

Helping Workers Acquire Skills



Hiring the right people for the job can substantially reduce the total amount of required training time. Even so, farm supervisors are often likely to find themselves training, mentoring and coaching employees. Some of these tasks may be delegated to a third party. Most workers enjoy a job where they can continually expand their technical and interpersonal skills.

Training needs may become apparent through (1) employee selection data; (2) review of employee performance; (3) worker skill, ability, and knowledge inventories; (4) introduction of new work methods or machinery; (5) planning for future vacancies or promotions; and (6) laws and regulations requiring training. It helps to plan ahead and provide training opportunities to employees who may

apply for future job openings. In this chapter we will discuss two types of skill transfer. The first focuses on training and the second on coaching and mentoring.

EMPLOYEE TRAINING

The first step in designing training is to translate an apparent need (e.g., introduction of new piece of farm machinery) into clear, specific learning objectives (e.g., after training, equipment operators will know how to service and operate machinery safely). Some objectives may be more quantifiable, such as “95 percent of fruit picked will meet packing grade.” Provisions for evaluating how well training objectives are met should be established from the outset.

You will want to identify any gaps between employees' present competence and the training objectives. Lack of assessment up front may mean repeating information workers already understand. Even more likely, trainers may err by assuming employees know more than they do.

Simply asking employees if they have the skills needed to carry out a particular task may elicit a less than truthful response. Some may not want to admit ignorance in order to avoid embarrassment; others realize that the request entails a possible prospect for advancement. Assessment of worker competence needs to be conducted so workers perform independently, rather than lean on someone else's abilities. Opportunities for an employee to demonstrate practical skills should be provided without demeaning the worker or endangering her safety.

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Transferring knowledge and skill

The training process consists of (1) explaining and demonstrating correct task performance as well as the reasons for doing something a certain way; (2) helping workers to perform under supervision; (3) allowing personnel to perform alone; (4) evaluating worker performance; and (5) coaching employees based on evaluation results. These steps may have to be repeated a number of times before an employee will sufficiently grasp what needs to be done. Once an employee has mastered the required performance, (6) he can further cement his skill by coaching another.

There is an important difference between telling workers how to do a task and successfully transferring skills, ability or knowledge. Ineffective training may lead employees to remove much of the fruiting wood in pruning or



to destroy a dozen rows of young tomato plants with a cultivator. Some concepts are difficult to learn; others require much practice.

When training personnel you may want to: (1) continually assess workers' level of understanding; (2) gear training to the participants; (3) present only a few concepts at a time; (4) where needed, divide tasks into simplified components; (5) involve all workers (do not assume other employees will catch on by watching one worker being trained); (6) use visual aids (e.g., samples of defective fruit); and (7) encourage questions. As in any teaching situation, workers will feel more comfortable if the trainer is friendly, patient, and positive.

