

Developing Supervisors From Within: Mentoring and Coaching New Managers

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Introduction

Agricultural enterprises across the U.S. continue to increase their size and efficiencies to be more competitive in the market and be able to turn in a profit. The dairy industry is no exception. With the increase in herd sizes has come an increase in the size of the workforce needed to manage these dairy operations and perform the work, resulting in the formation of people organizations. To be effective and efficient, these people organizations need to have an order in which things are done. As more people work at the dairy, an inherent need surfaces for placing supervisors and managers, or “middle management,” in the dairy organization. Dairies become people organizations and adequate design is needed to provide people clear boundaries and expectations with respect to authority, supervision, and goals. Being able to develop supervisors from within the dairy requires a set of abilities the candidate should possess to increase the chances of success in the position. Coaching and mentoring such a person are critical components of their development. These organizational changes take time and should be done with a plan in mind in order to be successful.

Management of growing workforces

The transition many dairy producers have experienced and will continue to experience is that of going from managing and working the cows themselves to managing an organization

of people that work with the cows. As this occurs, the owners spend more time managing people processes/issues than cow processes. This is not to say that the owner will be completely removed from the production process, as some might continue to be tied to the production process directly by performing some specific functions (e.g., A.I., feeding). The challenge here comes when the owners tie up their time into those functions, and not spend enough time with major functions for the operation (watching markets to sell milk, buying feed cost-efficiently); a subject better covered separately. Owners of growing agricultural operations need to come to the realization that if they don't have the people management skills, they need to find someone who does. We believe that it becomes harder for an owner to manage more than a dozen people or so all by themselves and do it effectively. Therefore, as the workforce of your operation grows, you might consider developing some supervisors from within.

We define “Developing Supervisors from Within” as the process of identifying, developing, and leading personnel up in the organization (a promotion) into a management role that involves more responsibility, higher rank, and supervision of people. All of these changes can bring about shifts in status, and often in pay. Here we use the terms manager and supervisor interchangeably, to mean one or more people in the organization report to them directly.

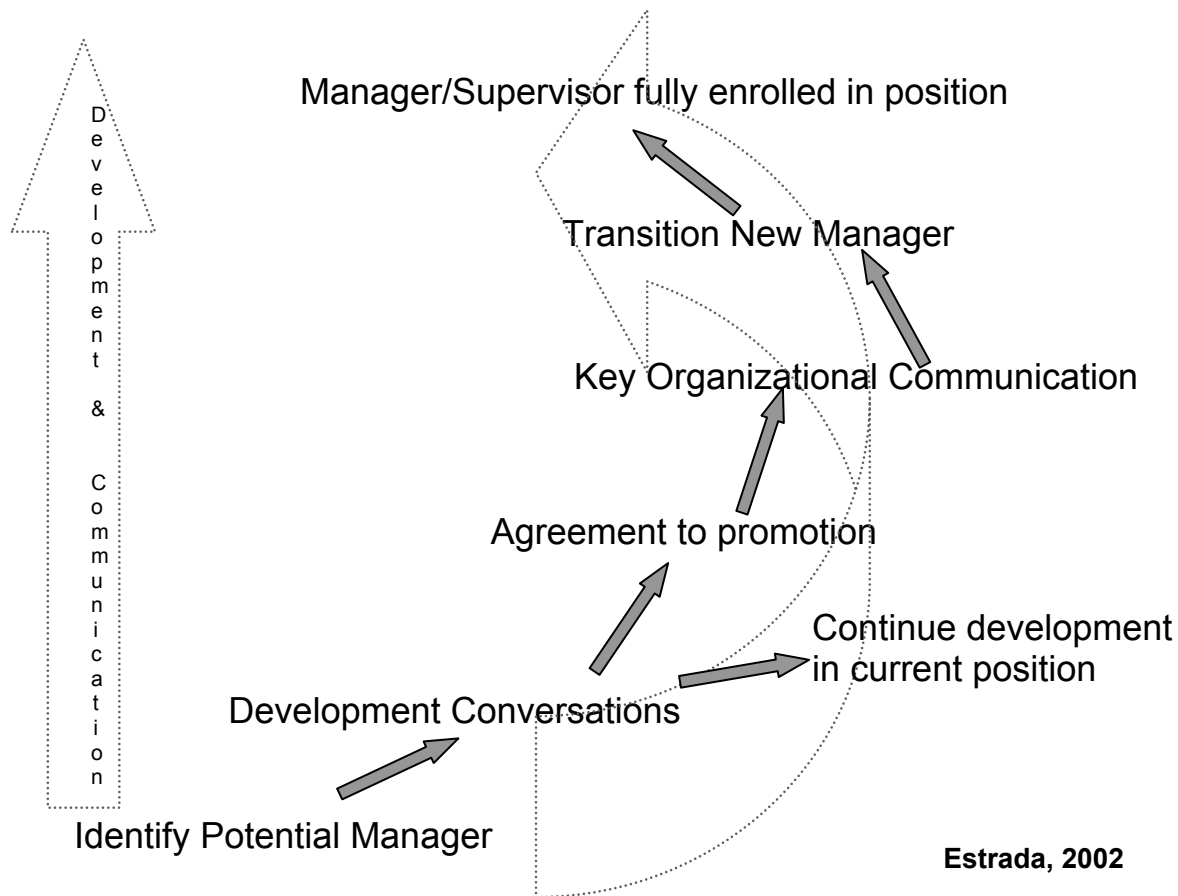
Developing Supervisors from Within – a proposed model

