

Youth in Agribusiness: Mentoring

Why mentoring?

It is highly important for the youth to organize themselves as independently as possible. At the same time, it is important for other people within the organization to know what the youngsters are doing and to check whether that is adding value to the goals and vision of the cooperative. When the youth are trusted in their capabilities, given responsibility, being challenged and created space for, great things can happen. One should bear in mind though, that the youth probably will need personal guidance and a framework, especially in the beginning. That is where the concept of mentoring comes in.

What is mentoring?

A simple, broad definition of a mentor is “an experienced and trusted advisor.” As opposed to coaching, a mentoring relationship tends to be more long-term of nature. The mentee can learn from and get inspired by the mentor’s experience. Generally speaking, meetings between the mentee and his mentor tend to be more informal and the initiative for these meetings lies with the mentee. As the terms coaching and mentoring are often used interchangeably, the difference is laid out in the next paragraph.

Coaching - The International Coach Federation defines coaching as “partnering with people in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”

Mentoring - a mentor can be defined as “an experienced and trusted advisor.” It is also described as an “employee training system under which a senior or more experienced individual (the mentor) is assigned to act as an advisor, counsellor, or guide to a junior or trainee. The mentor is responsible for providing support to, and feedback on the mentee.” While many organizations offer in-house mentoring programs, often as part of a leadership training program, it is also possible for mentees to work with mentors outside their organization.

To clarify coaching and mentoring relationships, the different structures are laid out in a side-by-side comparison:

Topic	Coaching	Mentoring
Timeframe	Relationship is more likely to be <i>short-term</i> (up to 6 months or 1 year) with a specific outcome in mind. However, some coaching relationships can last longer, depending on goals achieved.	Relationship tends to be focused on the <i>long-term</i> , lasting a year or two, and even longer.
Focus	Coaching is <i>performance driven</i> , designed to improve the professional’s on-the-job performance.	Mentoring is <i>development driven</i> , looking not just at the professional’s current job function but beyond, taking a more holistic approach to career development.
Structure	Traditionally more <i>structured</i> , with regularly scheduled meetings, like weekly, bi-weekly or monthly.	Generally meetings tend to be more <i>informal</i> , based on the mentee’s need.
Expertise	Coaches are hired for their <i>expertise</i> in a given area in which the trainee desires improvement. I.e.: Presentation skills, leadership, interpersonal communication, sales.	Within organizational mentoring programs, mentors have more <i>seniority and expertise</i> in a specific area than mentees. The mentee learns from and is inspired by the mentor’s experience.
Agenda	The coaching agenda is <i>co-created by the coach and the trainee</i> in order to meet the specific needs of the trainee.	The mentoring agenda is <i>set by the mentee</i> . The mentor supports that agenda.
Questioning	<i>Asking thought-provoking questions is a top tool of the coach</i> , which helps the trainee make important decisions, recognize behavioural changes and take action.	In the mentoring relationship, <i>the mentee is more likely to ask questions</i> , tapping into the mentor’s expertise.
Outcome	The outcome is <i>specific and measurable</i> , showing signs of improvement or positive change in the desired performance area.	Outcome from a mentoring relationship can shift and change over time. There is less interest in specific, measurable results or changed behaviour and <i>more interest in the overall development of the mentee</i> .

Mentoring within Agriterra's Youth Programme

When a young person is mentored effectively, he will feel taken seriously and as a result, he will more likely take on responsibilities and initiatives. Mentors can help youth to understand the culture, values, organisational structure of the cooperative. They motivate, provide feedback and provide guidance by asking questions. This specific mentoring style puts the mentees into action towards reaching their goals. The approach fits with the vision we have for the youth programme, in which we want to encourage youth to take ownership and responsibility.



We ask all participants of the Youth in Agribusiness programme of Agriterra to install a mentor for:

- Youth Groups (Council) and their members
- Young professionals within the rural employment facility of Agriterra.

What we aim to achieve with the youth in terms of mentoring is two-fold:

- **Task-oriented;** emphasis on gaining knowledge and skills
 - Supporting youth in finding their way in the organisation and understanding the organisational structure as well as their (new) responsibilities and tasks.
 - Assist youth in how to achieve goals in an efficient way, focused on giving them the space first to find out how they can organise themselves and how to organise activities.
 - Giving responsibility and room for own interpretation; this motivates to take initiative.
 - Teaching new skills, like how to chair a meeting, negotiating or making an project plan.
- **Person-oriented;** emphasis on learning or changing behaviour
 - Creating space for youth through a relationship of trust, which makes them feel comfortable in taking up that space.
 - Giving young people the feeling that they are taken seriously and that they have a voice and something to offer.
 - Making sure they feel appreciated and challenged.
 - Increasing their self-knowledge and self-confidence.
 - Training them in soft skills, as they are in the process of becoming future leaders.

Note: check the Kick-Off Youth Workshop participant's manual to get advice on how to mentor youth, how to appreciate their input, how to keep them interested and how you can end a collaboration in a healthy way.

