

Agricultural Entrepreneurship Coaching Guide



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Introduction to Coaching

Just as sports coaches assist athletes in developing to their full potential, so you, as an agricultural entrepreneurship coach have the task of guiding would-be (and present) farmers in developing pro-active, sustainable agricultural ventures. You are responsible for training agricultural producers to re-focus part of their time from an emphasis on “production... production...production” and *fighting fires*. This modification will take place as you assist them in analyzing their current activities, instruct them in pro-active business development skills and provide encouragement as they “do the work.” Because farming is not just an occupation, but more often a lifestyle, you are also responsible to guide of the producer in family life considerations – exploring with him/her how a chosen path will affect personal lives and relationships. Therefore, your roles as an agricultural entrepreneurship coach will be many and varied, most certainly requiring you to “wear some of the following hats”: instructor, assessor, friend, mentor, facilitator, tour guide, demonstrator, adviser, supporter, fact finder, motivator, counselor, organizer, and planner.

You will notice that, in the description above, it was never mentioned that you would actually be **conducting** the business of the farm. Have you ever seen a coach get out on the sports field, and take over the play for his/her athletes? Of course not! The athlete’s job is to listen to, and apply the instruction, advice, motivation, etc., from the coach and win the game. So you will find the same in your coaching responsibility – talking, prodding, reminding, (inwardly) shouting and (hopefully) cheering from the sidelines as your farmer “takes the ball and runs with it.”

This manual provides key points in how to make the coaching process a successful one – for you, and for the farmers with whom you will work. It establishes the tone of your relationships -- not only with agricultural entrepreneurs, but also as you and your client collaborate with Extension, agri-business service providers, and State/Federal agencies so that the practicalities of production may successfully combine with their entrepreneurial vision.

But enough theory – it’s time to discuss what you need to put into practice. You’ve received your coaching assignment. It’s spring tryout, and there are a number of likely rookies (farmers) waiting in the wings. Are you ready? What do you need to know? How much time will you need to invest *going over the playbook*? With a lot of ground to cover, let’s get started.

Preparation to Coach Farmers

It is not necessary to have a specific type of experience or skill to be a good agricultural entrepreneurship coach. Effective coaches come from varied walks of life – they may be successful retired farmers, economic development professionals, Extension educators, Small Business Development Consultants, etc., but with all coaches should have one thing in common – a passion for working with agricultural producers to see visions of sustainable, profitable ventures become reality.

Just as you will advise your clients to do, the preparation for taking on this responsibility is to take stock of your resources – what/who you know, and the skills you have developed.

If you are new to farm business development, you may find that the ability to coach well will not happen overnight. Initially, begin to look at the agri-businesses in your community – what is happening in the farming sector (both positive and negative)? Are there rising consumer or industry trends to be capitalized upon? Are there concerns or problems that many farmers share? Talk to some farmers to find out what they are doing that seems to be “working,” and what seems to cause a struggle. Read articles about farm ventures in the newspaper, and in publications like “Farm and Ranch Living” and “American Small Farms.” These resources tend to illustrate successful farm ventures – a model for the experience you want for your clients. Keep in mind, though, that farms in different parts of the country may operate very differently, and check with other coaches on your team to make sure that interesting enterprises that you can find would translate well to farming in Maryland. Making arrangements to “tag along” with a seasoned entrepreneurial coach – so that you can learn how to encourage, support, and guide a farm family – may be a necessary part of your preparation. This process – often referred to as mentoring – is a great way to move forward to coaching in your own right. Even as you begin to work “solo,” you can use your former mentor as a sounding board for ideas and questions about coaching, and to adopt some of their coaching styles and skills into your own “bag of tricks.”

If you are not new to agricultural education, you may have to search your own mindset for any prejudices that you have. A common example is the widely-held skepticism toward organic production. When working in the past with a seasoned farmer, you may have eliminated transition to organics as an option, because of the lead-time needed to convert a conventional field. This option often appears to be “too time consuming in relation to the anticipated profit margin,” for farmers who already have a long-term agricultural venture underway. However, as you approach smaller and start-up farms, the growing trend of consumer interest in how and where food is produced will signal that organic production might be a valuable market niche for

your client to consider. Organic production is meant only to be an example – as a coach, you may come to realize that you have pre-conceived opinions and preferences about “what farming should be,” that will need to take second seat. Instead, you must allow the farmer to explore and decide what he/she will grow, produce, add value to, direct market, etc. with you as a sounding board for this process.

