

## Chapter 7: Mentoring to Create a Self-Initiating Apprentice

### Resources:

- [Zoom recording](#) from the spring 2021 call
- [Google slides](#) from the call
- [Basics Characteristics of Adult Learners:](#)
- [Video from Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship on Adult Learners](#)
- [NAP Learning Plan Worksheet](#)
- [Mentoring Checklist](#)
- [Learning Plan Samples](#)
- [Sample SJR Skills Checklist](#): sample Skill Sheet with scores and comments from baseline to midseason in the Animal Husbandry sheet
- [Prompts for Skill Sheet Meetings](#)
- [Learning Plans and SMARTER Goals](#)
- [The Intergenerational Workplace](#)

A self-initiating apprentice with great motivation and follow-through comes about for two reasons: First is whole-hearted engagement. They are an active participant ready to engage in all the learning opportunities built into each day at your farm or ranch. They seek out other resources to augment that learning: books, videos, podcasts, workshops, local experts or neighbors they can learn from. Second is the quality of their experience with their mentor. This is where the difference between an employer and a mentor becomes clear. A mentor does more than teach skills; you are investing in them as a person and learner, creating educational environments, incorporating **who they are** into what you need them to learn.

Education is co-created by you and your apprentice. If they are recently out of school they may wait for you to offer the next lesson or task rather than ask for their next learning stretch, especially if they know you are busy. You may get so wrapped up in getting things done you inadvertently keep them doing tasks they already do well rather than teaching them a new skill that catapults them forward.

The NAP Skill Sheet is an active tool to help you both, and this chapter will dive into using them well. There are other tools to consider such as S.M.A.R.T.E.R. goals, and we'll include links to information on those as well. Before that, this brief Adult Learners 101 builds a foundation to help you activate your apprentice's learning and keep it going throughout the season.

## Adult Learners 101

Apprentices are adults, even if many are in their early 20s. And while they may be utter novices as agrarians, it's essential that we mentors treat them as adults. Here are the basic elements to keep in mind:

- They need to be *involved* in planning their learning
- The learning needs to be *relevant* to their personal goals
- The learning needs to have *immediate application*
- The learning needs to be *internally motivated*
- They want and need to be able to measure their progress (or lack) independently. You will both be happier if you help the apprentice develop skills to self-critique their work and learning: knowing when they do a job well and when they need to do it better
- For more on adult learners:
  - [Basics Characteristics of Adult Learners:](#)
  - [Video from Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship on Adult Learners](#)

## Co-Creating the Education: It's on BOTH your shoulders and theirs!

### Skills Sheets

On a working farm or ranch, there's no way that a mentor can do it alone -- the apprentice has to help make the education happen. They need to learn how to help make that education front and center. The NAP Coordinators help the apprentice with this, and the Skills Sheet, if used actively, is your best friend in this endeavor.

- The Baseline assessment lets you gauge what your apprentice already knows (or thinks they do!)
- Certain skills are needed at various points in your season; align what skill sheet elements your apprentice focuses on with what they need to do at that time of year
- With any skill, once you assess the incoming level of your apprentice, together you can brainstorm projects, reading, and specific teaching time to move them forward with that skill
  - ◆ Try creating a simple learning plan or action steps (this is discussed further below). Here's a template for a learning plan as well as examples:
    - [NAP Learning Plan Worksheet](#)
    - [Learning Plan Samples](#)

**Key Tip:** Don't think of the Skill Sheet as just a place to *record* what has happened; use it to *plan* opportunities for learning, either done with you, with someone else on your operation, with a neighbor or at a workshop, and self-study the apprentice can do

on their own. Skills Sheets are most effective -- and fun -- when you use it to spark conversation. What is your apprentice passionate to learn? Are you both interested in learning more about soil fungi or low stress handling? You can support one another and keep both of you on your growing edge, learning together.

### **Baseline, Mid-Season, and Prior to Departure Skill Sheet Meetings**

NAP requires three focused Skill Sheet assessments during the eight month apprenticeship: a beginning baseline, at mid-season, and a month or so prior to the end of the apprenticeship to review their time with you and identify next professional steps. Here's the basic process for each of these assessments:

- The apprentice assesses where they have learned, and where they haven't, and then scores self.
- Mentor also assesses and scores where you think your apprentice skill level is, has grown or is stuck.
- You meet to discuss how the learning is coming along, looking over where the sheets indicate growth and where things have stalled and need more attention.
  - Pay special attention to any significant difference between your assessment and your apprentice's. This is likely an area where you may need to give them more feedback more often
  - Strategize how to address skills that are getting forgotten or aren't seeing growth.
- **Why is it useful to have apprentices score themselves?**
  - The more self-aware an apprentice is of their own improvement as well as how they get in their own way, the less defensive they are to constructive feedback.
  - It stimulates their ownership of their learning process -- they will come up with ideas on how to move themselves forward in their skill development.
  - You'll be able to gauge their confidence. It could be that they're doing something well but they still feel unsure about it and underestimate their improvement
  - And if they are overconfident, you'll catch that too!

