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Coaching and Mentoring Experiences of Early Career Extension Agents in Florida Received from County Extension Directors

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County Extension directors (CEDs) are Extension agents who have both programmatic and administrative responsibilities. A critical role of Florida CEDs is to coach and mentor new Extension agents in their county office. Most literature surrounding the onboarding process of new Extension hires focuses on Extension agents within their first year on the job, with little attention on their subsequent years on the job. This study sought to understand the coaching and mentoring experiences of early career Extension agents (one to three years on the job) received from CEDs. Findings revealed eight major themes, including CED years of experience as an agent, lack of CED onboarding, and intentionality of meeting regularly. Overall, CEDs were substantially more optimistic about their early career agents' coaching and mentoring experiences than the agents themselves, revealing a major difference in perception regarding the impact of this critical CED role. UF/IFAS Extension should provide more resources to create needed onboarding training for new CEDs and tools to help CEDs be more effective coaches and mentors for new and early career Extension agents.

Keywords: coaching, mentoring, early career agents, county Extension directors

Introduction

Cooperative Extension is a nationwide, nonformal educational system that seeks to help citizens and interest groups at the local level solve problems in the areas of 4-H youth development, agriculture, horticulture, natural resources, families, and communities (Benge & Harder, 2017; National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2019). Extension agents carry out this mission by creating and implementing research-based educational programs, teaching people to identify problems, analyze information, decide among alternative courses of action for dealing with identified problems, and locate resources to accomplish the preferred course of action (Rasmussen, 1989; Seever et al., 1997). In Florida, Cooperative Extension has a local presence by having an office in all 67 counties (UF/IFAS Extension, 2020a), with each office managed by a county Extension director (CED) who has a split appointment between their Extension program and their administrative and supervisory roles (Benge & Harder, 2017; Radhakrishna et al., 1994).

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Florida CEDs have three primary responsibilities: (a) individual Extension programming, (b) leadership of the total county Extension program, and (c) administrative and management responsibilities (UF/IFAS Extension, 2020b). CEDs play an integral role in the onboarding and development of new Extension agents, serving as both a coach and mentor; however, many CEDs do not have these necessary skills to be effective in their positions (Sanders, 2014). CEDs have historically been promoted from county agent positions with no guarantee the agent is ready or prepared to undertake the responsibilities CEDs are tasked with (Elizer, 2011; Rudd, 2000). It is unclear how CEDs are coaching and mentoring early career Extension agents in Florida. Limited research has examined early career Extension agents' experiences regarding the coaching and mentoring they received from their CED, which decreases Extension's ability to provide a sound and firm onboarding experience for early career Extension agents.

Review of Literature

Mentoring is described as a “dynamic process through which mentors provide advice and support to those who have limited experience or skills” (Balu & James, 2016, p. 2). Hadden (1997) described coaching as “the discussion process between two partners aimed at exerting a positive influence,” yet “since coaching is a critical part of mentoring, an effective mentor will have well developed coaching skills” (p. 17). Within Extension, CEDs fill a critical role as both a mentor and a coach for early career Extension agents (Sanders, 2014). Mentoring by the supervisor is influential regarding job commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intention (Payne & Huffman, 2005). Mentoring and coaching are vital ways to obtain information, knowledge, support, and advice from supervisors (Brass, 2001) and “have become a part of the everyday workplace contributing to increased job satisfaction, personal productivity, and employment stability within an organization” (Kutilek & Earnest, 2001, para. 2).

Though the literature is bare regarding the experiences of CED coaching and mentoring of early career Extension agents, literature exists surrounding peer coaching and mentoring within Extension. Kutilek and Earnest (2001) provided a mentoring model centered on employee support and the enhancement of organizational effectiveness, where a new Extension professional has a peer mentor, peer coach, and executive coach. Place and Bailey (2010) found peer mentoring provided value to both new and seasoned Extension agents. Byington (2010) provided Extension professionals with four keys to establishing successful mentor-mentee relationships, which positively impacted new agents by experimenting with creative solutions and stronger teaching skills: (a) develop a trust relationship, (b) define roles and responsibilities, (c) establish short and long term goals, and (d) collaborate to solve problems.