For all coaches, life-long learning – in, and beyond, the scope of agricultural entrepreneurship – is a must! Reading books about communication skills, productive meetings, and such topics as local foods, direct marketing and small business development will increase your mental resources, enabling you to respond to what you hear, with the appropriate questions and observations to make your coaching experience successful for both you and your clients. The following is a “starter list” of helpful resources you might consider exploring:

- *Death by Meeting*. Patrick Lencioni (designing meetings for the appropriate purpose)
- *Flight of the Buffalo*. James A. Belasco and Ralph C. Stayer (importance of delegation)
- *How Full is Your Bucket?* Tom Rath & Donald O. Clifton (providing positive reinforcement in relationships)
- *Once Upon a Cow*. Camilio Cruz (getting rid of “sacred cows” for necessary growth)
- *Purple Cow*. Seth Godin (the importance of being truly remarkable)
- *The Dream Manager*. Matthew Kelly (helping people verbalize and realize their dreams)
- *The Fred Factor*. Mark Sanborn (going the “extra mile” to provide extraordinary services)
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Stephen R. Covey (for a proactive mindset and listening skills)
- *We're in this Boat Together*. Camille F. Bishop (intergenerational teamwork)
- *Winning with People*. John C. Maxwell (cultivating strong, exciting relationships with others)

If you want to know more about local foods and small scale farming ventures, check out:

- *Backyard Market Gardening*. Andy W. Lee and Patricia L. Foreman (small scale produce production and sales)
- *Sell What you Sow!* Eric Gibson (guide to innovative produce marketing)
- *Sharing the Harvest*. Elizabeth Henderson with Robyn Van En (guide to Community Supported Agriculture)
- *The New Farmers' Market*. Vance Corum, Marcie Rosenzweig & Eric Gibson (guide to setting up, selling at, and managing a community farmers' market)
- *The Organic Farmer's Business Handbook*. Richard Wiswall (business practices for small vegetable operations)
- *The Town that Food Saved*. Ben Hewitt (local foods re-framing an economy)

Resources for Coaching Sessions

The integrity of the agricultural entrepreneurship coaching project will rest on the consistency and reliability of information shared with farmers. While having assistance tailored (to an extent) to the individual needs of clients is important, much of the information upon which the decisions will be made should be standardized throughout the coaching team. A central source of resources for coaches to use is found at the Rural Enterprise Development Center web site:
<http://www.mredc.umd.edu/index.html>

This site contains a multitude of links that cluster around the following topics:

- Entrepreneurship tools
- Explore enterprises
- Distance learning library
- Get connected

Within the *Entrepreneurship tools* pages are a number of articles, self-evaluation tools, podcasts and additional links that assist start-up and established entrepreneurs through the Dream-Plan-Implement process. Also within this section is a down-loadable *Farm Business Planning Workbook*.

The *Explore enterprises* pages include a set of links and articles related to the following:

- Agri-tourism
- Alternative Livestock
- Aquaculture
- Forests and Natural Resources
- Grapes
- Horse Boarding
- Mushrooms
- Organic
- Specialty Vegetables
- Trees and Small Fruit
- Urban Agriculture
- Value-added Marketing
- Value-added Products

Because the resources are not just from University of Maryland, but from many other land grant and governmental sites, a fairly comprehensive set of start-up materials can be provided

to farmer/clients who are starting their exploration of a new agricultural venture. In addition, this section of the web site offers many resources for the entrepreneur who is aiming for a traditional agricultural venture – field crops, nursery, livestock, dairy, turf, ornamentals, etc.

The *Distance Learning Library* offers a set of exclusive tools provided by the Maryland Rural Enterprise Development Center, University of Maryland Extension, which includes access to:

- A 30 minute self-assessment for farm business plans
- The Dream-Plan-Implement module (referenced in the Entrepreneurship Tools section above)
- The Food Processing Module (an overview of what it takes to begin commercial food processing in Maryland)
- MREDC Maryland Resource Map (a county-by-county guide to many local resources, agricultural marketing professionals, and UMD Extension county offices)

Recordings of the Agricultural Marketing Series Workshops, UMD Extension webinars, podcasts, PDFs of ***Processing for Profits - An assessment tool and guide for small-scale on-farm food processors*** and the ***Farm Business Planning Workbook***, as well as downloads of Business Planning Financial Worksheets (Excel) and a sample Agricultural Business Plan (PDF) are also available within this tab.

Finally, the *Get Connected* tab features the *MREDC Resource Map*, the opportunity to subscribe to mredc-alerts (timely notices concerning business and training opportunities), notices for upcoming University of Maryland College of Agriculture and Natural Resources Events, and a set of hot links to the various agriculturally-related publications/news services, serving Maryland residents.

It will be important for you to familiarize yourself with all portions of this site – and to return regularly to see what has been added and updated – so that you can suggest these resources as a “launch point” for your clients’ exploration of possible ventures and strategies.

When all coaches in the project use this as a central source of information and support to the farmers with whom they work, it will be relatively easy to transfer a specific client to another coach on your team (to better match areas of interest and strengths). There will be less confusion about the information and tools that have been recommended during the coaching sessions. Because all information in this site has been carefully screened for accuracy and consistency (and most sources are provided by the government or a land-grant university) there is assurance that the information provided to clients will be sound.