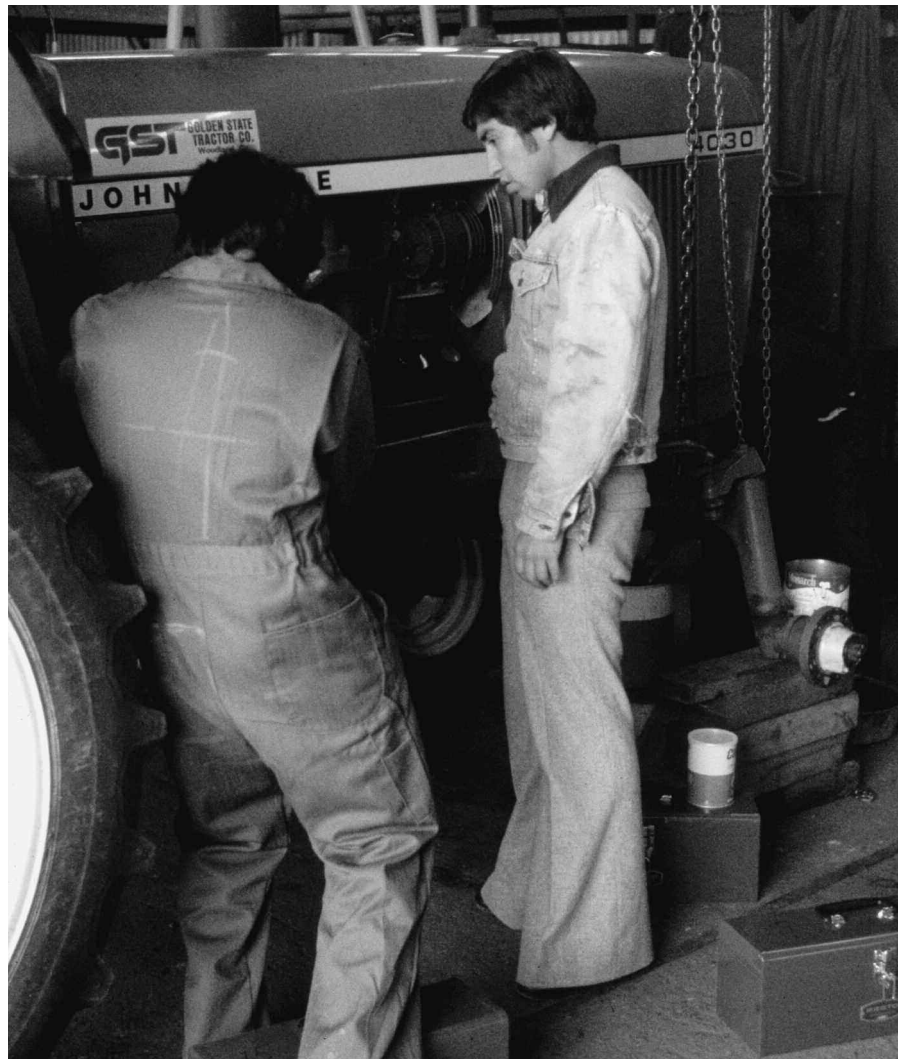
Employee participation in learning

While explanations and demonstrations are important in training, workers are more likely to retain information when they can put it to use. Unfortunately, this vital step is often eliminated because it requires time. It takes patience to watch a worker struggle with a task that comes easily to the trainer. Especially at the lower end of skills acquisition, teaching methods are more effective when they emphasize practice over theory.

Explanations should be limited in length and complexity. When showing a video (e.g., pesticide safety) you will want to encourage employees to ask questions—and be ready to ask questions of them, too. This way you can check for worker comprehension. As participants improve in their skill level, the introduction of theory becomes more vital.

Using an outside trainer or coach

Farm employers may sometimes prefer to use an outside firm to conduct training for their employees on the premises, or they may send their workers out for training. Those who often conduct training for farm employees may include pest control advisors, nutritionists, veterinarians, interpersonal communication specialists, product sales persons, farm safety



trainers, insurance carriers, and equipment manufacturers, to name a few.

Farmers need to be intimately familiar with the material covered in training sessions conducted by outside parties. Even better, a member of management would do well to attend the meetings. By doing so, it shows employees the subject is important, and it also affords management the opportunity to discuss sensitive issues raised during the training. An employee who returns from training may otherwise find she does not have the authority to implement concepts learned—or that the prescribed ideas may go counter to established company philosophy. One possible exception may be supervisor training, where front line supervisors tend to participate less when managers are present.

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SIDEBAR 5-1

Publicly Funded Training¹

A set of effective farm worker training programs was developed in California in the early 1980s. They were a component of the California Worksite Education and Training Act (CWETA).

Training was successful in the eyes of both farmers and workers because: (1) it served grower and worker needs; (2) workers “earned” the right to attend; (3) there was a good learning environment for participants; (4) there was a transition between classroom and work-site training; and (5) program outcomes went beyond better skill acquisition—interpersonal relations between growers and workers were also improved.

Match between farmer and worker needs. Instead of training people who may not be interested in farm work this program set out to improve the skills of workers already employed in agriculture. Farmers selected one to three of their employees each year for training. Farm employers agreed to either increase the workers’ wages or lengthen their work year upon successful completion of the program. Many traditional training programs have had no such relationship to the real world of employment. Training was offered at “down-time,” a time of the year when these employees had been laid off in previous years.

