

The Extension Mentor's Discussion and Action Guide¹

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Introduction

Mentorship is a dynamic, developmental relationship between a mentor and a mentee (Kram, 1983). When the mentoring relationship is first established, it can be difficult to set norms and expectations for both parties. Mentor relationships can benefit both the mentor and the mentee by providing a space for collaboration, learning, and support (Ragins, 1997). This publication provides a detailed discussion and action guide to help UF/IFAS Extension mentors form and build their relationships with their mentees.

The Initial Meeting

A mentor may be assigned a mentee by their supervisor, or a potential mentee may reach out to request mentorship. It is important for the mentor to contact the mentee to schedule an introductory meeting soon after the match is established. In their study of early-career Extension agents, Leitheiser and Harder (2022) found that new Extension agent hires needed mentorship at the beginning of their career, as well as structured, regular meetings. The first meeting should take place in person if schedules and office distance allow and is a great opportunity for both the mentor and mentee to set clear expectations, to discuss strengths and weaknesses, and to make a plan for the mentoring relationship going forward (Zachary & Fain, 2022). New employees can oftentimes find it difficult to acquaint themselves with their colleagues. A mentor should take the initiative and reach out to their new mentee, either by phone or email, with a brief introduction and offer

potential times to meet, either in person or virtually, to answer questions and get acquainted.

The old adage “you don’t know what you don’t know” applies to not only the job but also to the mentorship relationship. In many instances, new employees do not know what questions to ask their mentor for guidance or direction. Below are some topics the mentor can discuss at the first meeting to take the initiative and get the ball rolling.

Career Path

Mentors should understand the career path of their mentees to help guide them through their early career. Questions such as “What made you apply for this Extension job?” and “Where would you like to be professionally in 5 years?” can help the mentor understand the potential career trajectory of their mentee. Additionally, discuss the foundations of career advancement. Early-career Extension professionals may be unsure about securing the path to permanent status/tenure, moving up in the organization, and leading work groups. This is your opportunity to provide insight through your own experiences.

- Explain the expectations for permanent status/tenure and promotion.
- Depending on when the first meeting takes place, the mentor might need to explain the annual reporting process such as the agent’s ROA/POW and Workload Reporting.

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- Explain the differences between titles (e.g., Extension Agent I, II, III, or IV; or assistant, associate, or full professor positions).

Understanding of the Extension Agent's Role

Newly hired agents may be unsure of their role in Extension. Seasoned Extension professionals can offer experiences and share knowledge to help newer employees better understand their role. Consider the following conversations and activities:

- Invite your mentee to attend an event that you are leading (e.g., office meeting, volunteer meeting, group event). Shadowing is a great opportunity for your mentee to better understand their role.
- Introduce your mentee to stakeholders involved in your programs. Invite your mentee to tag along with you on a site or field visit. Observing an agent-stakeholder interaction can be extremely helpful for someone new to the Extension system.
- Explain to your mentee the importance of remaining unbiased when delivering information and suggestions to Extension clientele.
- Discuss how you conduct outreach and education programs for Extension clientele (e.g., your process for planning a program, questions to include on a program evaluation, etc.).

Learning the UF/IFAS Extension System

As a mentor you can help your mentee understand the ins and outs of the Extension organization. Share your knowledge of the system by providing insight on the following topics:

- Review the fundamentals of the [Extension Pathway](#) to help the mentee understand how their programmatic work can fit within the larger Extension picture.
- Ask your mentee if they have developed an advisory committee. Have they had their first meeting? Do they plan on scheduling a meeting soon? If they did not inherit an advisory committee, where should they start? Explain the function of advisory committees and maintaining strong relationships with committee members. For more information, refer to this guide: [Extension Advisory Handbook 2015](#)
- Continuing education and development are important aspects of being an Extension agent. Introduce your mentee to the in-service training system located within the [Program Development and Evaluation Center](#).

- Describe the role of the state specialist to your mentee and provide contact information for some specialists, with whom they might have frequent contact. A complete list of UF/IFAS Extension state specialists can be found using the [UF/IFAS Directory](#).

Following Through with your Mentor Role

Mentors are selected for their role based on their experience and expertise in the field of Extension and their specialty areas. The mentoring relationship should span beyond the initial meeting, and the mentor should be actively engaging with their mentee via Kram's three mentor functions: career development, psychosocial wellbeing, and role modeling (Kram, 1983; Scandura & Ragins, 1993).

Schedule Regular Meetings

After the initial meeting, the mentor should be regularly scheduling meetings with their mentee. Setting a reoccurring meeting (i.e., meeting every three months) is a good practice so neither the mentor nor mentee will forget. The meeting location should vary based on the time of year and the opportunity for travel. If the mentor and mentee plan to meet in person, consider alternating meeting locations.

Career Development Support

Career development support is an important component of mentoring, with mentees looking to their mentors as a resource for career advancement (Koberg et al., 1998). As a seasoned agent, the mentor can use their personal experiences and expertise to guide the mentee through the early-career phase. Below are important career development topics the mentor should be facilitating to their mentee through the early-career phase:

EXTENSION 101

This conversation will look different for each individual. Discuss with your mentee what they already know about the structure of Extension. Explain the relationship between county agents and their (a) county directors, (b) regionally specialized agents, (c) state specialists, and (d) district directors. This might be a good time to connect your mentee with state specialists you have worked with in the past or direct them towards specialists in their programmatic area. Explain the importance of working in priority work groups and collaborating with other agents on large projects.

ANNUAL REPORTING

The agent's annual report, or "The Packet," can seem ominous and daunting to a new agent. Provide your mentee

with a copy of your Report of Accomplishments to serve as an example. Explain the process, timeline, and expectations associated with annual reporting. Consider working with your mentee as an accountability partner when preparing annual reports. Remember to discuss the importance of a complete report and the potential positive career outcomes associated with effective reporting.