Goals to Make Coaching Work

Before charging straight into the agricultural round tables (and subsequent individual coaching sessions), it is necessary to set some goals for the project and look at some general adult educational guidelines. One would hope that the primary goal of the project would be:

EVERYONE SUCCEEDS!! (That includes you too, Coach)

At first, this seems to be an impossible aspiration. The U.S. Department of Labor & Industry's figures show that 34% of small businesses fail within the first two years, and 56% have folded by year four. So, how can we say that everyone involved in an agricultural entrepreneurship coaching program will succeed? It is because success will **not** always mean setting up a new business venture (at least, not the one about which the client was thinking when he/she walked in the door). If, by answering your questions and doing research, a farmer is dissuaded from diversifying by raising a new crop or different animals, from beginning to sell to grocery stores or from making farmstead cheese (because any of these ventures do not fit his/her skill set, temperament, or pocketbook), that is success. If a farmer realizes that he/she does not want to spend hours in the kitchen, and decides to have a co-packer make pepper jam to sell at the all-producers market, that is success. What is really meant by success is that the farmer is 1) encouraged to vocalize, 2) listened to, 3) helped to envision realities and to do the necessary research about a selected agricultural idea, and 4) empowered to select the best route for him/her in developing a more sustainable, profitable, enjoyable farm venture.

Additional goals might include

1. Promoting better management of current farm resources.
2. Improving individual and family communication and collaboration skills.
3. Developing good attitudes, professionalism and a sense of how one's individual farm fits into the local, state and national economy.

As a coach, you should encourage not only research and decision making about the farm venture at hand, but development of attitudes that will carry into future endeavors -- team work, community relations, determination, honesty, pride, focus, concentration, commitment, and responsibility.

Many of your clients won't have years of experience in the types of ventures they are considering – and thus won't be able to articulate many of the aspects that need to be considered. To stimulate thought, experimentation and learning on the part of your clients,

you must learn how to formulate precise questions. These should be open ended questions (ones that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer). Because you are working with adult learners, the use of leading questions, rather than lecturing and providing “all the answers,” is preferable. The pages that follow give examples of the types of questions you may ask, to elicit certain facts, ideas, and emotions related to a farmer’s start-up or diversification plans.

Get used to the idea that, sometimes, there will be silence in response to some of your questions. This is not a sign that anything is wrong – it is (often) a sign that thought is taking place. That’s what you want – the objective of having asked the question, to begin with. It is only through ruminating, researching and informed selecting that a good match can be made between the entrepreneur and the venture. When you do need to convey a concept or a skill, try to keep the instructions or demonstrations brief, and then let your client “test drive” it – first in his/her mind, and then through a written feasibility study.

Your goal (i.e., informed decision making and adoption) will be reached sooner, if you commit to being organized, in your approach of each session that you have with your client – when you schedule a meeting with a farmer, make the time count. Delegate some responsibility (after the initial session) to the farmer – it may be completing an inventory of current assets, visiting an enterprise in which they have interest, or doing research in the library or on-line. If they can report back what they learned at the start of a subsequent meeting, it will help them to be invested in the idea (or willingly discard it) – and the time spent recounting what they have learned will allow them to reflect, as well as bring you up-to-date. In addition, fulfilling an “assignment” at the beginning of the session allows for mental transition from the everyday cares that were left behind on the farm, to attend your coaching session. There is also a practical aspect, beyond the psychological value of farmers researching and recounting their learning. The more tasks you can assign to each farmer, the larger number of clients you can coach during the same time period. Only coaches with a staff of undergraduate assistants at their disposal can work with more than a handful of farmers at once, if they do not delegate the exploration in this fashion.

If you do meet with the same producer for multiple sessions, consider adding value to your interactions – with the farmer’s permission, invite agri-business professionals (lenders or suppliers), Extension Educators versed in production practices, or experienced agricultural producers to sit in on specific sessions, to answer questions on the spot, and keep the momentum going. In addition to getting “instant answers,” having these guests contribute to the session will introduce potential advisors to your client. By assisting in the formation of a team of advisors for the individual venture during the coaching period, you will empower the farmer to eventually step away from your support, with a “safety net” of counselors who not only share expertise, but who will already be aware of the history of the agricultural venture.

Finally, be aware of the need to have farmers “graduate” from the coaching situation. Just as you will advise your clients to consider an “exit strategy” as they are planning their venture, you need to have an articulated signal for the “end of necessary coaching.” After three or four meetings with a farmer, come to an agreement with him/her what your working goal will be – that is, the achievement toward which the coach/client relationship is focused. It may be the development of a business plan, the adoption of a new marketing strategy/venue, or registration to begin making a value-added product. Give the project a time limit. Agree with the client that, should the goal be reached sooner than the deadline, your immediate coaching responsibilities are done. On the other hand, if the project does not proceed as quickly as hoped, you and the client will agree to discuss extending, re-framing, or ending the coach/client relationship as the situation dictates. This will ensure that your coaching of each farmer is successful – whatever the resolution – but that it does not exhaust extended resources that could be allocated to new, more promising projects.

In Coaching, Communication is Key

Most people like to be the “best they can be” at their work, their volunteer activities, and living life in general. It stands to reason, then, that you want to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to do your job as coach. How can you be sure you’re doing everything you can to be the best agricultural entrepreneurship coach possible?

It is true that not all coaches are created equally. Some coaches diligently put all the pieces together and some just don’t invest time developing the coaching skills that make a difference. To get a good start in being an effective coach, you first need to realize that it is not about lecturing and being the “expert,” but listening and talking effectively – and that means you need to focus on six powerful communication skills. These skills may be broken into two groups -- Verbal and Non-verbal.