Workers “earned” the right to attend. Employees were flattered when nominated by their employer to attend training. Participants had previously qualified for the stipend they collected during the training program. This came from unemployment insurance benefits—something they would have received whether or not they participated in the workshops.

In contrast, more traditional farm worker training programs may form part of the public assistance cycle. Often eligibility is based on a record of prolonged unemployment and may attract people who need temporary help rather than career training. Such approaches may subtly encourage participants to stay on public assistance or prolong unemployment.

Good learning environment for participants. Classes were offered in a language familiar to the participants or were translated by bilingual aides. Farmers had a hand in selecting topics and learning objectives. Courses included welding, mechanics, English, practical math, and farm safety.

Teachers used *individualized instruction*. Performance tests were designed for each learning segment. A high standard of proficiency was set and tests could be retaken (a minimum score of 8 on a scale of 1 to 10 was demanded). Some participants would opt to redo a test when they got passing test scores that were anything less than a ten. Participants gained self-



SIDEBAR 5-1 (CONTINUED)

confidence through the positive reinforcement of tasks well done and an improved understanding of the material.

In contrast, when individuals do not have the opportunity to demonstrate skills and progress at their speed, training can be demoralizing. Giving away passing grades to students who do not deserve them only works to reduce their self-esteem.

Transition between classroom and worksite training. Workers knew where they would be using their new skills after the completion of classroom training. In addition, the program helped workers bridge the gap from classroom learning to specific farm applications and equipment.

Program outcome. Farmers and workers were pleased with the developed skills. One farmer had been skeptical about the training at first. After its conclusion, he had jokingly asked an employee to fix a farm implement while he took off for breakfast at the local diner. This grower was so delighted at the quality of the welding job, he gave the worker a large raise on the spot and thereafter substantially reduced his dependence on an outside shop.

Several farmers reported that participants showed increased initiative after completing the program, such as



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finding tasks to work on without being told. Farm employers and workers also reported better interpersonal relations when dealing with each other.

In contrast, workers in more traditional programs may have trouble finding or keeping jobs. In one traditional program a trainee quit his job when the farmer asked him to sweep the floor. This worker wanted to start out as a supervisor. Another abandoned his tractor in the middle of the night because “he got scared.” Some of these graduates preferred to find another source of government help or work independently so they did not have to pay taxes.

There is a fine balance between participant involvement and presentation of new material. Some of us may need to fight the tendency of trying to cover too much material for the time allotted. On the whole, presentation of materials without increased participant involvement often fails to stimulate.

A publicly funded farm worker training program is described in Sidebar 5-1—you may have an opportunity for input into the design of such a program in your community.

A few words to instructors

In some way or another, we are all teachers. I have found that there is a fine balance between participant involvement and presentation of new material. Some of us may need to fight the tendency of trying to cover too much material for the time allotted. On the whole, presentation of materials without increased participant involvement often fails to

stimulate. Notable exceptions are very short presentations and extremely dynamic speakers. It is good to remember that people want to *discover*, not just be told. Equally unsatisfactory is engaging participant interest, increasing receptivity to learning, and then failing to deliver needed, useful information.

Many worthwhile books have been written on increasing participant involvement. We can continue to improve our skills by observing talented presenters, reading, and thinking about our teaching. Although sometimes painful, it also helps to evaluate our

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workshops and classroom teaching by looking carefully at suggestions for improvement. It is more useful to focus on what worked well, as well as what we can do better next time, rather than on how we performed compared to other speakers.

The sooner workers in a workshop have the opportunity to participate, the more engaged they will be in the presentation. Perhaps, because it will then not be *your presentation* as each person will take ownership over the learning process. There are a number of ways to involve workers in learning, such as through questions, cases, role plays and group activities.

