

United States Department of Agriculture



*Natural Resources Conservation Service*

# Natural Resources Conservation Service Oklahoma NRCS Mentoring Program Guidebook



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# Mentoring Guidebook

**This guide gives information you need to know to get started and maintain a successful mentoring partnership**

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Mentoring is widely recognized today as an extremely beneficial career development tool. Studies have shown that having a mentor is a top factor affecting an employee's success, career satisfaction, and whether they stay with an organization.

This guide has been prepared with the intent to assist you on your journey to be an effective mentor/mentee.

## **Nine Steps to Having an Effective Mentoring Partnership**

- 1. Learn what mentoring is all about**
- 2. Review mentoring suggestions**
- 3. Make a match**
- 4. Have your first meeting**
- 5. Continue the partnership**
- 6. Have a six-month check-up**
- 7. Continue with personal growth**
- 8. Have an exit assessment**
- 9. Conclude the mentoring partnership**

## **Step One: Learn What Mentoring Is All About**

The mentoring partnership is an agreement between two people sharing experiences and expertise to help with personal and professional growth.

**To learn about mentoring, you need to know:**

- **What does it take to be a mentor?**
- **What does the mentor get out of it?**
- **What are the mentee's responsibilities?**
- **What does the mentee get out of it?**
- **What are the different types of mentoring?**

### **What Does It Take to Be a Mentor?**

- Most importantly, mentors need to have the desire to share what they have learned during their careers with their partner (the mentee).
- Mentors must be willing to spend time with the mentee to develop a good working relationship that is trusting and honest.
- Good mentors must be able to offer a reality check when necessary.
- Mentors must be able to work with the mentee to develop an *Individual Career Development Plan*. This will help the mentee determine what needs to be done to achieve their short term and long range goals.

### **What Does the Mentor Get Out of It?**

- Mentors get a chance to pass on their successes, which can give great personal satisfaction.
- Mentors get an opportunity to practice their interpersonal and management skills in an ongoing basis, which can help the mentor to succeed even more.
- Many mentors find that being in a mentoring partnership helps them expand their own horizons and keep them in touch with what is going on at other levels of the organization.
- Mentors often insist that they gain more from the mentoring partnership than their mentee does.

## What Are the Mentee's Responsibilities?

- Mentees must be willing to learn.
- They must be able to accept constructive feedback.
- Mentees must be willing to “stretch” to try new things and take risks. Many say they achieved success because someone encouraged them to aim higher.
- They must be able to identify short term and long range career goals and accept that those goals may change.

## What Does the Mentee Get Out of It?

- Every one of us is ultimately responsible for our own career. However, it can help tremendously to have someone to talk with who can provide a listening ear and share what they have learned about the organization and the things that helped them succeed.
- Mentors can provide valuable direction and clarification at times when the mentee “can’t see the forest for the trees.”
- Mentors can help the mentee figure out what they need to do to fill in the gaps between where they are now and where they want to be in the future.
- Mentors can sometimes serve as “door openers,” informing the mentee of opportunities they may not have been aware of (for example, referral to a program or training, introducing them to people in their field of interest, or recommending them to assist in a project that expands their skills).
- The most valuable and important asset mentors contribute is a different perspective.

## What Are the Different Types of Mentoring?

It is important to understand that there are several types of mentoring:

- **Natural mentoring** occurs all the time and always has. It happens when one person (usually senior) reaches out to another, and a career-helping relationship develops. Research shows this type of mentoring most often occurs between people who have a lot in common. This is because we are usually more comfortable with those who are most like ourselves.