Extension researchers and practitioners have shown considerable attention to the leadership competencies of CEDs, and the roles of coaching and mentoring are prevalent with the current frameworks surrounding CED competency research and development. Rogers (1977) found four administrative functions were critical for the CED administrative role: (a) personnel

management, (b) program management, (c) financial management, and (d) office management. Whiteside and Bachtel (1987) explored the essential skills needed by Georgia county directors, with the ten most important skills needed for success being communication, public relations, leading, planning, establishing and maintaining a good office image, budget accountability, decision making, evaluating, staff support, and motivating others. Owen (2004) explored CED skills in North Carolina and found 38 competencies were important for CEDs to possess, with coaching being rated as an important competency. Moore and Rudd (2005) explored the leadership skills needed for senior Extension leaders, resulting in six leadership skillsets: human, conceptual, technical, communication, emotional intelligence, and industry knowledge.

Sanders (2014) examined the leadership competencies needed by Florida CEDs to be successful and distinguished human skills from conceptual skills. Utilizing a mixed-methods study, Sanders (2014) included both CEDs and county administrators to identify and assess CED leadership competencies. Forty leadership competencies were identified, including “mentoring and coaching,” which was identified as a human skill. In addition to identifying 40 leadership competencies, which included mentoring and coaching, Sanders (2014) used the Borich model to create a mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS) between perceived level of importance and level of proficiency, where mentoring and coaching had a moderately high MWDS.

County Extension directors play an integral role in the career of early career Extension agents and are crucial to their Extension success. Beyond their administrative functions (Rogers, 1977; Sanders, 2014), Florida CEDs are also responsible for leading the county Extension office and coaching and mentoring early career Extension agents in their offices (Rogers, 1977; Sanders, 2014). Although research has focused on identifying and understanding CED coaching and mentoring, the experiences of early career Extension agents receiving CED coaching and mentoring are not well understood.

Conceptual Framework

Extension agent professional development concepts informed this study and guided the development of interview questions. Kutilek et al. (2002) provided a framework for providing professional development through a systems approach. The framework provided both motivators and organizational strategies throughout the three stages of an Extension professional’s career: entry, colleague, and counselor. Bengé et al. (2011) later expanded the framework to include a pre-entry stage for Extension professionals prior to officially starting their role. In this framework, agents in the entry stage should receive leadership coaching from CEDs, while agents in the experienced counselor stage should provide mentoring to other agents (Kutilek et al., 2002).

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of the study was to understand the CED coaching and mentoring experiences on early career Extension agents and is part of a larger investigation of the UF/IFAS Extension new agent onboarding process. The study's research question was: *What are the experiences of CED coaching and mentoring on early career Extension agents in Florida?* This study aligns with priority three of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda – Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce which Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts et al., 2016).

Methods

This research study used a qualitative methodology design through a phenomenological lens, where CED “coaching and mentoring” on Florida early career Extension agents was the phenomenon being studied. Phenomenology was the appropriate approach for this study as the researchers sought to capture the “meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). The goal of phenomenology seeks to move beyond description of a shared experience (i.e., CED coaching and mentoring of early career Extension agents) to what it means reflectively for individuals to provide “a description of universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57; Moustakas, 1994). IRB approval was obtained from the University of Florida IRB Office prior to contacting potential participants.

The total population of UF/IFAS Extension faculty was 367, of which 62 were CEDs, according to the UF/IFAS Extension Business Services office at the time the data were collected (Business Services Employee, personal communication, 2019). The target population consisted of (a) 89 Extension agents who have been on the job for 1-3 years and (b) 48 CEDs who currently have an Extension agent in their office with 1-3 years of experience. Sixteen participants were purposively selected to participate from the target population with regard to the representative characteristics of Extension district, program area, and county type (see Table 1). One agent passed away during the interview process and was not replaced for the study. Eight CEDs and seven Extension agents participated in the study, for a total of 15 participants.

The primary form of data collection for phenomenological research involves in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007). The researchers created two semi-structured interview guides, one for Extension agent participants and another for CED participants. A six-member expert panel reviewed both interview guides for face and content validity, consisting of one Extension agent, one County Extension Director, two program and staff development professionals, and two state Extension faculty. Five of the six-member panel either currently works or has worked for Extension as either an Extension agent or CED. Both interview guides consisted of 20 questions, with the difference being Extension agent participants were asked about their own experience, and CED participants were asked their perceptions of their new Extension agent(s) experiences in their office. The following three questions were asked of the participants specifically

regarding this study: (a) describe your mentor experience, (b) describe your working relationship with your CED, and (c) how does your CED coach you?

Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Participants

Participant	Agent Type	District	Program Area	County Type
Gabriella	CED	District 2	Family & Consumer Sciences	Rural
Ryann	CED	District 5	Family & Consumer Sciences	Rural
Kyle	CED	District 1	4-H Youth Development	Urban
Grayson	CED	District 3	Agriculture/Horticulture	Rural
Aaron	CED	District 4	Agriculture/Horticulture	Urban
Fatima	CED	District 5	Agriculture/Horticulture	Rural
Chelsea	CED	District 4	4-H Youth Development	Rural
Leo	CED	District 3	Agriculture/Horticulture	Mix
Alexa	Agent	District 2	Natural Resources	Mix
Olivia	Agent	District 5	Agriculture/Horticulture	Rural
Lilly	Agent	District 1	4-H Youth Development	Urban
Andrew	Agent	District 4	Natural Resources	Urban
Evelynn	Agent	District 3	Family & Consumer Sciences	Urban
Chrys	Agent	District 4	Agriculture/Horticulture	Mix
Isabella	Agent	District 3	Family & Consumer Sciences	Mix

Note. Participants were assigned an alias. Each district was masked with a random number between 1 and 5 to keep each participant's anonymity, as the characteristics provided would decrease anonymity of the participants. Participant 9 is a Regional Specialized Agent (RSA). Participant 10 is a Multi-County Extension Agent.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted over two months, ranging from 28 to 63 minutes in length, with the average interview length being 40 minutes. The researchers utilized NVivo 12 qualitative software to organize, code, and analyze the data collected. Data were reduced using the *phenomenological reduction* method by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen, as modified by Moustakas (1994). After transcriptions were downloaded to NVivo, each researcher completed the first seven steps separately, including horizontalization, descriptions of textures and structures of the experience, and construction of a textural-structural description of the meanings of the horizons. From the individual descriptions, a composite textural-structural description was created into a universal description of the CED coaching and mentoring experiences on early career Extension agents (Moustakas, 1994).

The researchers used five strategies to maintain credibility of the study, as Eisner (1991) stated the importance of establishing credibility within qualitative research “allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 110). The five strategies to maintain the study's credibility were triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, thick, rich descriptions, and clarifying researcher bias. Triangulation was attained by interviewing both the new Extension agents and the CEDs. The evidence from these different data sources provided greater evidence into the experiences of new Extension agents in Florida (Creswell, 2007). The researchers engaged in peer debriefing with the expert panel that reviewed the interview guides.

The researchers analyzed the data individually and then met to discuss emergent themes together, which was important in this study since as researcher did not have an Extension background and acted as an external check to the other researchers with Extension backgrounds. Participants were solicited for feedback on their interview transcriptions as a member check to safeguard the data's credibility, and thick and rich descriptions were used to ensure transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2007).

Lastly, Merriam (1988) explained it is important to address potential bias within qualitative research by writing a positionality statement to address past and current experiences relating to new Extension agents. As the lead researcher, I have worked within Cooperative Extension for eleven years, the first seven years as an Extension agent, and the past four years as a state Extension specialist, all within Florida where this study has been conducted. I have firsthand knowledge of and experience being a new Extension agent and have been through the challenges other new Extension agents face. My current role as a state Extension specialist is to coordinate professional development, and one of my primary responsibilities is coordinating the training for new Extension agents. There is currently no intentional development program for Florida Extension agents during their first year on the job, and I believe there are gaps that need to be identified and programs created to help better prepare our Extension agents for success.

Findings

Eight primary themes emerged from interviews with seven early career agents and eight CEDs involved in this study. The themes discussed in this section include (a) years of experience, (b) CED turnover, (c) lack of CED onboarding, (d) intentional meetings, (e) open-door policy, (f) CED knowledge of agents' programmatic fields, (g) emotional intelligence support for early career agents, and (h) CED understanding of early career agents' experiences.