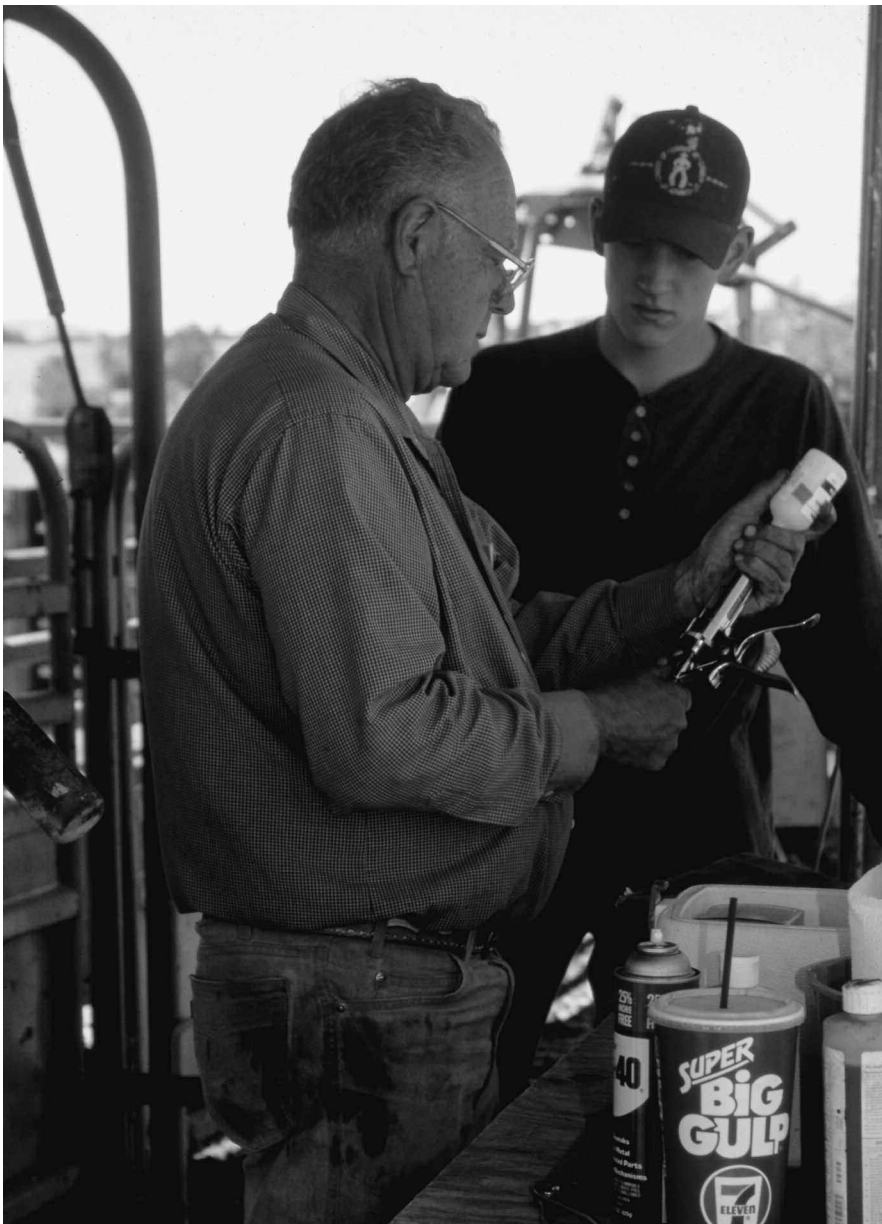
Well-crafted probes are an effective way of promoting discussion. Asking a question to the whole group is not as effective, however, in promoting participation, as having employees discuss an issue in small groups of 3 to 5 individuals. Small groups get everyone talking and involved.

I like short cases where a story is told, rather than a written case where participants read it and finish at different times. Perhaps this is because I am a slow reader myself. In one of my courses, we were given a case with an amusing line. People laughed as they got to the humor. By the time I laughed, I was far behind. Everyone looked at me, and we all exploded in laughter together.