Where to find a mentor?

Ideally, a mentor is someone who has a connection to the organisation and who likes to work with young people. Most of the times the mentor will be a member of the cooperative and is either seated in the board or has a management position. We also encourage the youth to look around them and to think about who inspires them. These people are the ones they can ask to become their mentor.

If the youth group needs to be coached on specific skills, it can also look for a temporary extra mentor selected for their professional skills, such as certain technical skills, marketing, finance, human resources, presentation skills or other valuable expertise like community or board services.

What does a mentor do?

A mentor guides the youth so that they are able to achieve their goal, which they will realise by questions being asked, becoming empowered and reflecting together. Be aware that mentees can only be mentored if they:

- Want to; it should be attractive to them
- Are able to; they need certain skills to do the task (do they have the skills),
- Dare to; a safe environment and being allowed to make mistakes is key
- Undertake action; by themselves, with or without encouragement. But never driven by enforcement or judgement.

The mentor should take a modest attitude towards the mentee, because *they* have to do the 'work' and therefore, they are number one. Modesty does not mean that the mentor disappears into the background. The mentor is allowed to be clear and confrontational when needed. He needs to be handing over actions instead of imposing them and show openness and unconditional respect instead of judging. Above all, a mentor needs to be patient and should not expect results too quickly. To help mentors with this, we created some guidelines.

Constructive mentoring

The following guidelines will help mentors to become more effective in what they do:

- **Help to set a clear goal;** what are the youth going to organise, when, for how many people, what are the costs and are there measurable results? Help the youth to make it SMART by asking questions.
- **The right match;** make sure there is a good match between the youth and the mentor. If there is no or just a little connection, find another mentor!
- **Regularity;** the mentees should arrange regular meetings to update the mentor and each other. You do not need to organise this, but keep an eye on whether they are still making progress. If not, set up a meeting yourself.
- **Safety;** give the youth space to make mistakes.
- **Help to structure sessions (use FRED, see last page):**
 - Facts: what do we need to discuss?
 - Reactions: first reaction (on emotional level), does it go well, is it hard?
 - Explore: ask questions, explore possibilities, discuss what is needed.
 - Decide: who will undertake which action or put the final decision on paper.
- **Ask questions:** a good mentor asks questions and will continue to do so. He or she does not give instructions, compelling advice or directional suggestions, but asks questions to achieve maximum effect.
- **Evaluate results;** continuously, so not only in the end, but also in between.



Accompaniment Styles

Young people who have never organized something before will need a different kind of guidance than those who are already very experienced. Do not forget that you could not do everything yourself either when you were young or started something new. You have learned a lot in recent years and you are no longer always aware of what you know or have learned.

Remember these steps in the learning process:

1. **Not knowing that you don't know, unconscious incompetence:** the individual does not understand or know how to do something and does not necessarily recognize the deficit, they may deny the usefulness of the skill.
2. **Knowing that you don't know, conscious incompetence:** though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, he or she does recognize the deficit, as well as the value of a new skill in addressing the deficit.
3. **Knowing that you know, conscious competence:** the individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires concentration.
4. **Not knowing that you know, unconscious competence:** the individual has had so much practice with a skill that it has become "second nature" and sometimes even forgets that it was hard to do in former days. The skill can be performed while executing another task.



Your mentee can be:

- **Motivated - unmotivated** (or willing): If someone is unmotivated try to find out why. Does he not want or is he not skilled enough for the tasks and does he need more support?
- **Insecure - confident:** The fact that someone is insecure, does not mean that he cannot do something. The same goes for someone who is very confident; that does not mean that this person can fulfil a task by default. It could very well mean that he is just convinced he can do it. Investigate this and adjust your guidance accordingly.
- **Experienced - inexperienced:** Someone can be very experienced in organizing projects. Check the level of experience, taking into account different learning environments like work, school or volunteering.



This requires a different approach, namely:

- **Instructing:** If they have little experience and take a wait-and-see approach, you start with giving detailed instructions (assignment) and you closely monitor the performance of the tasks.
- **Motivate & explain:** If they do not have sufficient experience to get started, but are motivated to think and work with you, indicate what needs to be done and give room to think along and ask questions. Explain why you are making certain decisions and ask for reactions and suggestions.
- **Advise & collaborate:** If they have experience, but not the confidence yet to arrange everything, so share responsibilities in decision-making. Encourage personal input and initiatives and ask questions about uncertainties so that the young person can gain insight into the situation.
- **Delegate:** The mentees are able to take own initiative, bear responsibility and work independently. They are motivated and see what needs to be done. Let the youth get to work themselves, but keep on following them and ask questions like: What else do you need to make the task a success?

The effectiveness of an approach is not only person-dependent, but also situation-dependent.



The art of asking questions

A good mentor asks and continues to ask. He or she does not give instructions, compelling advice or directional suggestions, but asks questions to achieve maximum effect. The answers lead to more understanding, higher motivation and better learning efficiency. Only if you ask the right questions will you get an effective exchange of information.

