Chapter 6: Balancing Work and Education: Communication, Workflow, Schedules

How do you fit in education when (to quote a past colleague) "There are only 36 hours in a day and we already filled them all?"

Every ranch and farm is already a more-than-full time pursuit. Yet an apprentice who understands your operation's priorities will help you accomplish them, which creates time for more intentional teaching moments.

Resources:

- **Zoom Recording from the winter 2021 call**
- **Google slides shown in Zoom call**
- **Tips to get them going**
- **Overall Season Calendar for Apprenticeship Period**
- **Check-in Prompts for Short or Longer sessions:**
- **Sample Team Meeting Agenda**
- **Time Management Matrix by Stephen Covey - Urgent/Important**
- **San Juan Ranch Covey Quadrant for team mtg 2/1/2021**
- **Sample SJR Skills Checklist**
- **Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship mentor training Communication video**
- **Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship mentor training Communication tip sheet**
- **Communication: The Core of Everything**

The best way to make sure that learning happens and that necessary work is done well and on time is to front-load communication so your apprentice knows the priority tasks for a week or month, is able to accomplish tasks autonomously and to your standards, and continues to learn something new on a regular basis.

You already have systems in place that help you. You may not even know all the strategies you use, or how you know what to work on when -- especially if you grew up in agriculture and basically learned your job before you were born.

3 systems: Production, Financial, Relational
Every operation large or small has three systems it relies upon to conduct its business.

- Production: What you raise, how you raise it, what breed/varieties you choose and why, technical assistance, etc?
- Financial: accountants, bookkeeping systems and personnel, budgets, planning large projects as related to financial needs, Ranching for Profit Management groups, etc.?

- Relational: Who do you rely upon? Customers, feed or seed sales people, the tire store, the parts store, employees, neighbors, family? How do you take as good care of those you rely upon as you take of your bank balance and land?

Most of us have many resources to go to for guidance and support for our production needs. We have key resources for financial support as well. But most of us have few if any resources when issues with people go awry. Yet if the people we rely on aren't feeling appreciated or fairly treated they are unproductive or worse.

As a result, successfully accomplishing the work while creating educational opportunities relies on timely, clear *communication.*

Empower your apprentice with a basic understanding of the way you organize your work days and plan in advance of big projects. Together you can:

- Identify learning that is automatically built in to work days and events
- Look for the spontaneous "teachable moments" - when something happens, a neighbor drives in, an event arrives and you can grab onto the learning it offers
- Strategize when to fit in more focused teaching events

As the apprentice becomes more capable and aware of all that has to be done, the more they can:

- Do things on their own, freeing you up to focus on other elements of your work and life
- Think ahead, gather tools, prepare vehicles, etc. in advance of work projects so you don't have to do it
- Help you both make time to teach the next level of skills

While basic orientation to your operation was covered in an earlier chapter, here again are the **tips that will help you and your apprentice** organize your time, incorporate intentional teaching and training, and keep motivation high throughout the season:

Tools that can help:
Regular, Brief check ins:

The biggest mistake mentors make is forgetting to check in with their apprentice regularly, giving them feedback on their work and asking if they are learning what they hoped they would when they were offered your apprentice position.

Start doing this at the end of the first week; it helps establish this as a normal part of your work week. Some mentors do it first thing one day a week, others as an end-of-

day unwind chat over a beer or cup of tea. Taking a walk or driving back to headquarters are also great times for this.

- Ask a few short questions. They may not have a lot to say the first few weeks, but they will eventually, and you make it clear that feedback and check ins are just a normal part of the work schedule and environment
- Sample questions:

  - What's something that was fun, exciting or really stimulating for you this week?
  - Was there anything we did or talked about this week that was confusing, hard to learn, that we should schedule more time to discuss and do?
  - Was there anything in particular I did this week as a mentor that was especially helpful or useful for you?
  - Was there anything I did that was confusing, difficult or unclear?
  - What's something you really want to do or learn that we haven't gotten to yet? Let's brainstorm ideas on fitting that in soon
  - **Check-in Prompts for Short or Longer sessions**

The most important thing you can do, hands down, is to let your apprentice know when they did something well. If you do nothing else, this alone will make your relationship and the work/education balance effective and positive for you both. Even a small "you did really well sorting cattle in the corral today" can mean the world to your apprentice. THIS is what keeps them motivated through the hard days and long weeks of mundane chores.