Years of Experience

A CED's level of experience as an agent before beginning their CED appointment was critical in providing valuable tips, feedback, and support for early career agents (Olivia, Andrew, Chrys). Agents expressed concern with seeking coaching and mentorship from CEDs with little Extension experience prior to becoming a CED (Olivia, Andrew, Chrys). Andrew explained the benefit of being coached and mentored by a CED with Extension experience:

I always like CEDs that are veteran agents. Those CEDs with that longer experience that worked their way through the system, they tend to have really good perspective...I always liked the persons who have done the job [themselves], I think that would help.

In addition, years of experience as a CED was expressed by agents as a concern for receiving coaching and mentorship from CEDs with limited supervisory experience (Olivia, Andrew, Chrys). Early career agent Olivia reported, "I feel like [my CED] and I have coached each other

because of her...lack of experience when she came into the CED position.” Similarly, Chrys explained her feelings as an early career agent with a new CED: “I think some of the challenge, too, is my [CED] is new...So I think we’re both kind of learning it,” and “Some of the things I’m working on, I know she may not be able to necessarily give me good direction on.”

Providing a supervisory perspective, CEDs Aaron and Kyle mentioned the vital role their years as Extension agents have played in their ability to coach and mentor early career agents. Aaron explained his ability to utilize his personal experience of being new to Extension at one point to better coach and mentor his early career agents: “[I feel prepared to supervise a new agent because] I’ve got a lot of experience with, you know, just being an agent. Being in the system for a very long time and understanding what new agents go through.”

County Extension Director Turnover

High CED turnover accounted for increased stress and challenges in adapting to multiple management styles. Andrew lamented, “We’ve had three different CEDs, all having different management styles which made it difficult, and you didn’t know what was expected.” Isabella explained having multiple CEDs within a short timeframe caused challenges in understanding how a CED leads and manages: “Within [my] county thus far, I’ve had 3 CEDs, and so just the changing of leadership has been a little bit challenging because each person has their own unique leadership style.”

Lack of County Extension Director Onboarding

Many CEDs expressed a challenge in effectively mentoring early career agents when they had not been mentored during their transition from county agent to CED (Ryann, Kyle, Grayson, Aaron, Fatima, Chelsea). Some CEDs explained how their CED did not provide mentorship support to them when they became a CED (Kyle, Fatima). Kyle, a CED, mentioned his CED provided him “very little” support, “other than email, and during evaluations, asking ‘how’s it going?’” Fatima explained her perception of mentorship and effective CED onboarding:

I think it takes a special person to understand the importance of the mentorship when you’re dealing with such a young faculty member [early career agents]...I think the mentorship curriculum is excellent, but I’ve heard some DEDs say, ‘oh, if you don’t want to complete it, that’s fine’...I got zero encouragement in this system even though I had been in this system [for a long time]...But I really try to go to [my early career agent], and I don’t make her feel like she always has to come to me.

Having learned many supervisory skills on his own without CED onboarding, Grayson described his challenge as a new CED: “No one showed me anything coming in as a new CED. No one showed me what I needed to do. You kind of figure it out on your own.” With respect to assisting the CED onboarding and training process, over half of the CED participants explained

the need for greater quantity and availability of resources on how to train, mentor, and coach early career agents (Ryann, Kyle, Grayson, Aaron, Fatima, Chelsea). CED Grayson described turning to an open-door coaching policy in lieu of more hands-on and involved coaching/mentoring due to a lack of available resources for CEDs to engage in developing early career agents. Andrew expressed his concerns as an early career agent:

[My CED and I] have a relationship where we have a one-on-one meeting monthly, and that's kind of it. There's not much sit down time beyond that. We go through the list of tasks, and sometimes I dread these meetings... You never know what to expect, because sometimes I'm walking out of there with more work. That's my biggest fear and why I hold back.

Six of the eight CEDs requested the creation of an online archive of CED training basics to support CEDs in mentoring/coaching their early career agents (Ryann, Kyle, Grayson, Aaron, Fatima, Chelsea). Ryann described her interest in using online tools while coaching her early career agents: "I think [it would be helpful] having an online directory for things they [early career agents] are going to need to know." Fatima also stated she would benefit immensely as a CED by coaching her early career agents with online tools:

Something [online] would be tremendous where I could just go and pick and grab tools I could use. Something I try to do with my folks [early career agents] is I try to do some professional development stuff that needs to be in those short bites. Dealing with difficult people. Seven habits. [I would love] someplace where we could get some Extension activity to go along with that, so we are not having to work for three days to get a 20-minute presentation together.

