



GNF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES #202A

PROGRAM: FARMER-TO-FARMER MENTORING
ORGANIZATION: REGIONAL FARM AND FOOD PROJECT, ALBANY, N.Y.
TARGETED TO: STARTUPS/PEOPLE LOOKING AT ALTERNATIVE ENTERPRISES
DATES: BEGAN IN 2000

Need

Often new operators of farms or people starting alternative enterprises cannot establish viable full-time businesses. This may be due, in part, to new farmers' having minimal contact with established, respected farmers who can serve as teachers, mentors and role models. Even if people starting a farm or an alternative enterprise have the necessary technical skills, they often lack a whole-farm management and entrepreneurial orientation. Plus, few new farmers have clearly articulated long-term goals that guide their decisions and actions.

Program Development

The Regional Farm and Food Project conceived the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring program to help individual farmers develop successful and sustainable farm enterprises that suit their farm resources. Through the mentoring program, farmer mentors, including some farm couple teams, representing 10 farms mentored with 19 new farmers (mentees) during a 10-month period. Mentees must have some technical skills, experience and an operating farm.

The program coordinator selected mentors who had farming and communication skills. Mentors were admired for their competence, sustainable farming skills and contentment in their careers. Many of the mentors were popular presenters at farm workshops, and some had acted informally as mentors or had taught apprentices who went on to farm independently.

Mentees were screened through a two-page written application. Information required on the application included:

- Contact information, as well as the best time and method of contact.
- Farm description, including people involved, type, duration, acreage, marketing and production approaches.
- Whether they farmed full or part time.
- Successes and challenges.
- Long-term goals in production and products, environment and resource management, marketing, profit/income, family/people, quality of life and new enterprises.

- Learning experiences, such as workshops, apprenticeships, growing up on a farm, that have been particularly helpful.
- How a farmer mentor would assist them.

The majority of the farmer mentees were organic vegetable growers. Six mentees were grazers raising meat animals or dairy cows. Mentee ages ranged from early 20s to early 60s. Few had grown up in agriculture. Most had participated in or were enrolled in at least one of the sponsor's multi-day workshops.

Implementation

The program coordinator took the following steps to implement the program:

- Drew up a short list of possible mentees for each mentor.
- Sent the mentees applications to mentors for review. They talked to the coordinator about people they might prefer working with.
- Encouraged mentees to contact one or two mentors who the coordinator thought would be appropriate for them. They were to report back on their preference. Mentors and mentees could reject a match if they didn't think it would "click."
- Conducted the orientation and final evaluation meetings and provided written materials with thought-provoking questions. At orientation day, mentoring pairs discussed their expectations about the frequency, timing and intensity of contact. The final evaluation prompted farmers to reflect on their involvement with the program. In several cases, participants may have gained self-knowledge, which will facilitate more effective participation in future learning and mentoring programs.
- Provided a Plan Development form with a comprehensive list of topics such as soil fertility, water, labor management and marketing/distribution. Under each topic were two subheadings: goals and present situation. The mentoring pair used this to assess the farm's current position and the mentee's goals. This Plan Development form helped the pair build a work plan for their mentoring relationship.
- Talked often with each mentor and mentee. Regular contact with both parties was necessary to support the mentoring relationships and troubleshoot any difficulties that might develop.

Funding

A Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant entitled "Whole Farm Entrepreneurship: Farmer-to-Farmer Education for Vegetable & Livestock Producers" provided funding. Also, consultees paid a \$50 fee to participate. Applicants were required to be Regional Farm & Food Project members, at a cost of \$25 per year. Mentors kept a log of the time spent communicating with their mentees or doing work on their behalf. This might include reviewing a business plan or researching equipment. Mentor compensation was \$20 per hour, with 12 hours allocated per mentee, which was not a realistic limit; 30 hours is more appropriate.

Outreach

The program developed a brochure with descriptions of each mentor. We distributed this to all farmers on the sponsor's mailing list as a way to generate inquiries from prospective consultees. We publicized Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring at farmer workshops and in press releases to farm

publications and organizations' newsletters in the region. Farmers who could benefit from the program were encouraged to submit applications.