Three verbal communication skills you must master to coach agricultural entrepreneurs are:

1) Consistency

Don't send the farmers who you coach mixed messages by telling them something today and then two weeks from now completely contradicting yourself. Remember that they are literally putting their financial future on the line with the plans that you will help them make – so they must trust the words that come out of your mouth. If you are not sure of an answer to a question, make a commitment to get back to the farmer with the answer – or assist him/her in identifying where to start researching to get the solution. If you did provide information and later learn that what you said was incorrect, own up to the error as quickly as possible, so that the venture exploration process can stay on track.

Just as important as what you say is the **tone that you use**. Some agricultural ventures take time, funding (and a bit of courage) to succeed – so that both you and your client will get weary in the attempt. Weariness of spirit often sparks tones of disillusionment. When a farmer has his/her energy and enthusiasm fade, it will be important that you, as a coach, continue to emphasize the goals and objectives – with an energy you often do not personally feel – to help get through an impasse and on to the success that you (and the client) hope to achieve. In many ways, you need to be not only a coach, but also a cheerleader, in this role.

Do not misunderstand -- your enthusiasm should always be genuine. If the farmer persists in aiming at a goal that just won’t work out, it is important for you to ask the leading questions that will help him/her to arrive at that decision. Some clients need to hear a message several times for it to sink in, so that they can decide to refocus toward a more profitable goal.

2) Honesty

Be honest with your client, and always in a positive way. When you can foresee mistakes being made, don't ignore them – but don't take charge of the project, either! Instead, ask honest questions of the farmer, intending to lead him/her to the conclusion that there is a "better" or "different" way of doing things. Try to catch mistakes when they are fresh and new – before much time, money and emotion has been invested. Many coaches might be tempted to gloss over a mistake-in-the-making (thinking that eventually the farmer will conclude that this was a "bad idea.") However, if you misjudge the timing and ignore the situation for too long, you'll lose your client's respect, making a continuation of the coaching situation difficult, if not impossible. By teaching the client how to correct mistakes in a positive way, you are teaching the farmer critical thinking – which will not only result in a sustainable agricultural venture, but entrepreneurial skill (of self-directed evaluation) that will far outlast your coaching sessions.

When pointing out a mistake, first identify good points about the direction that the farmer is heading in his/her plans, then say "and if you build on these key ideas, you'll get the type of business I've heard you say you want to have," rather than criticizing the entire project, and taking control to "set it right."

It is also perfectly fine to admit that you don't know how to proceed, when an impasse occurs – on those occasions, bringing in a trusted "third party," such as an Extension Educator/Faculty member who understands the production end of the venture, may break down the bottleneck and allow research and planning to continue.

3) Be Concise

Although your first encounter with an agricultural producer may be spur of the moment (at a roundtable or through an introductory phone call), you will need to prepare for the conversations that will take place at follow-up meetings or phone consults. Think through what you want to get across ahead of time – deliver your thoughts in a clear, concise manner. Have the necessary references and referral details in hand, so you can get to the point to keep the business evaluation and planning process moving. By modeling this "time is money" mindset, you will encourage your client to keep on track and meet his/her self-imposed deadlines. By valuing your client's time and his/her thoughts related to the business venture, you will receive respect as a coach – with the farmer soliciting your advice freely.

Do not confuse being concise with having little to say! It is the ability to put in a few words the information specifically targeted to the situation at hand that conveys that you are "in this process with" your client. Obviously, it is a careful balancing act – to say enough but not too much – to move you producer toward success.

There are **also three non-verbal communication skills** you must master:

1) Facial Expressions

The advent of conference calls and net meetings has resulted in a portion of what others are saying (through their expressions and actions) being lost. Since your coaching will initially be delivered in a physical meeting, be aware of how closely your client pays attention to what your face is "saying". Don't hide what you really feel with a fake smile or a serious blank stare.

Realize, also, that just a simple smile can do wonders for a person struggling with financial or production challenges on his/her farm, who is, as a result, unsure of how to turn things around to success. Show them that you're behind them, glad to be with them and there to provide support in their business planning process through a friendly, appropriate facial expression.

2) Body Language

Have you ever been in a meeting with someone who didn't want to be there? It is surprising how much a participant's negative appearance (scowling, repeatedly looking at the clock, etc.) can put a damper on the entire conversation. Without saying it, the message is quite clear – the "offender" would rather be somewhere else. Remember to present body language that represents enthusiasm, professionalism and character – a demeanor that says "you are my focus for this hour." When confronted with a client who exhibits negative body language, you should attempt to remain positive (or at least neutral) in the hope that they will begin to mirror your non-verbals.

Body language can also be used in the form of physical contact such as a pat, a handshake or an arm around the shoulder. If your personality is one that is more "touchy-feely," remember that others may have different personal space expectations. Until you know a client well, a small bit of physical contact can go far to show your clients the many emotions you feel about them - happiness, concern, approval, etc. If you are working with farmers from a different ethnic or racial group from your own, learning about the amount of physical contact expected and using this type of communication appropriately will result in a better coaching experience.