Given the dynamics of the process of developing and promoting supervisors from within, we have developed a model that we hope gives you the picture and guides you through the process of developing managers/supervisors. We describe the model here from Figure 1.

- *Identifying the potential manager.* It all starts here. This step usually takes place within the first few

weeks or months of the employee working for the organization. This early time allows the owner or general manager to make observations and assessments. Optimally, identifying a potential manager would occur when we hire every person into the organization, by asking a simple question: “Given what I know about this person (Resume, References, Interviews, etc.), does she/he have supervisory/management potential?” The new employee might take the initiative and mention their interest to management early on.

Figure 1. A Model for Developing Managers and Supervisors



- *Development conversations.* Development conversations might be a foreign term for owners and managers. The leadership of the organization has the responsibility to hold the conversations, formally and informally. Formally, we

propose that each employee should be eligible to a once a year review of performance; for example, on the anniversary of their hiring date. It is then that a development conversation can be held about the needs of the organization and the desires of the employee. When there

is a need for a supervisor, a potential one identified, and a desire for the one identified, the process will continue to move forward naturally. Informally, conversations may occur randomly throughout the year. These conversations can be primed with questions such as: “What do you envision your future being with our organization?” “What aspirations do you have with respect to your development?”

- *Continue development in current position.* This step of the model simply allows the process of personnel development and conversations to take place, and allows the identified employee to choose. The employee may want to remain in the current position, in which case ownership and management should respect that choice made by the employee of being passed for the promotion.
- *Agreement to promotion.* This phase might take several conversations over a period of weeks or few months. Agreement to a supervisory position includes agreement to a compensation package (e.g., higher salary, a house), to a set of roles and responsibilities of the position, to how the next steps (Communications and Transition) will be handled. The potential supervisor might need some time to think things through, consult with family members, and consider the advantages and possible disadvantages. This step benefits from setting expectations for timelines of decisions to be made.
- *Key organizational communication.* The moment comes to announce the change in the organization when the new supervisor will be taking on the new role. We recommend that the announcement be made in a formal meeting with, hopefully, every single employee in the organization present. This meeting should be solely held for this purpose, as it is

an opportunity to talk about the how the business values employees, values development, and how this organizational change fits the strategy for present and future. This is also an opportunity to address questions from the group, check for approval or disapproval of the change, and identify who might need some time and effort to understand and approve of the situation. The general manager of a dairy in the Magic Valley of Idaho did this in an exemplary way, “the success of the dairy is going to be impacted by the success of Manuel (the new supervisor) in his new position, and his success is based on all of your success” he told all employees, at a monthly meeting. The roles and responsibilities of the new supervisor should also be stated clearly, so everyone hears the same thing. If the new supervisor will be making hiring and firing decisions, it should also be mentioned, without making it the central part of the conversation. In other words, the positioning of what, why, and how are very important.

- *Transition new manager.* Transitioning the new manager/supervisor takes time. The quicker the ownership/management of the business wants the new supervisor in place, the better prepared the new supervisor should be and the more intensive the transition needs to be. These types of transitions take weeks to allow everyone involved to get used to the changes in the organization. The new supervisor will be adopting new ways of working, new responsibilities, new behaviors and ways of doing things. The ownership must be fully involved and informed as to how the transition is progressing, and make adjustments as needed. The ownership must continue to support and reinforce the change made. The first opportunity to reinforce the

change is when an employee approaches, say the owner, directly on an issue. This is when the owner has the responsibility and opportunity to quickly relate to the employee that he/she has been heard, and that the employee needs to proceed to communicate and work with the new supervisor on the particular issue. This totally reinforces the new way of doing things, as the owner is transferring authority to the new supervisor immediately, avoids undermining of the supervisor, and sends a clear message that jumping rank is not acceptable. A visual aid that might help everyone is a simple organizational chart, which shows the new position in place.