Intentional Meetings

Scheduling weekly face-to-face meetings between CEDs and early career agents was explained as critical within the first three months an agent is on the job (Ryann, Kyle, Grayson, Aaron). Aaron stated the vitality of his coaching methods during early career agents' first 90 days on the job:

I think that working with early career agents is really important because it's their opportunity to get [ahead]. They're very malleable in the first 90 days, especially, and that's the time you can get them trained to understand the culture, proper behavior, and a lot of different things. Because after 90 days, it's a lot more difficult after that point in time to correct.

Concerning weekly in-person meetings, Chelsea, a CED with multiple early career agents in her office, similarly described the benefits she has seen from scheduling intentional meetings with her early career agents: "I'm here to help them succeed. We spend a lot of face-time. I meet with

them every week. I think that has helped agents feel secure in that they're going to be supported in the growth of their career." Grayson stated, "I always meet with [early career agents] once or twice a week, see what's going on, ask them if there is anything they need." Kyle explained the value of consistent communication when he coaches early career agents:

I think [we] have a really good relationship. We meet regularly. I schedule a time to meet with [early career agents]. And then I follow up just by going and having a conversation to see if there is anything I can do and involve them in programs and activities. Just to help bring them along. Regular communication, face-to-face that is, not necessarily just email.

Open-Door Policy

Open-door supervisory policies have impacted CEDs' interactions and relationships with their early career agents (Isabella, Olivia, Grayson). Early career agent Isabella, who had three different CEDs over three years, shared, "[My CEDs] have kind of like that 'open-door' policy... 'if you need any help, I'm here to help you.'" Similarly, Olivia summarized her experience of an open-door policy by stating, "I'm not sure I've had what I would call 'coaching.'" Grayson, an experienced agent but new to being a CED, talked about how although he understands better coaching and mentoring strategies exist than having an open-door policy, he was not trained on ways to better help his early career agents, defaulted to using an open-door policy.

CED Knowledge of Agents' Fields

The amount of knowledge CEDs have within early career agents' content area impacted the level of coaching and mentoring provided. Andrew explained, "I view the role of a CED as someone who can provide support and guidance with programs. I'm hoping to see more of this from my current CED." Gabriella provided a supervisory perspective, explaining how having field-specific knowledge impacted her coaching: "I went to a lot of meetings that weren't in my subject matter area so that I can understand...what's going on in those other topic areas," and "I also want to kind of understand and help and still be involved in at least a basic understanding of what's going on and how I can help."

Reliance on early career agents' formally assigned peer mentor was often seen as a result of CEDs' lack of subject area expertise, in which they would easily defer early career agents to someone else for help. For example, when CED Kyle coached and mentored agents in 4-H, which was his subject area of expertise, he was able "to train and teach them all about 4-H." However, Kyle's ability to coach an agent in a different subject area differed. He said,

The one thing that I try to focus on when [early career agents] come in is 'this is what you need, work with your [peer] mentors with outcomes and impacts,' because with [my

early career agents], that is not in my field, so I really don't know. These are the things you need to do for your packet.

Emotional Intelligence Support for Early Career Agents

Support manifested through openness, honesty, and respect for early career agents (Alexa, Lilly, Evelyn). Supportive and encouraging relationships between early career agents and CEDs were inspiring to early career agents and promoted professional growth (Alexa, Lilly, Evelyn, Isabella). Evelyn explained that her CED encouraged her to pursue Extension and gave her books to read, walked her through the process, and shared strategies to help her be effective. CED Ryann provided another example of effective coaching and mentorship, stating, "I have very much a team mentality, so we quite often have a lot of meetings and communication...We are all...in the same boat as far as ownership of our own careers and utilization of the resources we can garner."

Early career agent Alexa explained the impact that receiving open, honest, and supportive feedback from her supervisor has had on her career. She said, "[My supervisor] has a lot of respect for me, and I think it's great. He does a lot of positive reinforcement. He is not the kind of supervisor that withholds praise," and "I know that he's doing it to help me, that he wants me to succeed, and that he wants to keep me as an agent, because he praises me, and I know I am valued by him. He is very open and honest where you stand with him."