3) Listen

You may have heard it said that you have only one mouth, but two ears – implying that you should listen twice as much as you speak. This is a coach's mantra. Listening well means paying attention to what a farmer says – and what he seems to be leaving out. By focusing on hearing (and seeing) your clients' verbal/non-verbal cues, you can respond with the right questions to fill in the information gap. Practice thinking of, and using, open-ended questions – ones that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." That will encourage your client to open up,

sharing his/her thoughts, dreams, and concerns. When these matters are put on the table, the coaching session can be truly effective in advancing the farm venture.

If you find yourself asking your client to repeat him/herself frequently, this is a cue that you need to work on more attentive listening. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey has designated the 5th habit as “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” He elaborates on this theme by indicating that most people have it the other way around – they seek first to be understood; they want to get their point across, ignore the other person completely, pretend to listen, and selectively only hear certain parts of the conversation or attentively focus on the words said, rather than really trying to grasp the meaning. He says that this is because most people “listen with the intent to reply, not understand.” By filtering everything through one’s own life experiences, or frame of reference, the listener runs the risk of prematurely deciding what the other person means before he/she finishes communicating.

Covey calls this faulty communication process “listening autobiographically,” and indicates that it will result in one of the following four responses:

Evaluating: You judge and then either agree or disagree.

Probing: You ask questions from your own frame of reference.

Advising: You give counsel, advice, and solutions to problems (without this being solicited).

Interpreting: You analyze others' motives and behaviors based on your own experience.

While it may seem to you that you’re just trying to relate to the client by drawing on your own life experience, very often, the real reason you’re listening is to find a way to reply, control, or manipulate the situation. In some situations, autobiographical responses may be appropriate, such as when another person specifically asks for help from your point of view or when there is already a very high level of trust in the relationship, but that will rarely happen in the coaching/client relationship (unless your relationship extends over months, or years, during which mutual respect and understanding has had a chance to build).

By striving for true communication – both in what is said and the non-verbal messages -- you will experience quicker understanding of your client’s wants, needs, and vision. You’ll be more quickly aware when a client is frustrated, upset, or unsure about a course of action, even though he/she’s trying hard to hide it. You’ll see how the client reacts to not only you, but to others brought into the counseling situation. This means you can be of greater help to the farmer, in your dual role of coach and cheerleader – in a genuine way that will get the concerns out on the table and dealt with, so progress can be made toward the business goals and objectives.

Attentive listening is a process that many people use to attain the true communication. It is conveyed to the client by your eye contact, your posture, and any gestures that you make as you speak, and as you listen. The acronym, SOLER, is often used by people just learning to be better listeners:

Squarely face the person

Open your posture

Lean towards the sender

Eye contact maintained

Relax while attending

Some individuals also use paraphrasing – that is, restating what one has heard, usually in fewer words -- as an attentive listening tool. The idea behind paraphrasing is to test your understanding of what you have heard, and communicate to the speaker that you are trying to understand what has been said. While this is a well-documented way of communicating, as Steven Covey points out (in the 7 Habits...), simply mimicking or rephrasing what was said should be used sparingly, since adults who are parroted constantly will eventually be insulted and close up. Instead, try to listen to both words and emotions (this can be done with practice) so that you can paraphrase in a way that says “I hear what you’re saying (and what you’re not) and I want to assist you.” For instance, a farmer who has just begun to sell his/her produce on the Mall in D.C. might come into a coaching session and say:

“After one month, I’ve had it! No matter how I arrange or price them, I can’t seem to sell my tomatoes!”

Simple mimicking would mean your reply would be:

“You have been selling produce in Washington for a month, and your display and pricing strategies aren’t succeeding.”

Better paraphrasing would be:

“Let me see if I understand you -- you’re really frustrated about not making the tomato sales you’d hoped for, in Washington.”

This option not only paraphrases emotions and words, but asks for confirmation that you are on the right track. If the client verifies that you have heard correctly, then you can begin to ask specific questions about the activities and the market stand – where the client’s booth is located in relation to direct competitors’, what different display strategies he/she has tried (and

how these strategies were selected), how the price compared to other vendors', how attentive he/she was to the booth/customers when they approached, etc. This process should ease the frustration (by cataloging all efforts) and identify acceptable future strategies to test.

The attentive listening handout that was received at the in-service training goes into the levels of listening activities in more depth, but the take-away is this -- being a coach requires good planning and organizational skills – before and during the meetings with your client. You need to be able to relate to not only the farmers you are coaching, but to the other coaches on your regional team, to get the best results possible for the farming operations that you are assisting. Good communications are the basis of relationship-building that will lead to successful decisions on the part of the agricultural entrepreneurs with whom you work, and ensure that you are the best coach that you can be. The following chapter provides several case studies, with general conversations/guide questions to provide a clearer idea of how the process really works.

Case Studies/Ag Entrepreneurship Coaching

The amount of time provided to an individual client, and the types of questions asked, will often be dictated by the experience level of the farmer, related to agriculture in general and the specific enterprise under consideration. The following case studies and sample coaching questions illustrate the most common situations for which a farm entrepreneur will seek assistance – start up, diversification of production (methods or what is grown/raised), and new marketing venues.

