

Mentoring the next generation

John Hewlett, J. Parsons and J.E. Tranel for *Progressive Forage*

AT A GLANCE

Well-known is the advantage of a mentoring relationship to the mentee. It is also beneficial, however, to the mentor.

Mentoring is a valuable way to transfer knowledge from an established producer to a new operator. It is also a tremendous risk management tool. Any time you gain knowledge about something with a direct effect on your farming or ranching operation, you remove uncertainty and risk. The benefits of being mentored by someone else are rather obvious. However, the benefits of serving as a mentor are often overlooked. In general, a mentoring relationship can be mutually beneficial to both parties when it comes to managing risk.

The transition from being someone interested in the business to being a business owner can be overwhelming. In agriculture,

this is doubly the case where new farmers and ranchers are not only dealing with the daunting task of learning how to run a business but are also dealing with learning about the biological and environmental variables involved with farming and ranching. Having a supportive colleague to guide you through this time is extremely valuable. A good mentor provides access to knowledgeable experience and the contacts needed to get a successful start in the business.

The origins of the word “mentor” come from Greek mythology, where Mentor was the loyal friend and adviser of Odysseus and the teacher of his son, Telemachus (Webster’s Ninth

New Collegiate Dictionary). The word “mentor” has traditionally been used to describe a trusted counselor, guide or coach.

In general, there are five types of mentoring approaches founders might consider for training management skills:

- Traditional one-to-one mentoring places one adult in a relationship with one mentee. At a minimum, the mentor and mentee should meet regularly at least four hours per month for about a year. There are exceptions. Mentees need to know from the

outset how long they can expect the relationship to last so they can adjust their expectations accordingly.

- Group mentoring involves one mentor forming a relationship with a group of up to four mentees. The mentor assumes the role of leader and makes a commitment to meet regularly with the group over a long period of time. Most interaction is guided by the session structure, which includes time for personal sharing.

- Team mentoring involves several mentors working with small groups of

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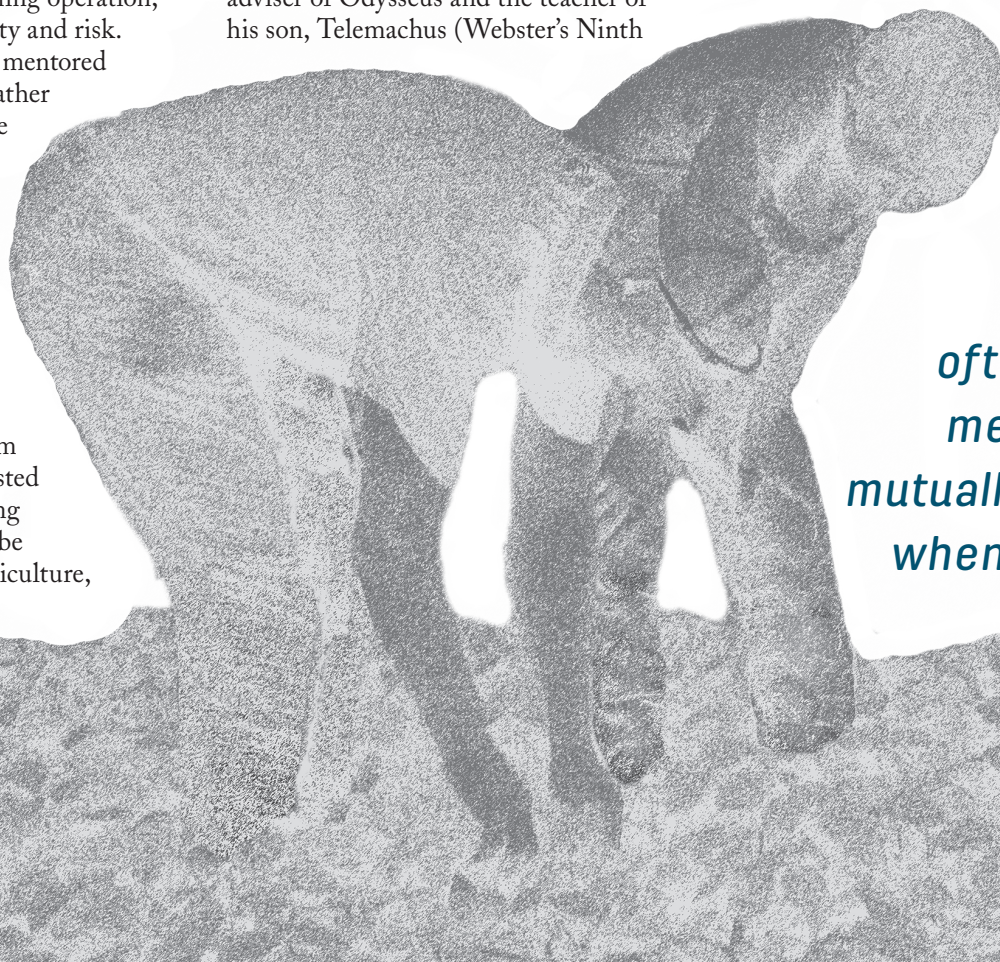


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mentees, with a mentor-mentee ratio no greater than 1-to-4.

• Peer mentoring provides an opportunity for a caring peer to develop a guiding, teaching relationship with a mentee. These peer mentors serve as positive role models. This type of mentorship usually requires ongoing support and close supervision by a third party.

• E-mentoring (online mentoring, or telementoring) connects one mentor with one mentee. The pair communicates via the internet at least once a week over a period of six months to a year. This approach may provide access to expertise outside of the rural business area and may not be as difficult to arrange as it might seem.

Mentors are more than just teachers. They are active guides. A good mentoring relationship is a partnership in a two-way learning process that increases the knowledge base and the resilience of both parties involved. The mentoring process is an opportunity for the mentor and mentee to focus together on the mentee's growth and development needs. It is a joint venture. Along the way, the mentor is sure to benefit from

the process of learning how to pass on skills and knowledge in a meaningful way.

Mentoring may be described as a cost-effective tool for developing any business's most valuable asset: their people. This is especially true for a family business. A successful mentoring process depends on the partners sharing common goals and expectations, having a commitment to the mentoring practice and giving and receiving trust and respect.

Being a mentor forces a person to think through what they are doing and why they are doing it. It provides an opportunity to review past experiences, which can be a great calibration tool. It helps reveal realities and uncertainties as attention focuses on the future and making plans.

These and other benefits of being a mentor are often overlooked. As a mentor, you will experience the satisfaction of shepherding someone new into the business, but you will also benefit from their youthful enthusiasm and open mind. At times you may be challenged to successfully communicate your skills and knowledge to them in a meaningful way. However, with that challenge will come greater appreciation and

understanding of the skills and knowledge you possess.

There is a saying among educators: You don't really know your subject matter until you are successful in teaching it to someone else. As a mentor, you will find yourself becoming more confident in what you do and don't know. You will also find yourself more confident and knowledgeable about sharing what you know with others.

Another great benefit of mentoring is the "passing on" of the latest knowledge and up-to-date information to the mentor from the newly educated mentee. The mentee's enthusiasm and openness to seeking and employing new information provides the mentor with an influx of new ideas. This, in turn, encourages candid, solution-focused discussion of the difficulties that can then lead to a more robust and inspired approach to the business.

An open discussion of ideas, concerns and knowledge are beneficial to all parties involved. Excellence in any field requires coaching. Coaches see things you don't, and they hold you accountable. By acknowledging professional goals and aspirations, mentoring is

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More information can be found online (www.rightrisk.org).

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