- **Situational mentoring** is usually short-lived and happens for a specific purpose. An example would be when one worker helps another with a new office computer system, or when someone goes on an “informational interview” with someone who is in a career they are considering.
- **Supervisory mentoring** is very important. All good supervisors mentor their subordinates to a degree. There are some drawbacks to supervisory mentoring, however.
  - The supervisor may not be a “subject matter expert” in the subordinate’s desired career path. While the supervisor can guide the subordinate in their present position, they may not be able to help them with future goals.
  - Today’s supervisors are often heavily tasked, and there is the possibility that they may not be able to devote equal time to each subordinate, which could create feelings of exclusion and favoritism.
  - Another important consideration is that many people would not feel comfortable being mentored by a person who prepares their performance evaluation or appraisal. The mentee may not wish to discuss such things as areas of weakness and plans to leave the organization or change career paths.
- **Formal facilitated mentoring** programs are structured programs in which an organization matches mentors with mentees. They may target one special segment of the organization whose career development may be lagging behind that of others (for example, women) to help that group advance further. They may assign mentors to mentees and monitor the progress of the mentoring connection.

## **NRCS Mentoring Program**

- What type of mentoring is the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s program?
- It is partly formal, partly informal.
  - We considered research, programs utilized by other organizations and information from the International Mentoring Association.
  - If we have enough mentor applicants in our Oklahoma program we intend to provide every opportunity for the mentee to choose their mentor when possible. If the match proves to be unsuitable we will assist in finding another suitable match. Some mentors may find they are able to assist more than one mentee. Details to the Oklahoma program will be adjusted to best suit the needs of employees and their career goals.
- The Oklahoma NRCS Mentoring Program seeks to educate people about mentoring so that they will form their own partnerships and encourage others to do the same.
- We hope to build a large database of volunteer NRCS mentors who are participants in the Oklahoma **NRCS** Mentoring Program for employees at all career levels.

## **Step Two: Review Mentoring Suggestions**

- Plan to commit to a one-year partnership. It takes a while to develop the trust and rapport necessary to begin working on identifying goals and an action plan to achieve them.
- Plan to discuss a “no-fault” termination clause, in which either party can back out if it is not working for them.
- Plan to have a six-month checkup point to evaluate how it’s working out for each of you.

## **Step Three: Make a Match**

- Using applications submitted by the mentor and mentee, matches will be made based on mentor choices and mentor availability.

## **General Guidelines**

- Keep it out of the chain of command if possible. A mentoring partnership is often more effective, open, and honest when the partners are not in the same chain of command.
- Our recommendation (and it’s a loose one) is that a two grade level difference is the most helpful. If someone is fifteen years senior to you, it may be very different now to achieve the same goals than it was then. Exceptions: If we have people in partnerships that are the same grade or lower grade than their mentee’s; it all depends on the goals and needs of the mentee.

## **Step Four: Have Your First Mentoring Meeting**

This session may take place in person, by e-mail, or by telephone, and should include the following topics of discussion:

- Discuss the mentee’s expectations. For example,
  - They may be new to the organization and want the “inside scoop” on the unwritten rules.
  - They may be mid-career and wanting to explore all their options.
  - They may be nearing the end of their “first” career and exploring possibilities for their “next” career.

- If the two of you are to meet face-to-face, it is suggested that you choose a neutral setting without distractions or interruptions. Choose a place outside the workplace that would offer the privacy needed without ringing telephones or the barrier of a desk between you.
- Discuss when you will meet and how often. This is setting the boundaries of the relationship. We suggest you connect weekly as you get to know each other and set up goals. Often at the beginning when you are building rapport and getting to know each other, you may meet more often. After an initial goal is reached, there may be times when you will meet less often or just call to check on how things are going. Depending on what the mentee is working on at the time will determine how often you will meet, but a once-a-month check-in is recommended to keep the partnership alive.
- Discuss when it's okay to phone each other.
- The partners should agree to confidentiality. You need to trust each other to keep your discussions private. One important caveat to discuss: confidentiality does not apply if a person says that he or she may harm him/herself or another or that he or she has broken a law.
- Begin getting to know each other by bringing each other up to date on your careers so far.