  - "Today when you were loading hay I could see how much more comfortable you are with the loader"
  - "This week I noticed some improvement with your cattle handling--you really worked off the shoulder well when we were turning them into the new pasture"

Deeper check ins:
Because mentors are more than employers, your apprentice will thrive if you periodically check in with them on a personal level. This may seem unprofessional or intrusive, or just awkward, but it is a key part of mentoring. Don't wait for a problem to arise to have a friendly "How are you doing?" check in. Ask them:

- Have you heard from family or friends? How are things back home?
- How is the workload feeling? Do you feel stuck as far as learning goes?
- Look at that prompt sheet for ideas: **Check-in Prompts for Short or Longer sessions:**

There may be times when it is vital that you find time to check in on your apprentice's well being. If they are:

- Increasingly forgetful, making more mistakes than usual, withdrawn or snarky. They could have had bad news about family, be struggling with insomnia or could benefit from some positive feedback
- If you know you have been stressed, unavailable, or short tempered often
- If you two had a rough day working together. Clearing the air will help both of you move past a hard day and come back together to get things done in a positive and productive way

A full ranch or farm schedule makes it hard to take time for these more personal conversations or informal conversations about life, dreams and, yes, needs. The chapter on Feedback will go into this in more depth, but here are some tips to consider

- **Try a Team Pulse Meeting**: If you have more than one apprentice, this can be a great way to get a read on team morale, and uncover simmering tensions before they increase.

  - Sit down in a pleasant, non-work associated place. Go around the circle, with each person saying how the past week/month has been for them: what went well, what was frustrating, what was fun.
  - If a problem is brought up, you don't have to try to address it in the moment if you haven't time or it seems unproductive. But you'll know to follow up either individually or with whoever is involved in a disagreement or issue.

- **Debrief an Event that was Difficult:** If you had a rough day with your apprentice, you may both need a break before you debrief, but don't forget to check in on it.

  - Ask them those simple check in questions as they relate to the event: "What was hard for yesterday when we worked cattle?" "Was there something that felt like it went well for you?" What do you think you could do better and what can I show you or do that will help you move forward with that learning?" And don't forget: "I know I lost my temper and got really sharp and short. I get impatient on days like that."

Team Meetings, Calendars and To Do Lists, Covey quadrant knock-off

Mentors complain that apprentices don't know how to be useful, don't know what to do when one task is complete so they are on their phones with social media, or just stand around looking perplexed. This isn't because they are lazy; they just don't have the life-long experience to know what task is next or the magical ability to read their mentor's mind.

Weekly Team Meetings:
Bringing a new person -- especially an apprentice-- into a team makes it necessary to verbalize the week's priorities. Many mentors are used to working with small, tight-knit teams of family or 1 or 2 employees, who intuitively know what is most important to do

each week, and how to organize days and delegate tasks to get things done effectively and efficiently. A weekly team meeting is a great way to help your apprentice become more adept at juggling tasks and taking over responsibilities.

Create a list of topic areas to cover each week, such as pasture planning; cattle movies; infrastructure needs; vehicle checks; days off/personnel needs; etc.

- Here's a sample agenda of items to consider covering each week in a team meeting: **Sample Team Meeting Agenda**
- Below is an adapted Covey Quadrant, another way to organize and document action items for a team meeting
- Many mentors schedule this as a 1-hour meeting, once a week. If you do them often, they needn't be long
- Consider having your apprentice facilitate the meeting and create the agenda, with your input, after they have been on site a few months. This catapults them into managerial mindset and they begin to comprehend all that it takes to run an operation like yours.

