



Transition to Organic Partnership Program Guide for Starting a Mentorship

This guide is intended to provide ideas and advice for mentors and mentees to use when starting a new mentorship. The beginning of the mentorship is an important time for getting to know your mentor or mentee personally and professionally, and for building rapport and trust in the mentoring relationship. The first few mentorship meetings are a time to focus on relationship building, developing communication patterns and styles that work for both parties, and creating plans to meet goals. Identifying and discussing strengths and weaknesses may be helpful as well for providing insight into support needs and will help to tailor guidance.

What to focus on in the beginning of the mentorship:

Break the ice: Talk about why you have joined the program, passions, aspirations, interests.

Get acquainted: Start with what you might have in common. Find the commonalities as well as uniqueness.

Discuss expectations: What does the mentee expect from the mentor, and vice versa. Share communication and other expectations.

Discover strengths and weaknesses: Get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses so that you can tailor your support and guidance.

Create and review goals: Go over mentee and mentor goals, focus on steps for achieving mentee goals.

Identify mental models: Discover how you each learn and what experiences have shaped your knowledge.

Break the Ice

Get to know your mentor or mentee by sharing why you joined the mentoring program, describe your farm or ranch, and share a bit about your interests and experiences outside of work. Ideas for questions to ask to break the ice include:

- Why did you choose to sign up for the mentorship program?
- Can you tell me a bit about your farm and/or ranch?
- What do you enjoy about farming or ranching?
- How long have you been farming and/or ranching?
- What do you enjoy doing when you are not working?
- What are some of your hobbies and interests?



Get Acquainted

Once you have broken the ice, then spend time building rapport and learning each other's stories. Some questions and topics that may help with getting acquainted include:

- Learn about each other's education and farming or ranching journey.
 - What were your education experiences?
 - What was your first job?
 - What led you down the current path with your farm or ranch?
- Get to know each other's inspirations and stories.
 - What inspires you to farm or ranch?
 - What inspired you to go organic?
 - Where did you grow up?
 - What's something you're looking forward to?
- Build rapport, understanding, and trust.
 - Look for similarities between you and your mentor or mentee, what kinds of interests and life experiences do you have in common and build upon those.
 - Ask, how are you feeling about transitioning to organic?
 - Share how you are feeling about your operation or ranch at this point in time.

Discuss Expectations

Many of the mentor and mentee expectations may be discussed during onboarding with mentorship program staff, but it can be helpful to continue reviewing expectations as you start the mentorship. Check in on your communication expectations in particular and ensure they are still meeting the needs of both parties. Some questions to ask to check in on expectations include:

- How often would you like to meet?
- How should we contact each other between meetings?
- Are there any limitations on communication?
- Are there any topics off limits to discuss during mentorship?
- What is expected of the mentee to be prepared for mentorship meetings?
- What is expected of the mentor to be prepared for mentorship meetings?
- How are the mentorship meetings going for you? Have the meetings been helpful?
- What can we do to improve our mentorship communication and meetings?

Discover Strengths and Weaknesses

Ask questions to help identify each other's strengths and weaknesses, and be open about anything you may find challenging in your mentorship role. Knowing each other's strengths and

weaknesses will help you to have a more understanding relationship as you work together. Some questions that may help with identifying strengths and weaknesses include:

- What are you good at?
- What have others complimented you about?
- What have others had to help you with on more than one occasion?
- Which projects and tasks seem to drain your energy?
- Which projects have you spent hours on without getting tired?
- What are your hobbies, and why do you like doing them?
- What don't you like about farming and/or ranching?
- Did farming and/or ranching come easy to you, or did you find it difficult to learn?
- When you've encountered difficulty learning or performing a task, what motivated you to continue?
- What do you consider to be your strengths?
- What skills are you working to improve?
- How do you mitigate your weaknesses?

Create and Review Goals

The beginning of the mentorship is an important time to identify, set, and initiate goals. The mentee will primarily be responsible for setting goals for the mentorship, but the mentor may also have their own mentoring goals. Goals will be ongoing and ever-changing throughout the mentorship, so continuing to check in on them should be a regular theme of your mentorship meetings. These questions will help to facilitate goal setting and conversations to check in on goals:

- What are your short-term goals?
- What are your long-term goals?
- What are your steps to achieve this goal?
- How will you know when you have achieved your goals?
- How will you measure your progress?
- What are the timelines for the goals?
- What are your strengths that will help you achieve these goals?
- What are the development areas to be addressed?
- What is getting in the way of achieving your goal? (fears, obstacles, people)
- What ideas have you developed to help you overcome this challenge and meet your goal?
- What will you do differently tomorrow to meet those challenges?
- What do you commit to doing between now and the next meeting?
- How can I support you in overcoming your challenges?
- Set action items and accountability for mentee and mentor to work on in between meetings that will help move towards goals.



Identify Mental Models

Understanding your mentor or mentee's mental models will help with tailoring guidance and support in your mentorship. A mental model is an interrelated set of beliefs that shape how a person forms expectations for the future and understands the way the world works. Mental models are how we subconsciously filter new information we learn through our past life experiences and beliefs. Anything new that we learn is shaped by what we already know and believe. We have models of the world inside of us that are unique to each person.

For mentorship, it'll be very helpful to understand your mentor or mentee's mental models to know what is shaping their learning and why something may be interpreted differently for them than it is for you. The following open-ended questions will help you with identifying your mentor or mentee's mental models. Fill in the blanks with whichever topic best suits your mentor or mentee:

- What problem have you had with _____ (e.g. pests)? How did you go about addressing it?
- Can you tell me what led you to decide _____ (e.g. to go no till)? What type of things did you consider when you made that decision?
- You seem to feel strongly about _____ (e.g. your pasture management). Can you tell me a bit more about why you feel so strongly?
- What do you find most rewarding about _____ (e.g. going organic)? Why is this so rewarding?
- What do you find most challenging about _____ (e.g. weed management)? Why does this seem so challenging?
- What do you see as the greatest obstacle for making changes in _____ (e.g. recordkeeping)? Why does this seem like a big obstacle?
- What is the key factor for your success with _____ (e.g. keeping records accessible)? Can you tell me more about this factor?
- What is one thing that might make this new practice, _____ (e.g. crop rotation plan), work for you?

Putting it all together

Focusing on these six areas as you begin your mentorship will serve you well in establishing a positive and successful mentoring relationship. Begin with breaking the ice and simply learning why you both signed up for this mentorship program, and then start to get acquainted with each other, your backgrounds, your farming or ranching styles, and a little about your inspirations and beliefs. Continue the conversation of expectations with each other, and put some intention towards discovering and understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, review your goals with each other and continue to come back to them during meetings, and ask questions to begin identifying what has shaped each other's learning in the past and what may affect both of your learning now. It will take time to get to know each other, but following this guide will set you on the path for a successful start.