

# Mentoring Guidelines

American Sheep Industry Association, Inc.

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## Mentoring Guidelines by Jay Parsons<sup>1</sup>

*Mentoring is a joint venture of passing skills and knowledge from the established to the new in a meaningful way.*



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### Introduction

Mentoring is an invaluable way to transfer knowledge from the established to the new in any industry. In recognition of this fact, the American Sheep Industry Association has established a mentor/intern network on a state-by-state basis across the nation in an effort to attract and support new producers. These mentoring guidelines are designed to provide a resource for new and experienced producers alike, guiding them in their relationship and highlighting the impact that strong mentoring relationships can have on successful personal and professional development.

### What is Mentoring?

The word “mentor” has traditionally been used to describe a trusted counselor, guide, or coach. As such, much that has been written about mentoring has been confined to the academic or corporate setting. However, mentoring is meant to be much more broadly defined than just a formal academic or business relationship.

The origins of the word “mentor” come from Greek mythology where Mentor was the loyal friend and advisor of Odysseus and the teacher of his son, Telemachus (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary). Mentors are more than just teachers. Mentors are active guides and a good mentoring relationship is a partnership in two-way learning.

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The mentor usually brings a significant level of experience to the relationship. They are often thought of as having “been there and done that.” On the other hand, the mentee typically brings less experience to the table. They are looking to enhance their skill set, expand their network, and get some career guidance. However, the mentoring process is a joint venture. It’s an opportunity for the mentor and mentee to focus together on the mentee’s growth and development needs. 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.

In summary, mentoring is about

- Passing on knowledge in a meaningful way.
- Enhancing skill sets and expanding networks.
- Learning to value differences in approach and philosophy.
- A partnership in two-way learning.

Mentoring is not about

- Managing inexperienced people. Mentors do not “fix” problems. Rather, they help the mentees see the big picture and develop a plan of their own.
- Sponsoring young producers. Mentees should bring a “can do” attitude to the table. They should be just as willing to provide answers as they are to ask for them. Mentors are not professional teachers. They are experienced people willing to give back to the industry.
- Offering spontaneous or casual advice.

## **Description of Benefits**

### *Mutual Benefits*

A good mentoring relationship benefits all parties involved. The reason being is that everyone brings some type of knowledge to the table to be shared. There is something to be said about strength in numbers. Most people face big fears when embarking on a new adventure. Having someone to openly discuss ideas with is good for both the mentee and the mentor. By acknowledging professional goals and aspirations, mentoring is beneficial to both the mentee and the mentor in sustaining growth and achieving objectives. Excellence in any field requires coaching. Coaches see things that you don’t and they hold you accountable.

In a healthy mentoring relationship, the mentor will bring experience and valuable knowledge to the table to share and explore further. The mentee will bring enthusiasm and an open mind. Mutually, this solution focused approach will reflect positively on the entire industry as well as successfully shepherding the mentee’s entry into the business.

### *Mentee Benefits*

The transition from being someone interested in the business to being a business owner can be overwhelming. In agriculture, this is doubly the case because you are not only dealing with the daunting task of learning to run a business but you are also dealing with learning about the biological and environmental variables involved with growing food and fiber. A personally and professionally supportive colleague to guide you through this time is extremely valuable. Your

mentor will provide you with knowledgeable experience and the contacts you need to get a successful start in the business.

As you start your business, you will find your mentor to be an invaluable resource and source of support when you encounter difficulties and challenging situations. However, remember that your mentor will not have all of the answers. You are encouraged to think and act independently in managing your business. As much as anything, your mentor is there to provide empathy and understanding that provide you with the courage and confidence you need to move forward. Together, your mentor's experience and knowledge coupled with your enthusiasm and "can do" attitude should make a formidable team.

### *Mentor Benefits*

The benefits of being a mentor are often overlooked. As a mentor, you will experience the satisfaction of shepherding someone new into the business. You will 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's a saying in education that you really don't learn 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 as a result of your mentoring relationship. You will find yourself more confident and knowledgeable about sharing what you know with others in the business.

Another great benefit of the mentoring relationship is the "passing up" of the latest knowledge and up-to-date information to the mentor from the newly educated mentee. The mentee's enthusiasm and open mind to seek and employ new information will provide the mentor with an influx of new ideas. This positive situation will encourage candid, solution focused discussions of the difficulties faced by producers which lead to a more inspired approach to the business.

