



# WHAT'S IN A Mentor?

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## BEHIND EACH OF OUR SUCCESSES

is a strong system of mentors, who push us and help polish us. Perhaps the most influential time for mentors to give us a leg up is during those first few years in the professional world.

Mentorship – both having a mentor and serving as one – is an essential value of Agriculture Future of America's Alliance for young professionals. Alliance member Ty Littau says he appreciates his mentors who have challenged him and kept him grounded. Fellow Alliance member Ellen Gilliland says mentors not only push her but also help her set boundaries and seek needed rest.

"I appreciate that my mentors have been concerned with my personal life as well as how I perform professionally," she said.

Agreeing, Jon Calhoun says, "A good mentor is genuinely interested in finding what your interests are and helping you get to the next level."

## FINDING & DEVELOPING MENTORSHIP

Each relationship looks different. Some develop from traditional supervisor–employee roles. Gilliland, project manager for Ohio Corn & Wheat, says her supervisors have been some of her best mentors. For Littau, having a strong mentor relationship with his colleagues was one of the reasons he left his home state of South Dakota and took his

current position as legislative correspondent with Senator John Thune in Washington, D.C.

"It's important when you make a large change that you have some idea of who you will be working with and who will be crafting your perspective," he said.

Calhoun also said his mentors are part of the reason he moved from Oregon to Nebraska to work with Union Pacific Railroad where he is now a sales manager. As a new hire, he was assigned a seasoned mentor within the company.

"I found that valuable; and I found even more value in informal relationships that grew organically because we had common goals," he said.

Sometimes mentorships start when you say, "I respect you. I would like to consider you a mentor." Others begin as you ask people in your network for advice on specific decisions.

"It takes a certain amount of time to figure out who you are dealing with and what their mentality is. Some of my relationships have been fairly formal," Littau said. "With others though, we simply talk on a regular basis."

With her supervisors serving as mentors, Gilliland said they never specifically set mentorship expectations. However, she did have one supervisor who was also a close friend. In that case, she said, boundaries were important.

"We labeled our conversations, 'this is a work conversation, this is a friend conversation,' so we were clear and

could pull from the correct set of expectations," she said.

Whatever the case, your relationship will benefit you if you are intentional in your conversations, said Littau. Calhoun adds that for the relationship to be mutually beneficial, you need to be open and willing to receive feedback.

"At some point, hopefully, you can begin to sharpen each other based on strengths and weaknesses," he said.

Always seriously consider and apply your mentor's advice, Gilliland says. Littau recommends sharing the specific things you admire about your mentor and explaining how you think they can help sharpen you.

"Within the professional world, we are hard up for encouragement and positivity some days," he said.

## PASSING IT ON

Littau says he has learned more about mentorship by *serving* as a mentor.

"What they need is a safe place to process and encouragement," he said. "I can help them zoom out and take out some of the emotion and dig into what is substantive."

Calhoun agrees saying he enjoys mentoring the newest hires at Union Pacific who have a drive similar to his. "I want to be a liaison between the person and Union Pacific and make sure they have the best experience possible."