After an oral case is shared, participants can ask questions and all have the advantage of having the issues clarified. After questions have been answered, workers can then sit in groups to solve or discuss the problem that was presented. A written handout can be given to support rather than to supplant the oral explanation. Longer and more complicated group activities can be very effective in teaching important principles to participants, especially those for which no satisfactory substitute can make up for lack of practice.

It is good to stop the activity before people are through discussing the issues, and while they are still having fun with it. A fatal mistake is to ask each group to report their findings, as there is unnecessary repetition. Much better is to ask for a few comments from *individuals* after the groups have disbanded, and then move on. While many people are hesitant to be involved in role playing, I have found that if the role playing is pertinent to real life or has "face validity," people will be much more likely to want to participate. In role playing, once again, I prefer to explain the situation aloud and coach my actors, rather than provide written instructions.

Finally, I believe that teaching through story telling is effective. Participants can help draw out lessons from life experiences.



COACHING AND MENTORING EMPLOYEES

In the literature, *mentors* are sometimes distinguished from *coaches*. While both may work one-on-one with individuals, mentors have a considerably greater time investment than coaches. Mentors² help others through the political process of recognition and career advancement by providing exposure to the organizational culture while offering protection and friendship.

Mentors may act as counselors, personal trainers or advisors and may also be responsible for passing on subject matter knowledge, skills and abilities. Mentors also model desirable behaviors that employees can imitate. In practice, the differences between mentors and coaches may be subtle or a little artificial, being just a question of degree.

For our purposes, we will define coaching as a shorter term mentoring type of behavior. *Mentoring behavior* can take place between people with a large gap in knowledge and understanding, or between coworkers who perform essentially the same work and have similar backgrounds and preparation.

People have different attitudes about helping others. Those who benefit from another person's help may carry a sense of gratitude or obligation towards that individual and toward society in general. For instance, a herd manager who obtained help from the veterinarian in improving her artificial insemination skills may not be able to return the favor. Later, however, she may be able to pass this skill on to someone else.

Some experts thrive on feelings of distance and superiority. *Mentors*, instead, receive enormous joy in passing on what they have learned. Some look for people they feel will be capable of matching or surpassing their own skills. In this way they (1) help others; (2) transmit knowledge and skills to those who will not only appreciate them, but also pass them on; and (3) enhance their own reputation along the way.

Many mentor relationships form informally. In Chapter 2 we discussed the importance of assigning an official mentor or coach as part of the orientation period. We said that if the farm employer does not take proactive steps to show a new employee the "way we do things around here," then someone else may do so, thus failing to take advantage of the time when an employee is most pliable and easily influenced. There are other times when an employee may become especially pliable, such as during a performance appraisal or period associated with employee discipline.

A coach or mentor can discuss with an employee ways of looking at the world that can make a big difference in her life. An ideal coach or mentor (1) is *not easily threatened* by an employee who becomes successful, (2) has a high tolerance for the employee *trying different approaches*, and (3) encourages the employee to *take initiative* in terms of how much and at what rate to absorb new information.

Mentor-apprentice relationships are not free of difficulties. At times, the mentor continues to consider the *protégé* a beginner long after the student has started to make valid contributions of his own. Often, mentors dislike having their *protégés* surpass them. Competition may develop between the two, resulting in a disruption of the relationship while new roles are established.

Perhaps one of the most difficult mentoring relationships at the family farm is that of a parent of adult children interested in the business.

So, what types of specific advice might a mentor and coach give? Let me illustrate with a few examples. In one situation, an employee had a problem with anger and with weak interpersonal skills. Much in this area of interpersonal skills, the coach pointed out, has to do with the ability to disagree without being disagreeable. Coming across a little more tentative and a little less self-righteous is an important part of effective interpersonal communications (Chapter 18).

In another case, an individual had been hired because of a number of positive traits, yet these were not being manifested at work. The employee's supervisor thought that she had been very clear on what was expected of this individual and was now ready to terminate him. A cursory examination of the correspondence between the supervisor and this employee showed that a person would have had to do much *reading between the lines* to understand what the supervisor had really wanted. Nevertheless, the difficult situation that had developed was not all the supervisor's doing. The employee had demonstrated poor time management, lack of follow up in terms of dealing with people who brought in jobs, and insufficient initiative. Furthermore, the employee had shown a marked negative attitude toward work.