## **The Mentoring Relationship**

### *Mutual Responsibilities*

- Bring enthusiasm, optimism, sensitivity, and respect to the relationship.
- Be open to new ideas and feedback.
- Recognize that the discussion may focus on the mentor's or the mentee's operation and associated objectives and goals.
- Commit to the highest standards of professional conduct, including full confidentiality of discussions.
- The mentor is not a professional coach. They are experienced producers who are willing to give back to the industry. The mentor will not be held liable for any advice and/or suggestions given. It is entirely up to the mentee to perform the required due diligence on any suggestion given.
- Make a commitment of time and energy. However, the mentor is not being compensated in any way and therefore the mentee should be respectful of the mentor's time commitment.
  - The default expected time commitment should not be more than an hour per month.
  - The default expected length of the commitment should not be more than a year.

- Both parties should always come to the meetings prepared.
- Relationships can be maintained by face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, emails or a combination.
- Promptly reschedule any meeting time that can't be met.
- Periodically assess and celebrate progress.
- Periodically evaluate the mentoring relationship to see if it should continue, be modified or terminated. Each party reserves the right to end the relationship if it is not working for them.
- Notice to end the mentoring should allow for at least one meeting where a final review and proper closure can take place.

### *Mentee Role and Responsibilities*

The mentoring relationship should be mentee-driven and mentor-guided. As such, the mentee should seek to accept full ownership of the relationship as follows.

- The mentee takes responsibility for scheduling meetings with the mentor.
- Establishes a “vision plan” for their operation and, with the help of the mentor, prioritizes professional needs and goals.
- The mentee is respectful of the mentor’s time commitment by identifying, planning, and preparing issues for discussion.
- The mentee is willing to share fears and concerns with the mentor knowing that it is acceptable and natural to sometimes feel lost or frightened.
- The mentee is open to a non-academic perspective of the industry.
- The mentee is respectful of the mentor’s operation, family, and employees.
- The mentee should make only positive or neutral comments about the mentor to others being careful to preserve trust and confidentiality.
- The mentee clarifies with the mentor the preferred method for conveying the mentor’s information and knowledge while being respectful of the mentor’s active operation and business activities.
- With the mentor’s assistance, the mentee strives to develop a professional rapport with others in the industry.
- The mentee strives to be a receptive and active listener, knowing that constructive feedback is an essential element to continuous professional growth.

### *Mentor Role and Responsibilities*

As the guide in the relationship, the mentor accepts the following responsibilities.

- The mentor actively listens to the needs and goals of the mentee, and asks challenging questions.
- The mentor helps the mentee establish a vision plan and short- and long-term goals.
- The mentor strives to learn and practice the ability to give constructive feedback.
- The mentor strives to help the mentee become a fully independent producer, recognizing that the mentee has ultimate responsibility for their personal and professional decisions.
- The mentor appreciates that mentees will often need time and practice to translate their advice and guidance into improved skills and practices.

- The mentor helps guide the mentee in the decision making process and, where applicable, gives validity to mentees' observations using past experiences.
- The mentor encourages self-directed learning by the mentee providing resources and solutions (e.g., internet sites, texts, or networking professionals).
- The mentor helps the mentee learn and improve communication skills with others in the industry and thus to create positive professional relationships.
- The mentor should adjust mentoring to meet the mentee's changing needs, such as providing verbal encouragement, demonstrating skills, or just being available if needed.
- The mentor should make only positive or neutral comments about the mentee to others. The mentee should trust that the mentor is there to support them and will do so in confidentiality.
- Mentors should recognize their limitations and avoid working with the mentee in ways that exceed those limitations. Should a mentor sense there is a conflict of interest between the mentoring and any other role, the mentor should make this conflict known to the mentee as soon as is practicable.

## **The Mentoring Life Cycle**

### *Establishing a Mentoring Relationship*

#### A. Types of Mentoring Relationships

##### 1. Formal vs. Informal

A formal mentoring relationship involves establishing mentoring rules of engagement in writing. This would spell out specifically when meetings are to take place, where they will take place, and how long they will last, and how often they will occur. It can also establish specific topics that will be covered or not covered in the discussions.

Usually a formal written mentoring agreement is not needed. However, should either party feel more comfortable with it being established, the other party should not object. Informal mentoring agreements are just handshake deals with no formal meeting arrangements established. For most, this type of agreement will work just fine but, if you are more comfortable with taking pieces of these mentoring guidelines and establishing a written agreement between the two of you, then it can easily enough be done and may, in the long run, make for a more professional and productive relationship.

##### 2. Virtual vs. Face-to-Face

This is largely a function of physical locations and schedules. A face-to-face relationship is usually more desirable but sometimes isn't physically possible. With today's technology, a virtual relationship can still be very productive. Virtual meetings can take place via phone calls, email, and texting. Smart phone technologies can facilitate the transfer of photos and real-time discussions of a specific situation. In reality, most face-to-face relationships will have some virtual aspects to it as a matter of convenience.