However, CEDs deferred to different coaching and mentoring styles than emotional intelligence coaching. For instance, a contrasting response was provided by CED Leo regarding his opinion of early career agents' personal responsibility in ensuring their own success. Leo explained how early career agents' professional well-being was determined primarily by how much and how well they network with others around them, stating, "They [early career agents] need to understand how to develop relationships with clientele, and it needs to be genuine relationships." Leo further stated,

[A]t work, you've got to be an extrovert. If you just sit in your office and shut your door and don't want to talk to anybody, then when you don't have success, that's your fault. If an agent [says] 'I didn't survive because nobody worked with me,' it's their own fault because there are plenty of opportunities to team up with other agents...I need my new agents to hit the ground running when they get here.

CED Understanding of Early Career Agents' Experiences

On the job experiences of early career Extension agents were understood by CEDs through breaking down information into manageable pieces, going step-by-step, providing concise guidelines for early career agents, and providing emotional support during times of need. Early career agent Lilly mentioned, "[My CED] has done a really good job of not making me feel

overwhelmed...I'm really lucky to have him in our office." From the supervisory perspective, CED Chelsea explained the process of meeting her early career agents where they were, stating, "I work to be very deliberate to coach each person as is appropriate for where they are professionally, mentally, emotionally, just trying to take all of that into consideration."

Similarly, Kyle, a new CED and experienced Extension agent, described his process of utilizing personal experience as an early career agent to better understand what his early career agents experienced. He said,

I'm not so far removed from what it feels like to be new, even though I've been here for a while; I still remember what it's like. It's a horrible feeling when you're in a job, and you don't know what you're doing or what you're supposed to do. I know what is important [to teach early career agents] early on before [they] start going off track. Also, CEDs have to be careful how they interact with agents. Making sure you don't say things that might make someone uncomfortable.

Providing an agent's perspective, Olivia expressed frustration with managing the demands of her job. Since she was coached and mentored by a new CED, Olivia explained that her supervisor has not been able to provide effective guidance or direction on what steps she should take. Alexa also summarized her conflicting feelings of being overwhelmed as an early career agent during her first six months on the job, stating, "In the first months, I would seriously just hold it together all day, and then I would get into the car, and I would just break down, and it was crazy."

Discussion

Participants provided substantial feedback regarding the onboarding experiences of early career agents. Four out of the seven early career agents interviewed reported a predominantly positive, supportive, and growth-enabling coaching and mentoring relationship with their CEDs. These same agents felt supported through positive coaching relationships with their CEDs, felt satisfied with their job when discussing their experiences as an early career agent, and reported a positive attitude when discussing their feelings about their job. These findings support Elizer (2011), who explained CEDs who engage and motivate agents have more highly satisfied agents than CEDs who employ a primarily hands-off coaching and mentoring style. Benge and Harder (2017) explained positive working relationships between CEDs and agents increase agent performance, job satisfaction, and retention, whereas negative relationships can contribute to agent turnover and burnout. The same cannot be said of the three early career agents that did not report feeling adequately supported by their CED, reporting they felt overwhelmed, disorganized, and simultaneously pulled in multiple directions when discussing their experiences. These same agents were either in a county with high CED turnover or were being coached by a new CED who did not have years of experience on the job. Extension agents faced various challenges, which lead to decreased productivity and low levels of job satisfaction, with ineffective and unreliable CED supervision being a major contributor.

Overall, CEDs were more optimistic about their early career agents' coaching and mentoring experiences than the agents. Seven out of the eight interviewed CEDs reported high levels of coaching and involvement with their early career agents, whereas only four of the seven interviewed early career agents reported high levels of CED coaching and mentoring. The CEDs' optimism could be accurate, or it could be inflated as they may not actually understand how their early career agents are doing on the job. CEDs should have an accurate perception of their early career agents as they were responsible for coaching and mentoring them during their entry stage on the job (Benge et al., 2011).