### **Baseline Assessment**

- If you didn't send them their Skill Sheet prior to arrival, give it to them right away upon arrival.
- Give your apprentice time to complete their Baseline Assessment during the first week to 10 days. Knowing this baseline helps you plan work, education and get them started on the right foot:

- Ask them to identify which skill areas are their points of passion. These may not be your priorities for their learning, but knowing these will mean you can try to roll those in as you can. This is especially useful when you begin to sense burn-out or monotony adversely impacting your apprentice.
- After they complete their Baseline assessments, meet with them and talk through their assessment.
  - Identify and discuss which skills you need them to learn or be better at right away and talk about the specific ways you will teach/train/review to make this happen.
    - For example, San Juan Ranch apprentices arrive right before calving season. On the Animal Handling Skill Sheet one section has them rate their experience with calving issues and skills (no experience, only watched someone else assist with a birth or have they actually had hands-on experience with a mom who can't get up after calving or a troubled birth, etc). Then the mentors know how much training will be needed and can plan that right away.
  - If they say they have some skill, make a point to work with them and double-check their skill level. You can check that what they say they can do, they actually CAN do.
  - The sooner you are confident -- and they are confident -- in their ability to do something well enough, the sooner they get the hang of how to learn as they go, and you can move them to the next new thing to learn

### **Tips for Subsequent Skill Sheet Meetings, including Mid-Season**

- Set the date for the skill sheet review a day or two in advance.
- Give them a few prompting questions to help your apprentice prepare so you aren't the only one offering observations. Prompts and preparation builds objectivity for the apprentice; they learn to *self-identify* where they are stuck, not learning, avoiding a skill, etc.
- Sample question: Ask them to choose which of the skills sheets has been most active within the last time period (e.g. if in calving season, the "animal handling" sheet is a place they can focus their review). and places where they made improvement and where they got stuck. Questions to ask them to consider:
  - "What skills in this section have you been working on? Where do you think you've grown the most and offer up an example of this?"
  - "What have you most enjoyed working on? Why is that?"
  - "What's been hard to learn? Do you need more hands-on support?"
  - "Is there something I am always too busy to get to, so you aren't learning it?"

- Here's a list of suggested questions: [Prompts for Skill Sheet Meetings](#)

Here's a [sample Skill Sheet](#) with the one sheet filled in with scores and comments from baseline to midseason in the Animal Husbandry sheet.

### **Other tools to help plan and execute learning to support a self-starting apprentice:**

#### **[Learning Plans and SMARTER Goals](#)**

#### ***It May take a LONG Time for them to "get it": How to Maintain Patience***

- You the mentor can do a task in half the time it will take your apprentice to do it, and you have to let go of that -- let go of expecting them to do it as quickly as you do. One suggestion: let them set their own pace for a week or two, then you can give them a timeframe that is closer to what is ideal: "Ideally we should be able to unload this truckload of trees before lunch".
- Let them do a task on their own first (if there are no safety reasons why this is a bad idea), and then review it with them to give them feedback on what they did well, what needs improving. For example, if an apprentice says she has done "tons of electric fence", give her a few instructions and let her set up a fence and charger on her own, and then went to look at it. She may have set the charger so it isn't facing the sun. This can be a powerful and lasting learning experience.
- They may need more basic info than you think, like the difference between red and clear diesel, what fluids to check in a vehicle before leaving headquarters, how to use a shovel correctly.
- Plan hands-on teaching/oversight up front to be sure they do this the way you need it done. You are learning HOW THEY LEARN, where they are naturally adept and where they will need more patience and help from you/mentor team.

#### **Once the Honeymoon is Over:**

By and large, things go well for the first three weeks. Everyone's on their best behavior, but eventually the 'new' wears off, the mundane routine sinks in for them, and that charming quirk or yours or theirs isn't so charming anymore. Often generational differences show up here: you discover your apprentice is posting photos to Instagram during the work day and that annoys you, or they don't understand how overwhelmed we are with your new iPhone. Here are some thoughts on how generational differences may show up: [The Intergenerational Workplace](#)

## **Expect the Doldrums:**

Agricultural work is often repetitive and mundane, and it has to be done well every time! This mix is often unfamiliar to apprentices. Here are some ways to help keep them enthusiastic:

- Have a check in and let them know that YOU are sometimes bored or tired of it too! That you may become 'spacey' or worn out and you too forget to make the fence hot. When you 'fess up' to how you get worn out or bored sometimes, they realize they can say it too, rather than suck it up for three months and then explode
- Try to diversify tasks, give them something new/different to do, especially if they've been doing the same thing for weeks - this is a time to pull out one of the areas of passion from their Skill Sheet and set aside some time for that, be it learning to weld with you or working on a neighbor's place for a day to learn how they work livestock
- Refer them to articles, podcasts, etc on a topic of interest to you both: on stockmanship, soil, etc -- give them intellectual food that prompts them to think more deeply about what they are doing at your operation. This might prompt them to ask more questions, get excited again.
  - listen to a podcast at lunch together, sometimes, just to get our educational juices flowing again
- Give them an extra morning off to sleep in -- that can change their reality from darkness to light!
- Let them attend workshops or visit other farms/operations in your area. They come back energized and with questions and ideas. And they also realize all they have been learning with you!
- Help them arrange a day with a local expert in a relevant field--soil scientist, NRCS range ecologist, other agrarians, land stewardship non-profit, local food coalitions, other farms or ranches you know
- Visit other NAP mentor sites--this can really feed the apprentice

## **A Few More Pointers**

By midsummer, mentors often fall into the trap of having the apprentice continually do what they already know how to do well. The schedule is so packed we can't find time to teach them a new skill. The apprentice feels that they aren't really learning anymore, and they become irritable, or feel their education isn't a priority for you (and it may not be at that time of year).

This is time for triage. Look over the above list. Remember your apprentice came to learn, as well as to work. As long as mentors continually remember to prioritize

education along with the work, your apprentice will remain dedicated and determined, will rise to each challenge and find joy in the routine.