It is important for the mentor and mentee to establish how they plan to communicate so there is no misunderstanding on what is and isn't acceptable or preferred.

### 3. Peer-to-Peer

While we usually think of mentoring as being a relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced mentee, a peer-to-peer relationship can be equally rewarding. In this situation, two colleagues with a similar level of knowledge and experience agree to share information with one another. These relationships can speed up the learning curve for both parties in a very positive way. The lack of established experience can, in some ways, lead to more open adoption of new production practices. There is still strength in numbers and mutual benefits to be had for the parties involved.

### 4. Open-Source Mentoring

Open-source mentoring is a relatively new concept in the business world that is catching on with some momentum in the last few years. The idea behind open-source mentoring is that perhaps a mentor within your traditional scope is not available or may not be the most forthright with sharing information. For example, in an established business, a supervisor may not be the best mentor for employee seeking to advance one day to the supervisor's position. In agriculture, some producers have questioned the wisdom of training their future competitors.

In open-source mentoring, the mentee is mentored by someone in a related but mostly uncompetitive position. In business, this may happen by mutual agreement between two uncompetitive companies to send employees each other's way for management experience or mentoring. In agriculture, this sometimes happens by default in a geographic sense. A producer in one part of the country may not think of a young producer many, many miles away as a future competitor and be willing to share a lot more information with them than say someone across the road.

This may not paint a pretty picture of mentoring but the bottom line is that mentees should keep an open mind when it comes to establishing mentoring relationships. They may find someone with seemingly little in common with them a great source of information for how to establish and run a successful agricultural business.

## B. Making the Mentoring Match

Identifying the right mentor-mentee relationship is fundamental to creating a great learning experience. The first step is to establish communication between the two parties. The mentor should have an understanding the mentee's goals and vision for their operation. However, the key is for each party to understand their own AND the other party's goals and objectives that they wish to accomplish as a result of the relationship. In this way, competencies are established and potential benefits identified for both parties so they can make an informed judgment on the desire to proceed.

Each party will benefit if the other party will provide some fundamental information. The potential mentor should make an effort to write down some of the routine activities that

they do on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis. What are some of the skills that you, the mentor, have to offer a beginning producer? Are you really good at pasture management? Do you have a strong animal science or nutrition background? Perhaps marketing is your forte. Then, give some thought to what makes your farm unique. Do you direct market products to the consumer? Do you use any special production practices or have unique breed qualities in your flock?

For the potential mentee, they should do something similar but focus less on the here and now and more on the before and after. What educational background do you bring with you and what new ideas would you like to establish as a part of your operation? Do you have any unique skills that you would like to build upon? List your past and current jobs. What skills do you think are needed in the agricultural operation you envision running? What skills are you most interested in learning? What information do you feel you are in need of learning about the industry?

The mentor-mentee match may not be easily established but writing down these few things and sharing them with one another is a good start. Assuming both parties are comfortable proceeding, they should move into establishing some groundwork along the lines of the preceding section on roles and responsibilities. Included in this should be the establishment of the length and timing of the relationship. The easiest way to do this is with the establishment of a production/mentoring timeline. To do this, the mentor needs to write out their annual production and marketing activities in a timeline fashion. The mentee should do the same with the added information of when they would most like to be bending the ear of the mentor for guidance. The mentor and the mentee need to decide if the logistics of their various time commitments and desires are a good enough match to proceed with the mentoring relationship.

The final component to establishing a mentoring match is a personality match. During the preceding process of exchanging information about each other's skills, desires, and schedules, it should become apparent if their personalities are going to be in conflict. If either party is uncomfortable with proceeding they should forego the relationship or establish it in such a way that they are comfortable with ground rules.

### *Maintenance of the Mentoring Relationship*

Above all else, the mentoring relationship should be built on respect. If, at any time, one of the parties feels the other is being disrespectful, it should be discussed openly and honestly. This includes violations of trust. Each party is expecting the other to be respectful of confidential information. All violations of trust, intentional or unintentional, should be immediately disclosed and discussed.

Other potential pitfalls that need constant attention in maintaining a good mentoring relationship include:

1. Limited time. Experience has shown that having limited time and energy available to devote to the relationship is one of the largest obstacles in maintaining a good mentoring relationship. The mentee should be vigilantly cognizant of making efficient and effective

use of the mentor's time. Take advantage of email, telephone and other opportunities to stay in touch and share information without interrupting day-to-day activities any more than necessary.