Most CEDs indicated taking an active approach to connect with early career Extension agents, including scheduling weekly meetings and engaging in face-to-face dialogue. Some early career agents and CEDs mentioned using an "open-door" policy, where CEDs invited agents to approach them whenever help was needed. Open-door leadership involves indirect and hands-off management of employees, and Extension agents with CEDs who employ a strictly hands-off coaching and mentoring style are more likely to have low job satisfaction (Elizer, 2011). Additionally, open-door, or laissez-faire, coaching and mentoring may contribute to agents' perception of a lack of CED support, involvement, and investment in their professional well-being (Elizer, 2011). Due to Florida CEDs having both supervisory and collegial working relationships with their early career Extension agents, a laissez-faire approach may, in part, stem from a collegial relationship rather than a supervisory one, meaning some CEDs may not be able to differentiate these distinct roles.

Sanders (2014) explained both human and conceptual skills are needed by CEDs to be effective in their job. Some of the CEDs did not possess these human and conceptual skills. Some newly hired CEDs were new to UF/IFAS Extension and did not possess the organizational knowledge to coach and mentor early career agents. Other CEDs had agent experience and knowledge of the organization but not sufficient human skills to be effective leaders and coaches. This was seen in counties where CED turnover was high, leading early career agents to feel less supported by their CEDs. CEDs that were not in the counselor stage of their Extension career may not be fully able to coach and mentor entry-stage Extension agents, which may contribute to some early career agents' negative experiences. Effective leadership, coaching, and professional support are crucial for the new Extension agent (Kutilek et al., 2002). It is evident some early career agents beyond the first year or even three years were still not receiving the appropriate coaching and mentoring from their CED.

Recommendations

The findings of this study revealed some early career agents were receiving more coaching and mentoring than others. The UF/IFAS Extension system lacked uniformity in how Florida CEDs are to coach and mentor Extension agents. As it is unlikely all hired CEDs possess all forty leadership competencies identified by Sanders (2014), UF/IFAS Extension should invest

resources and training to enhance its onboarding practices for county Extension leaders. A training program for both new and seasoned CEDs focusing on active coaching and mentoring strategies should be created to ensure all CEDs are coaching and mentoring consistently with common expectations. An online repository, or coaching toolbox, should be created for CEDs on topics related to coaching, mentoring, and the other leadership competencies identified by Sanders (2014).

Just as mentoring is important for early career Extension agents, it is just as important for CEDs to receive coaching and mentoring. All new CEDs under five years of being a CED could have a formalized mentor to be coached and receive support, especially for those CEDs who are hired with no Extension background. UF/IFAS Extension could also restructure some CED appointments to be completely administrative, which could encourage (a) job descriptions to be more specified to the skills and responsibilities of a CED, (b) a different pool of applicants who have more extensive leadership and supervisory backgrounds, and (c) more specified and intentional training opportunities for CEDs with high administrative appointments.

The quality of relationships between CEDs and early career agents needs improvement, as CEDs and agents have misconceptions in understanding their experiences of being coached and mentored. Relying on an open-door policy has caused CEDs not to be involved in their early career agents' success and challenges, putting the CED in a position where they are unable to properly coach and mentor. CEDs are encouraged to discontinue the use of an open-door policy unless it is used in conjunction with, and not as a replacement of, a hands-on coaching and mentoring approach involving regularly scheduled meetings and intentional check-ins with early career agents. The researchers recommend the impacts of CED coaching and mentoring on Extension agents beyond their first year be further explored since there is limited research examining this phenomenon. An in-depth needs assessment of current CEDs' coaching and mentoring competencies would highlight what resources are needed to enhance CED coaching and mentoring strategies. A similar assessment could be created and administered to early career agents to better understand this group's professional, developmental, and training needs.

The current study would be complemented by exploring the impact of formally assigned peer mentors on the job satisfaction and professional development of early career agents in Florida. Understanding peer-to-peer mentor relationships may provide additional insight into how CED coaching and mentoring relationships impact early career agents. Additionally, CED onboarding and mentoring needs to be better understood. Another qualitative study could focus on how CEDs themselves are coached and mentored, which would aid in the development of more training and "toolbox" materials available for CEDs. An examination of human, communication, and emotional intelligence competencies (Moore & Rudd, 2005), which may be more easily forgotten when considering valuable supervisory skills, could be investigated. A study comparing the emotional intelligence scores of CEDs in correlation to the coaching and mentoring styles they use with early career agents could provide details about how emotional

intelligence variance influences CED leadership outcomes. This could be compared to the current study on early career agents' feelings of support, coaching, and mentorship from their CED to assess whether CEDs' emotional intelligence influences the support they provide to early career agents.

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