Initial interviews will start off with a kickoff question from the Coach. This question is designed to get to know the farmer, and what he/she has been considering, or working on, as an entrepreneurial venture. This question gives the basis for the coach/client relationship, so attentive, active listening is a must. As the response is given, you as the coach should stay focused – have a helper take notes, or if doing this solo, try to limit the number of times you glance at your paper as you write. The optimum situation will be if you can perfect the skill of writing and looking not at the paper, but at the speaker, as he/she talks). The notes should be limited to key words that will spark future questions as the coaching session progresses. Similar to a brainstorming exercise, this is not the time to pass judgment or be critical. Openness and friendliness, now, will be the basis of frank discussions in the future.

Case 1: Lifestyle Farmers

John and Jane Smith purchased a 25-acre “farmette” a few years ago, when they moved their family from the city. Originally, their focus was on getting their three children situated in school and arranging their commutes to the city to work, around soccer and t-ball schedules. That all changed when John’s company down-sized and he was laid off. He and Jane took stock of their resources and realized that raising vegetables, and selling them at the local farmers’ market, would be a great way to capitalize on the “buy fresh, buy local” trend. While John has never farmed before, his previous job was in sales and marketing for a retail chain, so he knows that he will definitely enjoy the days at the farmers’ market. As Jane was growing up, her family always had good-sized garden, so she has an idea of the time and effort that this will take. To learn more about small-scale vegetable production John reviewed many of the *Grow It, Eat It* videos available on the Internet from UMD Extension, especially the ones related to tomatoes, beets, kale and melons. The Smiths came to the roundtable session to learn how they could get started on this exciting venture!

Coach Kickoff Request: “Describe for me what you want to do on your farmette.”

The following notes were taken, each as a basis of exploratory questions:

25 acres	How many acres will you devote to your business?
Grow vegetables	What kinds of vegetables will you grow the first year?
Propagation info	How will you learn to grow the vegetables that you've selected?
Seed/plant source	Do you have ideas where you will purchase plants, seeds, supplies?
Work distribution	John, what work will you do? Jane, what work will you do?
Drought	What if there isn't enough rainfall to water the plants?
Disease	What will you do to reduce risk related to disease?
Pests	What will you do to reduce pest-related problems?
Producers-only market	Once you begin to have vegetables to sell, you've indicated that you plan to go to the producers-only market. Have you contacted the manager?
competition	How many other vegetable vendors will be at the market?
uniqueness	What will set you apart from the others selling vegetables?
start-up funds	How much initial money for seeds and supplies do you have?
Household finance	How many years will you invest, before this should finance itself?
children's schedule	What changes in family time will take place because of the venture?

This set of questions starts with the vision – and challenges the client to expand on what it will really look like, to start a venture like this one. The questions probe how much the client has already thought through, and researched, the idea – and answers suggest areas in which he/she need to do more research or thought. It will be important for the coach to share bits of information (like the fact that there should be a back-up plan – hand watering or trickle irrigation – in case it does not rain), names of “experts” to whom the client will turn to learn more about propagation (such as local agricultural educator), regulations (GAP and GHP certification, pesticide licensing, etc.) and specific on-line/paper resources that will enrich the client’s knowledge about this idea. Notice that (by intention) financial questions are held off till later in the discussion – as are the family impact issues, since these are more emotionally charged items that should be addressed only after gaining some rapport with the client. After sufficient discussion, during which John’s and Jane’s knowledge about the vegetable business

and what they have yet to learn has been uncovered – by their own words -- it would be appropriate to provide a copy of, or direct them to the web site to purchase, the NRAES *Farming Alternative: A Guide to Evaluating the Feasibility of New Farm-Based Enterprises* or NESFI's *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* workbook. Either will provide guidance on how to conduct a detailed feasibility study for a farm venture; you may have them “go it alone,” or assign certain portions of the workbook to be completed for future coaching sessions. A small percentage of lifestyle farmers will progress beyond the feasibility study (many will decide against investing their savings this way). However, if they do go on, this subset of possible clients will be, in general, one that will embrace business planning and other more “serious” entrepreneurial activities.

Case 2: Diversifying Farms

Ethan and Amber Allen inherited a 90-cow dairy operation from Amber’s parents nine years ago. Since they took over the operation, they have expanded it from the original 55 cows, begun to lease a number of fields to neighboring farmers in exchange for right of first refusal for the feedstuffs and bedding produced on those acres, and Amber has begun to raise calves as replacements (rather than buying bred heifers, as was done previously). Because Ethan is conscientious about herd health issues, they regularly receive premiums from the dairy co-op. However, they have heard about several farmers in other parts of the state who were part of a pilot program for farmstead cheese production, and they have come to the roundtable meeting to discuss the potential for making more money if they convert $\frac{1}{4}$ of their milk production to cheese, rather than continuing to sell it all to the co-op.

Coach Kickoff Request: “Describe your farmstead cheese idea to me – how would it fit in with what you are presently doing on your farm?”