Some of these behaviors may well have been a result of frustration and lack of job satisfaction. The employee and his assigned coach met for a little over an hour. They discussed each of the specific performance-related behaviors mentioned above. The role of the coach was partly to help the employee see the challenges being faced in a different light; to become excited for the possibilities of what life and work could offer when viewed with the right degree of optimism.

The coach also discussed some practical matters. While in an *argument* it is not admirable to have the last word, in *business communication* it could be essential. The coach suggested that when a job was brought in, that the employee should (1) acknowledge that he had received the assignment; (2) let the appropriate person know by when he could have the job done if no due date was given; (3), let the pertinent individuals know immediately what challenges he was facing and give a new projected deadline if it became increasingly evident that a deadline could not be kept; and (4) let people know when assignments had been completed.

Sometimes employees do not realize that in every job they have a *clientele*, even if those persons are all in-house.

For instance, a shop mechanic can think of those who bring her broken-down equipment in need of repair as her clientele. Job satisfaction develops from keeping clientele pleased through high quality and timely work (i.e., the *service factor*) and the ability to learn on the job (i.e., the *growth factor*). If a mechanic succeeds in having people not bring work into the shop, this job soon becomes an easy one to eliminate.

The coach, when meeting with the employee, also spoke about having an *attitude of gratitude* about work, and about being cheerful and positive about work, rather than the sometimes prevalent attitude: "I can't wait for the weekend." Within six months, this young man became a valuable team player whose help was sought frequently in that organization.

In my farm supervisory training workshops I sometimes share a personal story about *being cheerful*: The year after I was married I was having trouble making ends meet. It was important to me that I provide a living for my young family and that my wife not work outside the home. I had two jobs, one with Migrant Education for about 35 hours a week; and I taught dressage (equestrian sport) on Saturdays. One afternoon, I went looking for additional hours of work and had two potential job offers, but neither would start for a week. I continued to look, and stopped at a Mexican restaurant where I asked if they had a job. "What can you do?" they inquired. I let them know I was willing to do anything they wanted, to which they responded, "We need someone like that," and they assigned me to do the dishes.

That was a great job! I love Mexican food, and the cook would make me a Mexican dish each night. A few months later, the owner, a Mexican-American attorney, came back to where I was washing the dishes and essentially said, "Gregorio, you are so cheerful back here doing the dishes. I have a job for you up front."

I followed him, full of excitement, daydreaming in my mind, "Wow, I will get to wait tables!" When we got to the front we stopped by the cashier box. The



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owner took out the keys from his pocket and said, "You are now the new manager!" He spoke for a few minutes after that, but I was so taken back I don't know what he said. When I came home and told the story to my wife, she said, "Only in America!" The anecdote has many points, but two key ones are (1) you can make your job and life what you wish to make out of it, and (2) you never know who is watching.

Beside the sheer long-term and unselfish service, those who are good mentors (1) have paid the price over the years to hone their own skills, (2) are creative and independent thinkers, and above all, (3) are positive motivators, choosing encouragement over criticism; confidence over doubt.

Through the *Negotiated Performance Appraisal* process (Chapter 7) we will discuss how this mentorship and coaching can become institutionalized in the organization. Supervisors help employees learn and discover more about their jobs and responsibilities while giving them guidance and a shared vision toward excellent performance.

SUMMARY

Part of an effective training program entails identification of training needs. Hands-on training is generally more effective than more passive methods. There is an important difference between telling workers how to do a task and successfully transferring skills. Coaching and mentoring are important tools that can be used in an organization, both formally and informally, to help individuals achieve their potential.

CHAPTER 5 REFERENCES

1. Billikopf, G. E. (1982, March). A Win/Win Situation. *California Tomato Grower* (p. 14).
2. Bass, B. M. (1990). *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications* (3rd. Edition) (pp. 833-836). New York: The Free Press.