Analysis

In the Regional Farm & Food Project's analysis of the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring, the following successes and challenges were identified:

Successes

1. The program is simple and flexible.
2. Participants appreciated it. As one mentee said, *"this program permits me to pick the brain of successful farmers without feeling guilty about using them or leaning on them too much."*
3. Mentees reported positive changes. They increased returns in the marketplace, achieved economic objectives, improved farming practices, and enhanced their understanding of basic agricultural principles. They made other tangible changes such as acquiring needed used equipment, expanding their infrastructure, and streamlining operations. Personally, mentees gained new ideas, renewed hope for their farms, and enhanced self-confidence.
4. The farming pairs forged strong, enduring bonds. Mutual respect, understanding and an interest in the mentee's success made a tremendous difference in the mentoring relationship. Mentee's visiting the mentor's farm during the season showed them systems and equipment operations that they needed to learn about. These included soil preparation, planting, cultivation and harvesting *"After a walk through the fields, I realized that many things were lacking at my farm,"* said one mentee. The farmer noted seeing standard row spacing, cultivating equipment set up permanently for efficient cultivation, succession plantings, midseason cover cropping, more efficient use of plant bed space, and concentration on certain profitable crops.
5. Both mentors and mentees rated friendship as an important benefit of the program. Overcoming isolation is a related theme.
6. Experience shows that the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring program has been successful because it has a part-time paid coordinator who is available to establish and support the mentoring relationships. The coordinator functions as a coach, cheerleader and confidant.

Challenges

1. Geography was a huge challenge since mentors and mentees live in three states, as far as three hours from Albany.
2. Mentee's keeping track of questions to ask was a problem. This was solved when the farmer kept a notepad or a clipboard to write down questions as they occurred.
3. Planning for regular contact was important. It needed to be agreed upon by each mentoring pair.
4. It's tough to ask for help. Sometimes independence, rather than failure to articulate questions or recognize problems, prevented a mentee from taking advantage of the program.

5. Knowing how busy farmers can be, some mentees were concerned about imposing upon a mentor after having gained a lot from the person.
6. Mentors need to have realistic expectations of what they can gain from the program. A mentor cannot solve all problems or make difficult decisions for a mentee.
7. Mentors should not expect their mentee to follow all of their advice. And mentees must feel empowered to act only on suggestions with which they agree.
8. A shortage of capable and willing mentors is probably the biggest obstacle to building the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring program. New mentors must be recruited as the demand for them increases and experienced mentors pull back to take a break. Also, as mentors form lasting relationships with their mentees and continue to work informally with them, they may be less available to take on a new mentee.
9. Mentor development should be explored. Developing a workshop in goal setting, planning and other skills for people interested in becoming mentors would strengthen the program.
10. The program's future depends upon fundraising, probably from grants and individual donors, since mentee's payments cover a small fraction of the cost.

Next Steps

Experience taught us that this time-line works for the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring Program:

January – August: Recruit mentors, informally announce program.

September: Produce & disseminate brochure & outreach materials.

September – November: Accept applications & make matches.

Mid-November (or mid-January): Hold orientation; program begins.

Mid-December: Mentees turn in work plans.

Monthly – Quarterly: Coordinator communicates regularly with mentors & mentees. Spring: Farm visits begin.

November: End-of-season gathering and evaluation. (Mentoring pairs may opt to end their participation in the program or continue through either the end of winter or for another 12 months.)

Winter: Mentees working with their mentors evaluate previous season and plan upcoming one.

In the future, the following three points must be addressed:

1. Mentor time allotted must be increased to at least 30 hours per mentee.
2. Program costs must be reevaluated. Costs include hourly compensation and mileage for mentors for one farm visit, and a share of program coordination and administration.
3. We estimate it requires 10 hours per mentee to coordinate the program, given about 20 mentees in the program. This is based on their being a shared history and foundation relationship with a mentee from previous educational programs. Lacking this, it might take considerably more effort to launch such a program.

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