- *Manager/supervisor fully enrolled in position.* Once the transition has occurred, the new manager is in place, performing his/her roles and responsibilities. We must realize that the process does not stop there. One of the key roles of ownership/management once the new supervisor is in position is to reinforce the change and support the process. Optimally, there would be a plan put in place for the development of the new manager, where growth and new learning opportunities are included. Periodic evaluations also help maintain lines of communication open.

The role of development and communication are fundamental to the success of this entire model. The development of the new supervisor should never cease, and although some major aspects of their development might already be in progress, some other aspects will show up here and there. A client we worked with recently had promoted a new supervisor, and a growth opportunity had been identified in the area of conflict resolution. As the weeks went by, it became apparent that the new supervisor was lacking some time management skills. Eventually he made this the growth area he

emphasized, due to the effect it had on other areas of his work.

Communications are also a key component of the process. From the conception of the idea to the full implementation, communication will take place in different forms (verbal, written, in meetings), and with different people (new supervisor, future direct reports). Communications should include some sort of a record that is kept of the dates and nature of the conversations held with the employee.

This model is proposed as a way for ownership/management of an organization to think through the steps of developing supervisors from within.

Critical abilities needed

In the model presented earlier, it is understood that developing managers/supervisors involves assessing their abilities (those that encourage you to promote them) and how they match the job responsibilities, and working with them to continue to expand their abilities into those that are critical to the manager. A common mistake organizations of any kind make (including growing dairies) is to promote employees based on how good they are at what they do now. The Peter Principle applies here, which says that people are promoted to their next level of incompetence. Let's take Pedro, for example, who was promoted to supervisor at a 5,000-cow dairy in Idaho. He is very good with cows; he recognizes a healthy cow and a sick one, and knows the ins and outs of treatments needed to get the cow healthy. The ownership failed to see that Pedro lacked interpersonal skills. It was almost as if the management thought, if he is good with cows, he must be good at managing a group, let's promote him.

It is not easy to know the result of promoting a person, and we can certainly increase our chances of success if we take a look at some critical things needed. From the standpoint of promoting a person to that next role, you ought to ask yourself two critical

questions: 1) do you honestly picture this person being effective in that role? and 2) do they honestly picture themselves being effective in that role? Rarely are promotable employees 100% ready to take that next position, but you might want to consider the chances of success for this person, given that support and development will be provided along the way.

From our experiences in working with dairies that have promoted and are developing personnel to promote to supervisory and management roles, we have developed a concise list of what we call “critical abilities” (see Table 1).

Table 1. Critical abilities of the person being promoted to supervisory/management roles in dairies:

- ✓ An overall positive attitude toward work, the dairy, and all the people in the organization.
- ✓ A solid understanding and knowledge of how the dairy operates (specific knowledge of the area he/she will oversee).
- ✓ Ambition, and a desire to do what is needed.
- ✓ Interpersonal abilities, gets along with people.
- ✓ Leadership ability (knows self well, people gravitate to him/her, commands respect/trust).
- ✓ Management ability – delegation, authority, communication, coach, competence.
- ✓ Analyzes and resolves problems in a timely manner.
- ✓ Reads and writes, both Spanish and English, fluently.
- ✓ Sees continuous learning as an integral part of his/her development.
- ✓ A desire to develop, learn and grow.

People management skills

These new supervisors more than likely are used to working directly with production units (i.e. cows), and now have responsibility for helping accomplish tasks through other people. People management skills become critical components for managers, particularly for the newer ones. Following is a list of critical people

management skills you ought to consider developing your managers and supervisors in:

- Building productive teams
- Use of power and authority
- Interpersonal skills
- Communication skills
- Leadership skills
- Performance assessments
- Rewarding and motivating
- Empowering and delegating
- Conflict management

Besides experiential learning, formal training programs become a key component of acquiring skills for the new manager.

Coaching and mentoring

We must recognize that developing supervisors from within involves coaching and mentoring of the new managers, as well as coaching and mentoring of other people involved in the process. Coaching and mentoring tend to be used loosely as processes that are part of developing people, and many times these terms mean different things to different people. For example, coaching might mean to some, that you are telling the person/client what needs to be done and how. Others consider that to be the mentoring process. Let’s spend some time on what these two areas are about.

Coaching, from the business standpoint is a professional field, a helping profession that has emerged in the last 15-20 years as an actual career around the globe. Professionals go to school to learn, train, and study to be a business coach, to practice coaching (more distinctions for coaching later). Some coaching professionals have entire businesses dedicated to this field. Given that coaching is a relatively new field, it grants distinction from other professions, mainly from consulting, therapy, and from sports coaching.