The art of asking questions: Listening, Summarizing and Questioning.

- **Listen:** Do not just listen with your ears, but with your whole body. By your posture (open posture, eye contact, nodding and humming, making notes ...) you show the other person that you are interested in what they have to say. Listen to the content as well as the tone of voice.
- **Summarize:** When the other person has completed his or her story or argument, summarize it in your own words. By summarizing, you check whether you have understood the message correctly. If this is not the case, you give the other person the opportunity to supplement or correct.
- **Continue asking questions:** Look for leads to continue asking questions. Be on the lookout for vagueness, subjective statements, assumptions, general truths and formulations with 'must' or 'can'. These language patterns often hide valuable information. Pay attention to what the other person says and what he is not saying. This way you get more information. (Example: "The participants were satisfied." → How do you know?; or: "I arranged for that speaker" → Which specific agreements have you made?)

Different types of questions

There are different types of questions. Which type is most suitable depends on your goal and the situation. An experienced questioner switches between the different question types according to the situation:

- **Open questions:** By making use of open questions, you let the other person talk without restraint. You gather broad, general information and because you give the other person space. Open questions are great for creating a good relationship. A disadvantage can be that using open questions take a lot of time. In that case, it can be difficult to remember all information and steer the conversation in a certain direction. Example: How did the preparations go so far? What keeps you busy?
- **Closed questions:** When you need specific information, ask closed questions. Closed questions limit the answering options. They are suitable if you want to collect specific information in a short period of time. Example: Did you rent a meeting room? How many participants showed up?
- **Suggestive questions:** A special category is the suggestive question. The desired answer already resounds in your question. Suggestive questions are generally not recommended, but they can be useful sometimes, for example if you want to persuade the other person or if you want confirmation of a common goal. It becomes problematic if you are not aware that you are asking suggestive questions. That makes it hard to know whether you have received a socially desirable answer. Example: We are here to help you perform better, right? Don't you think asking person X could be a solution?

Be aware of the following:

- Formulate questions positively
- Do not interpretate what the other means, but listen well, summarize and check if you understood it right.
- Do not criticize answers (verbally or non-verbally).
- Keep focus on the subject, delimitate the subject and do not ask questions on side paths.
- Ask clear questions and one question at a time. Do not ask (too many) suggestive questions
- Do not keep asking questions until it becomes painful, or about things that have already been discussed.
- Do not try to impose your opinion to the mentee (for example with suggestive questions).

Reflections: meet FRED

Feedback often leaves people feeling attacked, unsure, vulnerable and they may even start to defend themselves. We prefer to talk about reflections instead of feedback, because it should help the mentee to learn and create insight into his behaviour.

Effective reflection requires information to be exchanged in an atmosphere of security, respect and trust. If that feeling is lacking, the feedback will only lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and resistance. Only when the other feels safe, he will dare to ask questions and reply.

Some reflection rules:

- **Actual (close after the event happened):** Feedback works best when the time between the observed behaviour and the feedback is as short as possible, so you can give concrete examples.
- **Use "I" messages:** A "you" message points towards the other ("you are doing something wrong") and has the risk that the other person denies it or becomes defensive. In either case, it diverts attention from what you want to say. With an "I" message, you keep the feedback close to yourself. If *you* describe *your* observation, the other cannot change, nor deny it.
- **Be specific and concrete:** To avoid misunderstandings and resistance.
- **Only reflect if the behaviour can be changed:** Giving a stutterer feedback on his verbal skills makes little sense.

The ToP® Focused Conversation method, aka FRED can help you to prepare and structure all kinds of conversations, like a reflection on what happened, achieving a common level of understanding of a certain topic, broaden a group's perspective or gathering clear ideas and conclusions. What you need to do in advance is preparing one or more questions for every stage, as laid out in the table below.

	Questions about	Visual summary	Explore with questions about	Importance	Example: Reflect on behaviour	Example: Reflect on project
Objectives F	What?		Facts Sensory Impressions Information	To build a shared understanding of what the facts are.	Describe actual behaviour that you have observed; I saw, heard, you said...	Which goal did we set for this project? (With bigger projects: walk through the questions various time with different subjects)
Reflections R	Gut?		Personal reactions Associations Emotions Images	To elicit and acknowledge imaginative, intuitive and emotional responses.	Indicate the effect the behaviour had; I find, felt, experienced. What did you experience?	Are you happy with the results? Specify what made you proud and what not?
Interpretations E	So What?		Meaning Values Significance Purpose Implications	Explore possible solutions, find connections, look for the importance and meaning.	What does this mean for both of us? What behaviour would we like to see in the future?	What would you do differently next time? Did you discover new possibilities? Which? What do we need to learn/ improve? Are there still loose ends to cover?
Decisions D	What now?		Resolution Action Future Direction Next Steps	To develop collective opinions or resolve that may lead to future action.	What do we need to do to prevent this happening again? What alternative behaviour we would like to see?	What do we agree on concerning the approach of a new project/ the follow-up?

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