

How are you mentoring the next generation?

By Caleb Carter, UW Agriculture and Horticulture Educator

Ron has spent all his life on the ranch, working alongside his grandfather, his father, and now his son and grandsons. Early mornings moving cows, late nights calving, sorting pairs, fixing fence, and putting up hay; it has been his life for as long as he can remember. Ron had always dreamed he would pass the operation on to a son or daughter at some point, but never really talked about it much. After all, he was still able to do most things that needed to be done.

His son, Alex had expressed a desire to be more involved, so Ron helped him buy some cows to start his own herd. That went pretty well for a few years, but when the market turned down, Alex lost a lot of money and was forced to sell most of his cows. The ranch fared a little better, as Ron was able to work a deal with some regular buyers and at least broke even.

The event proved to be a continuing source of frustration and contention between the two of them. Ron felt bad, but wasn't sure how to help his son. He didn't want to do things for him, he wanted him to learn from his mistakes and have the skills to figure things out on his own. Alex wanted to have an opportunity to learn more about how the business worked, so he could be successful as well. But how could Ron turn over any of the ranch business responsibilities to a boy who had already lost so much? The ranch certainly couldn't manage a loss of most of its cow herd and remain in business. Why couldn't Alex understand that?

How could they handle this situation differently? How might they each get what they want, one helping the other? Have you had similar circumstances in your own family? It's important to know that, although it may seem like it, you are not alone. This is an all too common occurrence in many family-owned businesses. There are approaches that can facilitate this type of learning. One of those methods is mentoring.



Mentoring as an option

Mentoring is a relationship in which a more experienced or knowledgeable person guides a less experienced or less knowledgeable person through an activity or event in their life. While the mentor can be older or younger than the mentee, they must have a specific expertise which qualifies them.

This approach is similar to coaching but in coaching the goals and the plan of action are often set by the coach. In a mentoring relationship, the mentee sets the goals and formulates the plan under the guidance of the mentor. For the most part, we don't even consider this more formal method of instruction as necessary in a family business. Often the kids grow up helping and working in the farm or ranch business. It is assumed that they will pick-up the skills necessary to help with the daily crop or livestock operations; even learn how to operate the business.

We have likely all heard farmers or ranchers exclaim "They just need to get out there on that tractor and figure it out! That's how I learned!" Unfortunately many opportunities are missed for passing on the hard-won knowledge and experience gained through years of struggling to hold things together when this approach is used.

A Formalized Mentoring Program

Why is a more formalized approach needed? Humans are creatures of habit. If we do not take specific actions to do things differently, then we tend to continue along the same path. Likewise, when looking to make a concerted effort to pass on management skills, having a formal plan provides guidance, follow-up, accountability, and a way to determine whether the effort has been successful or not.

There are many methods for mentoring that could be considered when implementing a mentoring program for a farm or ranch. These include:

- One-on-one mentoring, with one mentor and one mentee;
- Group mentoring, one mentor and several mentees;
- Team mentoring, one mentee and several mentors;
- Peer mentoring, where peers mentor each other; or even
- Online mentoring or e-mentoring, facilitated via internet or email.

If you decide to pursue a formal mentoring plan, don't feel trapped by a particular model. Instead consider adapting and adjusting as needed for your situation. You may find that parts of these strategies or a combination will best suit your situation. However, there are several important steps that should be followed:

1. Identify the purpose of your mentoring relationship: as the mentee, what do you want to gain from the relationship? What are the goals and expectations for the mentor?
2. Determine the format of mentoring you would like to put in place: What environment would work best for the mentee to learn? Are there other people you can include in the process to make it more effective?

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3. Brainstorm potential activities or discussions: This is an opportunity for the mentee to set some initial goals, but allow for the mentor to also add things to the list. Define the important topics to address.
4. Create a structure for your mentoring relationship: when and where will you meet? How often? Set boundaries on how and when you can contact each other. Where will you plan to visit each other or not?
5. Define success for the mentorship: both the mentor and the mentee should take time to define success for themselves. Have a contingency plan in case the relationship does not seem to be working out.
6. Commit to the mentoring relationship: A successful mentoring relationship requires mutual trust and respect. Each person must agree to be on time and prepared for meetings, as well as fulfil any obligations agreed upon throughout the mentoring process.



The Mentor/Mentee Relationship

In addition to mutual trust and respect, there are other specific qualities for each participant that can help make the experience valuable to both parties. A mentor who is willing to share advice but also act as a sounding board, can provide feedback while also knowing the correct questions to ask, and can balance sharing experiences and suggestions while still allowing for active learning by the mentee.

The mentee, on the other hand, must be willing to interact openly and honestly, ask questions, accept responsibility, and learn from mistakes. The mentee must be allowed enough flexibility to make mistakes and learn from them, while also taking criticism graciously. Both the mentor and the mentee must be willing to try new methods throughout the process. It is also important that the mentee be allowed a sense of ownership and involvement, otherwise they will feel like they are just another employee.



What Does Success Look Like?

We would all like success to mean that the next generation has successfully taken over the business and maintained it, (gulp...) even making it better! But what do we do if that is not the result? Is failure really failure or is there something that can be learned from that too?

As mentioned earlier, this process should allow both the mentor and the mentee to outline and determine what indicates success in the mentoring process for themselves. The mentor and the mentee should share this with each other. It is also important that they discuss how to proceed if it appears that the



relationship is not working out. Have a contingency plan. One or the other party may find that you don't work well together. The mentee may even discover that the business is not a good fit for them. Instead of frustration, be grateful that you found out now, rather than later when potentially much more time, effort, money, etc. has been invested. As much or more can be learned about yourself, your passions, your desires, dreams and goals from finding something is not a good fit, as can be learned from finding your niche.

There are many challenges when running a family business and finding just the right way to involve family members in the process can be daunting. A properly-constructed mentoring program might be a way to organize and formalize this process, providing the necessary guidance and format to an otherwise difficult process. A successful mentoring program can help individuals gain a better understanding about various roles within the business, and the associated responsibilities. It can help them identify where they best fit in the bigger picture and can help them to gain the skills to be successful, perhaps inspiring them to continue in the learning process.

Tune into our live webinar for more information on mentoring the next generation. An on online component will explore this concept further following the webinar presentation, using an anonymous and interactive experience. For more on upcoming presentations and for information about Ag Legacy see AgLegacy.org. Requests for additional information may be emailed to Information@AgLegacy.org.



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