PATH TO PERMANENT STATUS

Your mentee may be eager to learn how they can secure their career within Extension for years to come. Explain the path to permanent status and the different expectations between Extension agents' promotion levels. Highlight the importance of planning ahead for activities and tasks that will lead to high Extension scholarship outputs, such as planning evaluation, seeking awards, and submitting conference abstract proposals.

Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support refers to the mentor serving as an emotional resource for the mentees when they experience barriers and challenges (Harder et al., 2021) and can take the form of counseling and providing friendship (Kram, 1983). A mentee may view a mentor as an unofficial authority figure in their worklife (Ragins, 1997). When discussing expectations and establishing norms, a mentor should build trust with the mentee and confirm the mentoring relationship as a supportive environment for growth and learning. To provide psychosocial support, consider these suggestions:

BE A HELPING HAND

In an agent's first year, they may be overwhelmed with all their new and emerging responsibilities. This can be a very isolating experience, and feeling this way consistently can lead to burnout or turnover of new employees. Be a helping hand during this challenging time by offering advice, personal anecdotes, and examples of past successes, challenges, and wrongdoings. Remember, you were a new agent once too! Think back to when you first entered Extension: How did that feel and how did you work through challenges and obstacles?

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION

As a mentor, you may be your mentee's first friend on the job. Work through the distance between your offices by scheduling regular meetings for open discussion. Whether virtual or in-person, meetings with your mentee provide a great opportunity for you to develop a professional and social relationship. Regular meetings and casual conversations

help build trust over time and make the mentee feel more welcome within UF/IFAS Extension.

CULTIVATE A POSITIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Creating a positive and supportive work environment is crucial for the growth and success of new Extension agents. Be a source of encouragement, offering constructive feedback, and acknowledging their achievements. Celebrate their successes, no matter how small, and provide guidance when they face challenges, criticisms, or failures.

Role Modeling

A mentor acting as a role model intends to influence the goals and motivation of mentees by modeling behaviors, representing what is possible in the profession, and serving as an inspirational figure (Morgenroth et al., 2015). As a seasoned agent, the mentor is someone the mentee should look up to and model their own behaviors after. However, mentees may only meet with their mentors a few times a year, meaning each meeting is all the more important for the mentor to model desired behaviors and performance. To provide for more role modeling opportunities, the mentor may invite the mentee to shadow a program or event they are hosting. This offers the mentee with an opportunity to witness an experienced agent at work in their specialty area, encouraging the mentee to apply best practices to their own work (Lamb et al., 2022). Role modeling can take many forms, the following are suggested actions the mentor can model for their mentee:

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Extension mentors need to lead by example and display the appropriate characteristics, attributes, and ethics to their mentees. Demonstrate professionalism, dedication, and a genuine passion for your work; show new agents what it means to be committed to the mission of Extension. By consistently delivering high-quality work, maintaining a positive attitude, and being open to learning and growth, you set a standard of excellence and expectation that can inspire others.

SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

New Extension agents often face a challenging learning curve during their early-career phase. As a role model, you can help bridge that gap by sharing your knowledge and experience. Be willing to answer questions, provide guidance, and offer insights gained from your own professional journey. Consider providing real-life anecdotes of experiences you have worked through. By being approachable and supportive, you can help new agents navigate their roles

more effectively. New agents may look back on your advice to work through challenges throughout their careers.

FOSTER COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING

Encourage new Extension agents to connect with other professionals in the field to build a strong network of colleagues and mentors, such as other agents and state specialists with whom you have worked. Share information about relevant conferences, workshops, and professional organizations, and encourage your mentee to collaborate with others on fact sheets, conference abstract proposals, and programs. By fostering collaboration and networking, you are empowering new agents to tap into the wealth of collective and institutional knowledge and resources within the organization.

EMBRACE LIFELONG LEARNING

The field of Extension is forever growing and changing, it is essential for new agents to embrace a growth mindset to adapt as changes arise. As a role model, emphasize the importance of staying updated on emerging trends, research findings, and best practices. Share resources, recommend EDIS publications or journal articles, and encourage participation in professional webinars or in-service trainings. By modeling a commitment to lifelong learning, you inspire new agents to invest in their professional development and strive for excellence.

Conclusion

This publication provides Extension mentors with a discussion guide to generate potential actions and talking points to include throughout the mentoring relationship. Discussion points correlate with core mentor functions as cited by Kram (1983) and support needs identified by early-career agents (Harder et al., 2021). For more EDIS resources on Extension mentoring, see Appendix A for a brief review.

Resources

UF/IFAS Extension Pathway: https://extadmin.ifas.ufl.edu/media/extadminifasufledu/ext-admin-new/documents/Ext_Pathway_Digital_Final.pdf

UF/IFAS Extension Advisory Handbook: <https://extadmin.ifas.ufl.edu/media/extadminifasufledu/Extension-Advisory-Handbook-2015.pdf>

Program Development & Evaluation Center: <https://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu/>

UF/IFAS Directory: <https://directory.ifas.ufl.edu/>

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Appendix A

Defining and Performing the Functions of Extension Mentors

This publication provides UF/IFAS Extension faculty serving as formal mentors with information about the three primary functions of a mentor and guidance on how to perform those functions using a mentor calendar.

Using Mentoring as a Part of Professional Development

This EDIS publication defines mentoring, gives a brief history, and reviews the stages of the mentoring process. It also highlights the benefits mentors, protégés, and organizations can expect from the utilization of a mentoring process.

UF/IFAS Extension Mentoring Roles and Responsibilities

This publication provides information about the mentoring roles and responsibilities of protégés, county and district Extension directors, and the state Extension specialist.