Workload change	Who will have the most additional work, if you start this venture?
Training needed	What do you know about making cheese? What will you need to learn?
Milk retained	Have you talked to the co-op about pulling back $\frac{1}{4}$ of your production?
varieties produced	What varieties of cheese will you produce? Why did you choose those?
Cheese room	Where will you make the cheese? (note: they need a non-family kitchen)
Marketability	Where, or how, do you think you will sell the cheese?
Funding needs	How much money will you need? From what source will you get it?
Profitability	How long do you think it will be before you break even?

The initial conversation with the Allens will provide information about how they approach their dairy farming business, and be an indicator of their level of capability to pursue the value-added venture. If they have not discussed the matter with the regional office of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene - Office of Food Protection and Consumer Health Services - Division of Milk Control, that will be an important, initial step, since, except for a small pilot program, all value-added dairy products made in Maryland must be from Pasteurized milk. Also, there will be definite guidelines related to the production facility set-up for them to secure a Manufacturer Grade Processor license necessary to manufacture cheese – not being able to locate an appropriate site may be a deal-breaker for the Allens. This contact with DHMH would be the first assignment given to the Ethan and Amber, to be completed before a second meeting with the coach. Assuming the contact with the DHMH is encouraging, marketability of the cheese would have to be the second research area. Farmers' markets, local restaurants and caterers, etc. would each have their own separate issues to respond to, and resolve. Profitability will be the third area for Ethan and Amber to research – how much money will it take, to set up the cheese room and aging facility? How much income will they lose, by keeping a quarter of their milk on the farm for cheese making? (This question signals the need to talk to the milk co-op about the possibility). What are packaging and distribution costs? During this time, the “cheese maker” – either Ethan or Amber – will need to receive training to make cheese and also any generic food safety classes required. Finally, they should be guided through the *Farm Business Planning* workbook, to gather all pertinent data and formulate this business venture – regardless of whether they determine the need to get a loan for start-up or initial operating expenditures, or if savings will carry them through.

Case 3: New Marketing Options

George Brown has been raising and selling “freezer beef” through private sales for the past ten years. He has a good, established relationship with a USDA butcher shop to produce wrapped, frozen cuts of beef. Although this has provided an excellent additional source of income for his family, he has noticed that it is sporadic, as his long-term customers become “empty nesters,” and the rising generation is more acquainted with grocery stores than they are getting their meat fresh from the farm. Sales around the holidays are great – but there are fewer and fewer orders for a side of beef. Recently, George was talking to his neighbors, the Greens, the owners of *Greenstuffs CSA* (a community supported agricultural operation); their shareholder feedback indicates a significant number of people who would like to get a wider variety of food in their share – not just vegetables and some baked goods – but meat and cheese. George has come to the round table to learn how he might be able to capitalize on this opportunity.

Coach Kickoff Request: “Describe how your current freezer beef operation works. (then) How do you see the way this works changing, if you begin to supply meat to *Greenstuffs*?”

CSA Demand	How many current shareholders does the CSA have? How many pounds of meat per month will that require you to supply?
Herd Size	Will you be able to produce enough to meet this demand?
More Beef	If demand outdistances your herd size, what is your backup plan?
Butcher capacity	How do you know that your butcher will be able to increase quantity?
Neighbor relations	What tells you that this partnership with the Greens will go smoothly?
CSA Facilities	Does the CSA have a freezer to hold your meat, or will you supply one?
Transport	How will you transport the meat from the butcher to the CSA?
Time factor	How will the time demands of this enterprise fit in your schedule?
Profit/Money	When will you receive payment from shareholders? How much/month?
Adequate funding	Will this amount be sufficient to warrant the additional costs?
Downside?	What might be the challenges to anticipate and plan for?

Because marketing involves relationship building and production capacity, these are the two aspects that coaching should focus on with the client. While George desires a larger income from this enterprise (as most business people might), your coaching should assist him in visualizing what it will be like to raise the additional animals, transport them for slaughter and processing, and transport a quantity of meat every month throughout the CSA season. The initial conversation with George will provide information about how he has been able to manage the “freezer beef” operation thus far, and be an indicator of whether he has the time, production capacity, and conviction to work on this expanded marketing plan. It will be a time to explore his relationship with the USDA butcher shop; to have him clearly assess whether business dealings are working well with the butcher, now, and whether he can count on continued support for expanded processing. This is especially important in the current economic climate, where many small businesses (including slaughtering/butchering facilities) are going out of business. George relies on the butcher to stay in business and be able to process an increased number of animals for him to follow through with commitments to the CSA members. Relationships not only with the butcher, but also with the Greens, will be vital to the success of this venture. Exploring how much contact he has had with the Green family, and if he can see them as long-term partners will be important. Some conversations should take place between George and the Greens to determine if there will be any interaction between him and their CSA members (often, there are special events where subscribers come

to the farm for a meal, or a work day – will he be expected or encouraged to be there so they can meet the producer of their meat shares?) This type of interaction with the public will be very different from the types of contact George has had with the people who contacted him in the past for a side or quarter of beef. Some farmers will be energized by the opportunity to socialize; George should prepare himself for this type of activity.