2. Lack of knowledge/skills. After establishing the relationship, you may discover that there is not the common ground between the two of you that was expected. The mentee may need advice in an area in which the mentor does not feel competent to advise in. In this situation, the mentee should be encouraged to take the initiative to find another person to get the information they desire.
3. Over-dependence. Over-dependence can go in either direction in a mentoring relationship. In particular, it is not wise for the mentee to become over-dependent on the mentor. It is valuable for the mentee to have someone to contact for advice in the future, however, it should be everyone's goal to grow in professional development to the point that they become independent colleagues.

### *Evaluating and Ending the Mentoring Relationship*

Evaluation of the mentoring relationship should be ongoing throughout. This is best done by celebrating successes. For example, the establishment of a "vision plan" for the mentee's operation and prioritization of his/her professional needs and goals is an important step in getting the relationship started. It should be celebrated.

Along the way, as the mentee meets some of the goals and objectives they have established, they should be celebrated as a mutual accomplishment. As challenges are identified and questions are answered, they should be celebrated. The mentor and the mentee have mutual responsibility to bring enthusiasm and optimism to the relationship. As such, overcoming obstacles or figuring out something new should be cause for celebration.

Having said all this, exit interviews and open and honest evaluations of one another is a fundamental learning tool that will help each party grow professionally. Notice to end the mentoring relationship should allow for at least one meeting where a final review and proper closure can take place between the two parties. At the very least, a review of the goals and objectives established during the relationship and success in meeting them should be conducted. Mentors should provide positive feedback on mentee strengths as well as constructive criticism on areas still needing development and improvement. The mentee should provide the mentor with positive feedback on what worked well, and constructive criticism addressing what could be done differently. This will help the mentor to grow as a producer and as a mentor. This feedback between the mentor and mentee can be done in written or oral format, depending on individual preferences.

### **Final Thoughts**

Whether you are a seasoned mentor or a first-time mentee, your experience in a good mentoring relationship can lead to tremendous satisfaction. The mentoring process can sometimes seem overwhelming and a bit confusing. These guidelines are meant to provide guidance and structure to help cultivate a successful mentoring relationship.

# Mentee Checklist

## Establishing a Good Mentoring Relationship

- Establish contact with a potential *mentor*.
- Communicate goals and vision for *your* operation to the potential mentor.
- Communicate skills and information *you* desire to acquire as a result of the mentoring relationship.
- Establish an understanding of the goals and objectives the *mentor* would like to accomplish as a result of the mentoring relationship.
- Agree to establish a mentoring relationship with the *mentor* or start over by establishing contact with a new potential mentor.

## Maintaining a Good Mentoring Relationship

- Establish mutually agreed upon modes of communication with *your mentor*.
- Establish how often and how long meetings and conversations will take place with *your mentor*.
- Establish potential topics to be covered.
- Establish the expected length of the relationship.
- For each communication/meeting
  - Identify when, where, and how long.
  - Clearly identify the topic.
  - Establish next meeting/communication.
- Celebrate accomplishments and communicate appreciation to *your mentor*.

## Evaluating and Ending a Good Mentoring Relationship

- Establish with *your mentor* a desire to evaluate your mentoring relationship and move on to a peer-to-peer relationship.
- Complete final mentoring meeting and review.
- Communicate feedback to *your mentor* on mentoring relationship including final inventory of goals and objectives met or not met as a result of the relationship.

This checklist was produced by Jay Parsons and supported by the National Sheep Industry Improvement Center under a 2011 Sheep and Goat Industry Grant Initiative project with the American Sheep Industry Association, Inc.

# Mentor Checklist

## Establishing a Good Mentoring Relationship

- Establish contact with a potential *mentee*.
- Identify skills and experience that *you* have to offer.
- Communicate to the potential mentee some of the routine activities that *you* do on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis.
- Communicate goals and vision for *your* operation to the potential mentee.
- Establish an understanding of the goals and objectives the *mentee* would like to accomplish as a result of the mentoring relationship.
- Agree to establish a mentoring relationship with the *mentee* or recommend the mentee start over by establishing contact with a new potential mentor.

## Maintaining a Good Mentoring Relationship

- Establish mutually agreed upon modes of communication with *your mentee*.
- Establish how often and how long meetings and conversations will take place with *your mentee*.
- Establish potential topics to be covered.
- Establish the expected length of the relationship.
- For each communication/meeting, understand the topic(s) to be discussed as well as when, where, and how long it is expected to last.
- Celebrate accomplishments with *your mentee*.

## Evaluating and Ending a Good Mentoring Relationship

- Establish with *your mentee* a desire to evaluate your mentoring relationship and move on to a peer-to-peer relationship.
- Complete final mentoring meeting and review.
- Communicate feedback to *your mentee* on mentoring relationship including a final inventory of goals and objectives met or not met as a result of the relationship.

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