### **Step Five: Continue the Partnership**

- The mentor will use listening, counseling, coaching, career advising, and goal setting to help the mentee develop an *Individual Career Development Plan*
- Identify the mentee's short-term, medium, and long-range goals and plot an action plan. The mentor should be careful not to decide the mentee's goals for them, no matter how much the mentor thinks they know what the mentee should do.
- Discuss what needs to be done to fill in the gaps between the present state and the future state.
- Use the mentor's experiences, ideas, and guidance to expand the options open to the mentee.
- Explore the mentor's referral resources to expand the opportunities for the mentee. Who could the mentee be introduced to, who works in their desired career field? Does the mentor know of training that may aid the mentee?
- Work to build the mentee's self-esteem and confidence and encourage them to stretch, perhaps taking a risk and aiming high. The mentor should be understanding, if the mentee is hesitant and not yet ready to reach.
- Discuss the progress of each meeting, experiences shared, and next steps.

## **Step Six: Have a Six-month Check-up**

- Both the mentor and mentee should describe the relationship's progress and discuss if it is worthwhile to continue the partnership. If not, the partners may decide that another mentor be sought who can help more with current or future goals.
- The Career Development Plan should be reviewed, noting progress and making necessary changes for the next six months.
- This is a good time for the mentor to ask some questions:
  - Am I giving my mentee the guidance they are asking for?
  - Is there more that I can do?
  - Can I recommend more resources?
  - Am I providing guidance while allowing my mentee to make their decisions?
  - Am I really listening?
  - Am I really there for my mentee?

## **Step Seven: Continue With Personal Growth (for Both Partners)**

- Mentoring can expand the world of both partners
  - We grow most as individuals when we develop good working relationships with those who are different from us. A mentoring partnership can serve to expand the worlds of both partners so that each learns tools to build strong connections with those who are different from them.
- Mentoring can help people become more comfortable with differences
  - Today's NRCS, like other organizations, is becoming more diverse. When we don't understand how someone who is different from us perceives their world, it can affect our interactions and the success of the tasks or mission in our workplace. An excellent way to become more comfortable with our differences is to form a mentoring partnership with someone who is different from you and for each to have an open mind to learn from the other.

## **Resources to help**

- Some of the obvious differences are gender, ethnicity, and personality types. The following resources can help you expand your awareness and ability to manage these differences, not only in mentoring partnerships but also in all areas of your life.
  - Gender differences
    - Book: You Just Don't Understand, by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D.
    - Video: Invisible Rules: Men, Women and Teams (corVision 1-800-537-3100). NRCS is investigating the purchase of this video.
    - Web site: <http://www.crossell.com/>
  - Ethnic Differences
    - Video and program: A Winning Balance (BNA Communications, Inc., 1-800-233-6067).

- USDA Links for Civil Rights, Diversity and Affirmative Action  
<http://diversity.cas.psu.edu/USDA.html>
- Web site: [www.yforum.com](http://www.yforum.com) -- The National Forum on People's Differences
- Personality Differences:
  - Web site: <http://keirse.com/>
  - Web site: [www.personalitytype.com](http://www.personalitytype.com)
  - At the above sites, you can take an inventory that will help you to understand yourself and others better.

## **Step Eight: Have an Exit Assessment**

- Each participant should describe the relationship's progress during the course of the mentoring partnership.
- The Career Development Plan should be reviewed during the previous six-months, noting progress and making necessary changes. Review recommendations/changes to determine if goals were met.
- This is a good time for the mentor to ask some questions:
  - Did I give my mentee the guidance they were asking for?
  - What more could I have done?
  - Could I have recommended more resources?
  - Did I provide guidance while allowing my mentee to make their decisions?
  - Did I really listen to my mentee?
  - Was I really there for my mentee?

## **Step Nine: Conclude the Mentoring Partnership**

- Many partnerships continue long past the initial time commitment, especially as the partners often become friends.
- Always notify your partner if you decide to terminate the mentoring partnership before the planned completion date. It is the polite thing to do, prevent them from waiting for a call that doesn't come, and allows them to find another partner.
- When you have decided that your work together is finished, go over the career plan and talk over the pluses and minuses of your work. This will help you clarify what to do differently in your next mentoring partnership. Give each other constructive feedback that may help the other in the future.
- If you decide to continue the partnership, review and revise the goals and agree to a new time commitment.