The advance-payment aspect of CSA puts an added stressor on this project. If George receives payment for the entire season, or in installments, he will need to make sure that he, as the producer, can stand by the commitment of regularly providing frozen beef to all CSA members. He will have to purchase/lease a refrigerated truck to haul the quantities of frozen beef to the pick-up location(s) through the summer; he may have to supply a freezer at the CSA pick-up point to ensure that the meat stays frozen. These costs must be weighed as investments against the potential for income. To ensure that the fruits of these discussions are all used to their fullest, it would be appropriate to provide a copy of, or direct George to the web site to purchase, the NRAES *Farming Alternative: A Guide to Evaluating the Feasibility of New Farm-Based Enterprises*, or Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture's *Building a Sustainable Business*. By systematically using the worksheets in either publication, George can be confident that he has not missed an area of consideration; by using the latter (MISA) publication, you can guide him through the development of a business plan for this venture. Finally, if George has not already done so, he should be coached to set up this frozen beef venture as a business entity separate from his farm, so that any liabilities introduced by this increased distribution of meat will not put his entire farm at risk.

Coaching as a Team

Although the bulk of this guide has focused on the one-to-one relationships between the coach and the agricultural producer, it should be recognized that the strength of the project lies in the skills and experience of the diverse group of individuals who have been selected to take part in the larger project. Just as a football or baseball game is not won by one player alone, so the environment of the roundtables and subsequent sessions will be more successful if there is a natural interaction between members of the coaching team. Getting to know the strengths of other coaches, and how they complement your own skill-set will lead to the best support possible for the farmers seeking assistance.

In his book, *The FIVE Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni reveals that truly cohesive teams behave in this fashion:

1. They trust one another. *Because every functioning team must have trust as its center, you can be confident that the other coaches' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful when interacting with the group. By being willing to admit weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, and mistakes, as well as by making requests for help, the members of a team get beyond the usual political façades that waste time and energy. That time and energy can then be directed in a productive fashion, working together to support entrepreneurial farmers.*
2. They engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas. *Many people don't like to think of conflict as a part of working together. However, to ignore the fact that we don't all have the same opinion constantly is a mistake that limits the usefulness of teams. If your coaching team addresses differing opinions about the course of action that an individual agricultural producer should take, looking at the matter from all sides, then the coach who is assigned to the farmer can bring one or more well-thought-out options back to the client. When in "team mode," issues are discussed more quickly and completely with all opinions considered, the client will truly get the best support possible.*
3. They commit to decisions and plans of action. *By creating a group goal (such as that expressed earlier in this guide), and having everyone move forward in a unified fashion, regardless of how individuals "voted," the project can stay on track with all team members invested in making it work. It is important that everyone get a chance to express his/her opinion about what the goals and objectives might be – but equally crucial to the process that there be strong buy-in and support once the goal has been set (regardless of how individual coaches may have voted).*
4. They hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans. *It will be understood that, to guide farmers to a course of action that is right for them, there will*

be positive listening, assistance in identifying the appropriate sources of information and referrals, and a commitment to see the farmer to a successful conclusion of the coaching activity. If specific coaches struggle, they will be assisted and mentored by others on their team. When clients are referred to a coach who is more experienced in their type of enterprise, there will be a clear, concise, and purposeful change of personnel, with the reason clearly articulated. The team commits as a group that no one will ever “slip through the cracks.”

5. They focus on the achievement of collective results. *No matter how skilled and knowledgeable an individual coach is, the number of clients that he/she can support at a time is limited. By focusing not on what “I am doing,” but rather the total impact of the efforts of all team members, the coaching project will be perceived (by coaches, farmers and funders) as a wide-reaching initiative. Individual egos should not get in the way of effective coaching and referrals. The client’s progress and welfare is of prime consideration.*

In other words, for your coaching team to work toward the goal -- **EVERYONE SUCCEEDS!**-- you must be able to trust other coaches to “bring their best” into the situation if you make a referral, or if you merely ask them for advice about an aspect of the business idea your client has proposed. You must “agree to disagree” so that certain ideas can be discussed with candor and the best course of action taken. Deadlines that are promised must be honored, or explanation given for any delay. Finally, egos must be put aside so that the clients receive the best, collective guidance for sustainable results.

The one-day training session was designed to launch functional, successful coaching teams throughout Maryland. Coaches begin as individuals – bringing their experiences, knowledge, and skills to the team. Attentive listening allows for the farmer to control the process, and to buy in to the results of the relationship. Hearing what the farmer says will enable his/her coach to refer to others on (and outside of) the team so that the most informed decision can be made in relation to agricultural sustainability and profitability. Together, you can rise to the occasion and make a difference for Maryland farm families and the rural economies they support.

This *Agricultural Entrepreneurship Coaching Guide* was prepared by Winifred W. McGee, Senior Extension Educator, Agricultural Entrepreneurship, Penn State Extension. This Guide uses generic listening, teamwork, and sports coaching ideas from:

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. 2004. Free Press, New York, NY.

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