies several organizational strategies for developing the core competencies agents at this final career stage need to be successful, including providing them with the opportunity to fill mentoring roles (Benge, Harder, & Carter, 2011).

Agent orientation and retention in Cooperative Extension can be strengthened by preparing agents with critical skills during their first 3 years on the job (Baker & Hadley, 2014; Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzales, Craig, & Haile, 2011). Benge et al. (2011) and Kutilek et al. (2002) identified peer mentoring programs, professional support teams, leadership coaching, and orientation and job training as organizational strategies for helping new agents acquire those skills. A qualitative survey of successful veteran agents in Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and Oregon (Smith et al., 2011) revealed that good mentoring was essential for helping young agents set themselves up for professional success in the future.

## Structure of Mentoring Programs

A pilot study evaluating a newly implemented formal mentoring program at the University of Florida (Place & Bailey, 2010) revealed several valuable guidelines and recommendations for structured mentoring programs within an Extension organization:

- Mentor-mentee pairing should be the responsibility of regional or district supervisors because they have a better knowledge of veteran agents who might make successful mentors.
- Mentees paired with mentors with similar personalities, geographies, and program areas may form higher quality relationships with their mentors.

A mentoring handbook with detailed task lists should be developed as a tool for guiding mentors and should serve as a reference for mentees to start conversations with their mentors.

- Mentors and mentees should schedule their meetings very early in the mentoring relationship to make their interactions a priority.
- Mentors should be intrinsically motivated to serve in the mentoring role and should not be monetarily incentivized.
- A statewide coordinator to oversee the mentoring program would provide the needed consistency and structure in developing curricula, implementing training, and explaining guidelines, procedures, and expectations for all involved.

However, a study assessing perceptions of effective educational strategies for facilitating North Carolina Extension agents' acquisition of desired competencies revealed a strong preference for face-to-face small-group training workshops and only a moderate preference for mentoring (Lakai et al., 2012). The use of informal, peer-driven group learning sessions supplemental to formal, one-on-one mentoring relationships also should be considered.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Cooperative Extension System can be an overwhelming organization for new staff and faculty, regardless of the institution. Some insist that the most effective mentors would be senior employees who understand the system and specific expectations of the job (Saunders & Reese, 2011). However, this view does not address the potential for Extension agents at the formative stages of their careers to serve as peer mentors to new hires. This group of agents could offer significantly different perspectives and be more willing to challenge mentees' personal assumptions, thus enhancing a true transformative learning workplace environment.

The known benefits of mentoring—both giving and receiving—within the Extension system include proficiency in Extension programming, a stronger orientation to the workplace environment, increased leadership efficacy, increased organizational commitment, and overall job satisfaction. These benefits may translate to reduced turnover rates and enhanced productivity and quality of work. In public sector organizations such as Cooperative Extension, learning organizations and organizational mentoring can provide the link between the learning movement and the development of leaders as continuous learners (Hale, 1996). When a strong, structured mentoring program is in place, the mentees, the mentors, and the organization benefit (Godwin et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, Extension, as an organization, lacks strong and consistent training, mentoring, and professional development programs for faculty and staff (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, Leadership Advisory Council, 2005). There is a need to improve Extension's efforts in preparing and developing individuals to be future leaders within the organization (Strong & Harder, 2009). Formal mentoring programs are important for training and retaining employees and developing leaders (Sosik & Lee, 2002).

Although the literature agrees on the implementation of formal, structured mentoring programs,

there are differing views on how those programs should be structured. Considerations such as how mentors are chosen, trained, and incentivized are open to debate and probably will be specific to the organizational culture at any particular institution. Additionally, the concept of Extension as a learning organization and the agent's role within that organization needs to be further studied to better understand effective ways to help agents succeed as adult learners and potential future leaders in a professional setting.

Existing research targeting Extension focuses primarily on assessing the perceived efficacy and benefits of current mentoring programs to mentees. There is a distinct lack of research on the relationship between mentors and mentees as adult learners and effective behaviors of mentors of adult learners. There are also no reliable instruments that measure the efficiency of a wide range of desired mentoring functions. Further discussion addressing appropriate, transformative training for formative and seasoned Extension agents to effectively serve as mentors for new hires, as well as orientation training for new hires on how to make the most of the relationship with their mentor, is needed.

Additionally, there is very little research focusing on the dyadic relationship between mentors and mentees and specifically the perceptions about mentor relationship expectations, effectiveness, and success by each respective party. Young and Perrewé (2000) found that whereas mentees place higher value on the social and psychosocial behavior exhibited by their mentors when determining success of the mentor relationship, mentors were more concerned with the career-related behaviors demonstrated by the mentees. This finding may imply that mentors enter the mentoring relationship focused on tangible, work-related results whereas mentees first need to establish a sense of trust in their mentors through relationship building before acting on the more technical aspects of the transformative learning relationship. Future investigation in this area may shed light on strategies for developing more effective training of mentors and better managing mentoring programs.

Another opportunity for future inquiry is from the perspective of mentees in Cooperative Extension as adult learners. The goal of Extension, in particular with its adult audiences, is transformative education that leads to increased knowledge, improved practices, and enhanced quality of life. It makes sense, then, that new-hire orientation and ongoing professional development for Extension agents—mentoring notwithstanding—promote transformational learning as a way for agents to enhance their ability to meet the educational goals of the organization. Understanding the professional development needs of employees and how formal and informal mentoring can support those needs over the course of employees' careers could provide significant information to improve employee training and development practices.

Finally, there is conflicting research on the perceived efficacy and success of mentoring relationships relative to the level of "sameness" within the mentor-mentee pairing (Allen & Eby, 2003; Daloz, 2000; Franz et al., 2009; Menges, 2015). For Extension systems to truly engender the idea of transformative learning within the bounds of professional development for its agents, administrative support and an active push against conventional social and operative norms will be essential. This active support could be realized in three ways. The first would be implementation of enhanced training for soft skills, such as diversity awareness, inclusion, communication, facilitation, and



conflict management, to encourage nontraditional thinking and innovation. The second would be a realignment of Extension culture to reset the current climate that encourages collaboration and risk taking but rewards individual effort and short-term "feel-good" successes that often offer no lasting impact. The third would be a unified connection of administrative processes—from prehire interviews and onboarding to annual evaluations—that use performance benchmarks and accountability to reinforce the new culture of Extension as a transformative learning organization, inside and out.

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