- Express your gratitude to each other.
- Accept our congratulations and thanks for participating in the Natural Resources Mentoring Program.

## **Role of the Supervisor**

Providing employee development and employee guidance are the primary duties of the supervisor. The mentor program does not absolve supervisors of this role. The supervisor remains the primary source of guidance for employees. The mentor program supplements and reinforces the roles of the supervisor.

## **Roles and Responsibilities of the Mentee**

The mentee must be willing to make a one-year commitment to the Oklahoma Mentor Program, once a mentor has been assigned. The mentor and mentee will meet face-to-face twice a year as a minimum, maintain monthly contact via telephone or electronic mail, and will work together to develop a preferred way of interacting during this one year time frame.

The success of mentoring is dependent on both the mentor and mentee. Mentee responsibilities include:

- Identifying and assigning priorities for needs and mentoring expectations;
- Doing a self-assessment of the skills they have and the ones they desire;
- Clarifying and defining goals so that they are both realistic and challenging, or developing action steps toward a goal they have already identified;
- Developing a mutually approved agreement on mentor/mentee expectations; being open and receptive to guidance, suggestions, and coaching; following through with agreed upon training, activities, initiatives, and program enhancement;
- Being honest and up front with the mentor;
- Keeping the mentor informed of changes in needs, expectations or career goals;
- Asking questions so that a clear understanding is reached;
- Accepting the reality that needs and expectations change as one grows;
- Blending mentoring with other training approaches;
- Recognizing that this program is only a supplement for his/her own hard work and abilities, not a substitute; and

- Accepting decision-making responsibilities and the consequences of these decisions.

## **Mentee Characteristics**

- Self-motivated and willing to take advantage of available opportunities;
- Eager to learn new skills and abilities, or exhibit a desire to develop existing skills and abilities;
- A team player and able to cooperate and communicate with others;
- Sensitive to cultural and gender differences;
- An active participant; and
- Willing to have fun!

## **Roles and Responsibilities of the Mentor**

The mentor must be willing to make a one-year commitment to the Oklahoma Mentor Program, once a mentee has been assigned. The mentor and the mentee will meet face-to-face twice a year at a minimum, maintain monthly contact via telephone or electronic mail, and will work together to develop a preferred way of interacting during this one year time frame.

The success of mentoring is dependent on both the mentor and mentee. Mentor responsibilities include:

- Providing yearly progress reports to the Oklahoma Mentor Program;
- Serving as an advisor by listening, guiding, and providing non-evaluative feedback;
- Providing encouragement and guidance on training and development issues, as well as support on a personal level;
- Referring the mentee to his/her supervisor, EO Counselor, Civil Rights Coordinator, Employee Assistance Program, or Human Resources as appropriate when other counseling is needed;
- Being sensitive to mentee workload and supervisor instructions;
- Serving as a role model on how to conduct oneself in the professional world;
- Recognizing and validating signs of mentee professional growth and development;
- Being flexible and recognizing that mentoring relationships go through stages and changes over time;
- Encouraging and conveying a sincere belief in the mentee's ability to succeed;
- Providing constructive feedback on the mentee's actions, products, and skills;

- Helping the mentee network with individuals within NRCS, other agencies, and organizations;
- Providing suggestions for the mentee to demonstrate his/her skills;
- Recognizing that mentoring relationships can be short-term or long-lasting;
- Not giving up if the chemistry doesn't feel right at the first meeting; and
- Maintaining confidentiality. Nothing kills trust in a mentoring relationship faster than a breach of confidence.

## **Mentor Characteristics**

A mentor should take pride in their organization, relish new challenges, and understand and support the mission, vision, and values of the organization.

A mentor should be:

- Sensitive to cultural and gender differences
- Supportive
- Patient
- Respected
- People-oriented
- A Good Motivator
- Respectful of Others
- An Effective Teacher
- Self-confident

A mentor can expect his or her mentee to be competent, credible, ambitious, eager to learn, loyal, and candid; have a positive attitude; and be able to listen, work as a partner, keep confidences, and accept responsibilities.