- *Coaching vs. consulting.* Coaching is a form of consulting, but the coach stays with the client to help

implement the new skills, changes, and goals to make sure they really happen. Many consultants are acquiring coaching as a new set of abilities and skills to work with their clients.

- *Coaching vs. Therapy.* Coaching is not therapy. Coaches don't work on "issues" or get into the past or deal much with understanding human behavior and feelings generated from childhood. We leave that up to the client to know and figure out while we help them move forward and set personal and professional goals that will give them the life they really want.
- *Business Coaching vs. Sport Coaching.* Coaching includes several principles from sports coaching, like teamwork, going for the goal, being your best. But unlike sports coaching, most professional coaching is not competition or win/loss based. We strengthen the client's skills vs. help them beat the other team. It's win/win.

In the agriculture sector, coaches are needed now, particularly for the leaders of organizations (owners, managers, supervisors) for eight specific reasons. Coaches:

- Help adults manage change effectively
- Develop leadership of expanding businesses
- Sustain self-confidence, esteem, hope
- Support people organizational systems that work
- Provide on-going training in specific skills
- Model collaboration and consensus building
- Elicit core values and commitments
- Tap genius and wisdom

A coach anchors the client, or "coachee," to his/her current values and passions (what's most important to them) to evoke the energy to perform well in the current chapter of life, equipping the person with tools to navigate through changing environments.

Coaching must be an integral component of developing supervisors from within and promoting workers to management positions. Simply put, coaching is the process of intentional conversations and interactions between managers and employees that brings out the best in people. There is a natural sequence of key actions a manager can follow when coaching new supervisors, and coaching his or her employees. They can be summarized in ten coaching steps, as described by Gerard Egan and practiced by hundreds of coaches around the world:

1. Identify an opportunity to help someone expand on his or her skills, knowledge, and abilities – attend to the person's story.
2. Listen intently, mirror back—confirm that the person is ready for coaching. Ask questions and offer information to clarify the situation.
3. Practice empathy, validate the person.
4. Formulate hunches (identify the issue at hand, where the person's real opportunity is).
5. Ask searching questions; seek to broaden perception.
6. Challenge, confront the person (particularly on ways of thinking about self).
7. Engage the client in vision and purpose (What would this look like once we move forward?).
8. Develop new scenarios. Help the person identify possible actions.
9. Plan and rehearse plan —seek commitment. Gain agreement on a course of action.

10. Follow-up, network, re-evaluate plan. Offer your support.

New supervisors tend to get side-tracked and out of focus when transitioning into new roles, and many times cannot quickly redefine themselves and unlearn old habits to be effective in the new positions. A new manager, Roberto, had been promoted at a herd in the Central Valley of California we were working with. Realistically, it took the dairy about three months to transition this new manager. In the new role he reported to the general operations manager. He was promoted because he had good interpersonal skills and had been with the dairy for several years. One of the challenges he faced was his tendency to rush through work and focus on completing assigned tasks, not paying attention to quality. When he moved up to a management role, he was aware of this weakness and the general manager and owner were also aware. They tried to support him in changing that behavior, and he just could not shake it off, he could not manage around this. It was one of the major aspects ownership considered when he had to be demoted, almost a year after the promotion, because there was too much at stake for quality of work and the goals of the dairy. In this example, we might say a rudimentary form of coaching was implemented, not very effectively, particularly because it was not very intentional to begin with. After the promotion, ownership worked some with the new manager, offering support, sending Roberto to a two-day people management class, and trying to support the decision, doing what they thought he needed. Roberto might have benefited from someone internally in the dairy spending intentional time with him to develop him and support him with more effort, or he could have benefited from working with an external coach.

When it comes to working with managers and supervisors in a coaching effort, the coach should possess some critical skills, as identified on Table 2.

Out of all of these skills, listening and tending to the person is probably the most critical of all. In a coaching relationship, respect and trust must be established from the get go, which give the coachee the confidence that it is OK to proceed. Listening helps the new supervisor get it all out in the open so that it can be dealt with.