Ranch Calendar:

Two different calendars prove useful when an apprentice is striving to understand what happens when, and where they can be useful. The first is an overall calendar of your season. This can be very streamlined, just noting the major events that occur each month. Here is a sample: **Overall Season Calendar for Apprenticeship Period**

A month-at-a -glance visual calendar prominently placed in a meeting space your apprentice uses daily will reinforce priorities discussed during meetings, help the apprentice think ahead and find ways to help you prepare for upcoming events. Whether you use an online calendar like Google Calendar, or a white board or wall calendar, find something that **you** the mentor will use, and make it a habit to use it weekly.

- Use a large white board or fillable calendar to help schedule a month at at time: there's an example of this in the slide deck
- This helps your apprentice grasp how what you do *today* is determined by what has to occur two weeks or 2 months from now
- A visual reminder helps them figure out where they can take something off your shoulders, what training they need in order to be ready for a task that is coming up
- If you like digital tools, try a shared Google Calendar that everyone has access to and can add tasks and events to
- Some mentors use workplace apps like Asana that list tasks, deadlines, and who is assigned to the task

To Do Lists, or "What to do when mentor is busy":
Create a Task List of tasks an apprentice can already do, or can learn and can be done independent of you. These may be things inventorying fence supplies in preparation for purchasing more, vehicle maintenance checks, changing the oil in vehicles (of course, you'll want to be sure they know what they're doing, so run through it with them once or twice until you know they are good on their own)

- This could be another white board next to the calendar
- Some mentors prefer an online app like Asana or other organizational app

Covey Quadrant Knock-Off:
Stephen Covey, author of *7 Habits of Highly Successful People* created a matrix to help prioritize tasks. There are two continuums: one for Urgent/Not Urgent, another for Important/Not Important. Here's a simple version of Stephen Covey's quadrant, from this article: **Time Management Matrix by Stephen Covey - Urgent vs Important**

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Crying baby Kitchen fire Some calls 1	Exercise Vocation Planning 2
Not Important	3 Interruptions Distractions Other calls	4 Trivia Busy work Time wasters

- Here's a more detailed version of the same:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	**Quad I** **Activities** • Crisis • Pressing Problems • Deadline Driven **Results** • Stress • Burn-out • Crisis management • Always putting out fires	**Quad II** **Activities** • Prevention, capability improvement • Relationship building • Recognizing new opportunities • Planning, recreation **Results** • Vision, perspective • Balance • Discipline • Control • Few crisis
Not Important	**Quad III** **Activities** • Interruptions, some callers • Some email, some reports • Some meetings • Proximate, pressing matters • Popular activities **Results** • Short term focus • Crisis management • Reputation – chameleon character • See goals/ plans as worthless • Feel victimized, out of control • Shallow or broken relationships	**Quad IV** **Activities** • Trivia, busy work • Some email • Personal social media • Some phone calls • Time wasters • Pleasant activities **Results** • Total irresponsibility • Fired from jobs • Dependent on others or institutions for basics

Mentor site San Juan Ranch adapted this for their team meeting agenda template, using the #1"Urgent/Important" and#2 "Important/Not Urgent" quadrants, replacing #3 and #4 with #3: "Action Items" -- what was assigned to whom and what deadline for that action, and #4: "Important Dates", so everyone has a list of upcoming events such as vet visits, cattle work, pasture moves, other meetings, etc. **San Juan Ranch Covey Quadrant for team mtg 2/1/21**

Lastly
Whatever tools or systems you use, it will make a huge difference for your apprentice if you have a normalized way in which you communicate details about the workday, priorities, and what you most need them to do and when it needs to be done. It may feel like work you haven't time for, if you don't already have ranch calendars or conduct weekly team meetings. And it may be that you and your apprentice can create informal and continual communication lines that render more formal or systematic methods unnecessary.

Whatever you choose, informal or planned, systems or ad-hoc chats, be sure it is working for your apprentice. Even mentors who have been with NAP since its inception realize they aren't always communicating in a way that is clear to their apprentice. The more upfront and intentional you are, the fewer glitches, frustrations and time-sinks you'll have in your season.

For more tips on creating solid communication with your apprentice:

- *Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship **mentor training Communication video***
- *Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship **mentor training Communication tip sheet***

- ***[Communication: The Core of Everything](#)***