## **Ideas and Suggestions in Helping the Mentee Grow**

In this stage, the mentor serves most as a counselor, guide, and door-opener. The mentor persuades the mentee to find answers on their own. The mentor also prods the mentee to take risks, try new strategies, ask questions, and make discoveries. Some of the activities a mentor might recommend to his or her mentee during this period are:

- Formal training that could help the mentee become well-rounded and aid in advancement;
- Reading books, articles, journals, and other publications to enhance knowledge;
- Trying new projects or special assignments;
- Volunteering to cover for someone who is on vacation or official travel;
- Giving presentations;
- Involvement in NRCS projects, working groups, or special events;

- Temporary details to other positions;
- Representing the supervisor at meetings;
- Switching jobs with a co-worker for a short period of time;
- Joining a professional society, subscribing to a professional journal, and participating in the society;
- Attending conferences and symposiums;
- Writing an article for a newsletter, magazine, or professional publication;
- Teaching a course;
- Mentoring a junior employee;
- Shadowing a senior person for a day;
- Involvement in community service;

## Contacts

The mentoring process works best through personal contact. The mentee should feel free to contact their mentor at any time. The mentor and mentee may meet on official time. Under most circumstances, official time should not exceed, on average, 4 hours per month. Effective communication methods may also include written communication, telephone conversations, emails, and meetings at field sites or other work locations. Mentor - mentee contact may involve onsite visits when it coincides with official NRCS business, and does not inhibit NRCS business. Mentors are encouraged to hold their meetings with employees in private, and in a relaxed atmosphere.

Mentoring relationships are confidential. Trust and confidence are vital to the relationship. If the relationship is to succeed, both mentors and mentees must be at ease with one another to the point where they are willing to freely share information. For both parties, the subjects discussed are confidential and not to be shared outside the mentoring relationship.

The mentor program does not negate an NRCS employee's responsibility to report waste, fraud, abuse, misconduct, or breach of ethics to his/her supervisor or appropriate agency personnel.

Mentors are to provide employees with confidential guidance, to correct misunderstandings and wrong impressions; and to provide encouragement and guidance in career development. They also assist employees in the development of meaningful, comprehensive career development plans, and review progress as needed. Employees are to make periodic contact with their mentors to update them on their progress.

## Conclusion

Mentoring is not to be entered into lightly. It takes dedication, time, honesty and sincerity. That's just to get started! Once a relationship has been formed, effort to keep it on track is demanding yet rewarding. Even the best of efforts are not enough at times and the relationship must be severed for the good of the mentor, the mentee and the agency. But instead of the end, a new beginning could appear, and again, the cooperation of all three ingredients is required; mentee, mentor and agency. The mentee can develop the relationship with a new mentor and the process is again revived. The mentor is held in esteem, one that can be depended on for straightforward advice regardless of its potential effects. The advice will provide a foundation for sound decision making by the mentee. After all, that is what mentoring is all about!

## Useful Forms

- [Oklahoma NRCS Mentor Program Mentor Application](#)
- [Oklahoma NRCS Mentor Program Mentee Application/Needs Assessment](#)
- [NRCS Mentor/Mentee Agreement Form](#)
- [Oklahoma NRCS Mentor Program Mentor 6 Month Progress Report](#)
- [Oklahoma NRCS Mentor Program Mentor 12 Month Progress Report](#)
- [Oklahoma NRCS Mentor Program Mentee 6 Month Progress Report](#)
- [Oklahoma NRCS Mentor Program Mentee 12 Month Progress Report](#)
- [Early Termination of Mentoring Partnership](#)

**Please Note:** This program is a cooperative effort under the guidance of the Oklahoma Civil Rights Advisory Committee. If you feel any of these forms do not properly suit your needs, please provide suggestions and we will make requested changes if necessary. Additionally, if you have suggestions on a new form or forms needed for this program, again, provide suggestions or a draft form and we will evaluate and possibly implement.