Table 2. Skills coaches possess that are values by their coachees/clients

▪ Committed listening	▪ Uncovering blind spots
▪ Likes to contribute to others	▪ Calling forth values and commitments
▪ Promoting learning that transforms	▪ Collaborating for the win-win
▪ Agile/fierce conversationalists	▪ Building new skills and capabilities
▪ Challenging interpretations, status quo	▪ Creating breakthroughs
▪ Motivating, respecting, and trusting	▪ Moving to action plans to produce results
▪ Supporting	▪ Building shared understanding
▪ Stretching the client	▪ Facilitating
▪ Observing	▪ Adding value
▪ Giving feedback	▪ Discovering unseen possibilities
▪ Renewing	▪ Forward action, goal-oriented
▪ Inspiring – focusing on strengths	
▪ Raising the bar	
▪ Creating future scenarios	
▪ Increasing awareness of choice	

Coaching helps explore possible future-oriented scenarios, develop visions of a desired future, connect realistic goals and actions to those visions, and help people move forward by keeping them accountable and responsible to what they want. Coaches challenge, encourage, motivate. Coaching is not about fixing something or somebody, but about understanding a person's story and desires, and helping them develop. There are different areas of specialty within the coaching profession (e.g., leadership coaching, performance coaching, life coaching, couples coaching, spiritual coaching). For the needs we see in the agricultural industries, businesses should consider

the professional services of a leadership coach, or a performance coach. Optimally, these coaches would offer services in English and in Spanish, given the number of Ag businesses employing Hispanics.

“Stewardship – Willing to be accountable for the well-being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control, of those around us.”

– Peter Block

When putting coaching and mentoring right next to each other, we consider them to be professionally different, even though they share some similarities.

Mentoring is derived from the Greek word meaning enduring, and is defined as a sustained relationship between a rookie and a more experienced person. Webster’s defines a mentor as an experienced and trusted friend and adviser. Through continued involvement, the mentor offers support, guidance, and assistance as the mentoree maneuvers through transitional or difficult periods, faces new challenges, or works to improve and develop. The use of mentors can play a critical role in organizational systems where support is either unavailable or unable to provide planned guidance for workers. The two types of mentoring are natural mentoring and planned mentoring. Natural mentoring occurs through friendship, collegiality, teaching, and counseling. In contrast, planned mentoring occurs through structured programs in which mentors and participants are selected and matched through formal processes. In the agricultural industries there is experience with both natural and planned mentoring. From our experience, when left to a natural process, mentoring programs vary greatly in quality and effectiveness, mostly due to lack of accountability, planning, focus and overall intentionality.

In the case of developing managers from within, a natural match exists between the owner or operations manager and the incoming new supervisor, since these individuals have likely held those positions before. Mentoring in those cases involve a fair amount of showing and guiding the individual, with some coaching opportunities here and there. But most of the absorbing the new supervisor is doing about what, why, when, and how of his new roles and responsibilities will likely be delivered by a person higher in the organizational structure, by a “this is how I have done it myself” approach.

Mentoring programs have grown dramatically in popularity in recent years. This popularity results in part from compelling testimonials by people—mentorees and mentors alike—who have themselves benefited from the positive influence of a more experienced person who helped them in particular areas of challenge or growth.

Mentoring programs are established to match a suitable experienced or mature adult—the mentor—with a person in full development. Appropriately matching mentors with mentorees should be at the heart of all programs. Matching can be done formally and informally through interviews, personal profiles, comparative interest inventories, and get-acquainted sessions.

New and incoming supervisors desperately need some support, which a mentor can provide in an effort to stay focused, pay attention to the tasks at hand, and not get inundated with a multitude of distracters that can impact the person tremendously in the early part of their appointment.

Succession planning, a foreign term?

Forward thinking organizations today are going through a process called succession planning, to assure that people are being developed to take on management/supervisory roles and employees that leave or are let go can be

replaced by someone in the organization. This requires that the ownership and management of the enterprise get together at least once a year and discuss every employee, from the standpoint of performance and developmental opportunities. During these sessions, more time can be spent on those people that have indicated interest in more responsibility and/or those that management and ownership consider are good candidates with abilities for a supervisory role. Succession planning basically boils down to knowing or having an idea who will replace the current managers or supervisors, fulfill new management roles, and fulfill different roles, may the need arise. This process requires identification, conversations and development of these people, and not waiting until the day the need arises to do something about it. If you were managing a professional football team or a basketball team you have your seedings, your minor leagues, your bench of people who are coming up through the organization and one day will play in the front lines.

Conclusions

The need to develop supervisors from within will continue to grow in agricultural industries, particularly the dairy industry. Owners and managers of these enterprises should explore a process that works for their operations to develop people to supervisory positions. In all likelihood these new supervisors will need to learn or refine people management skills. As the agricultural enterprise expands and the worker pool grows, the gap between owners and workers becomes wider and wider, deteriorating the communications and other aspects of people management. Developing employees from within to supervisory positions can help narrow this gap. Coaching and mentoring programs need to be strongly considered as support systems that help the new supervisor be successful in their

new venture and be effective in producing results for the business.

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