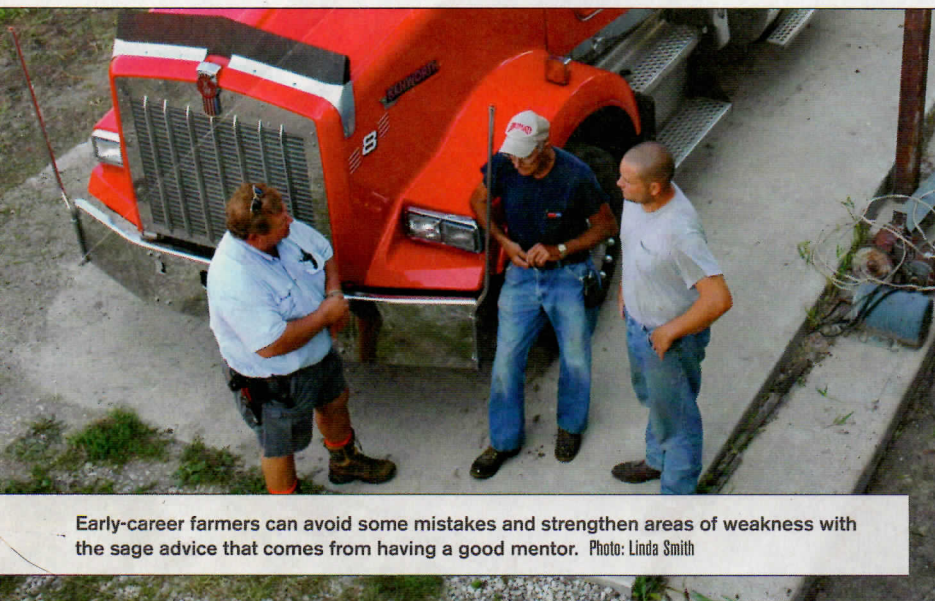


SAGE ADVICE

Mentor-mentee relationships offer endless value



Early-career farmers can avoid some mistakes and strengthen areas of weakness with the sage advice that comes from having a good mentor. Photo: Linda Smith

BY SARA SCHAFFER

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Jason Franck knows the benefits of a mentor go beyond what any balance sheet can calculate. For the past two decades, the Rowley, Iowa, farmer has learned a number of priceless lessons from his business partner and friend, Chris Barron.

Besides farming techniques and margin management, Franck has seen the benefits of Barron's patience and ability to motivate. "I've seen how his positive attitude affects others," Franck says. "I've applied a lot of those attitudes to my own life."

Today, Franck serves as a mentor to another partner, Chris Bass. Franck, Barron and Bass are three of 15 farmers in a unique partnership called "The FUN Group," which stands for Farmers United Network.

Bass joined the group with little knowledge of the industry, so Franck and others provided advice and input on everything from how to operate equipment to financial projections. "Chris (Bass) has a real innocence,"



Franck says. "He would ask questions that someone else, who has been around farming, wouldn't ask."

Bass' ideas make the entire group recalculate decisions. "We all get complacent, so it helps to have fresh ideas to challenge what we do," says Franck, who takes pride in steering Bass and the other young farmers in the group toward good decisions.

Mentors come in many different forms, says Dick Wittman, a farmer in Culesac, Idaho, and financial consultant. "More people are realizing the benefits of expanding their circle beyond the immediate talent base," he says.

For some, family members are available and happy to share advice. Family members know your history,

appetite for risk and work ethic, says Wittman. With a non-related mentor, you won't have those distractions that come from being related.

Wittman recommends using a mentor to help fill gaps on your farm. "If you're weak in marketing or human resources, look for a mentor who can help you develop those skills," he says. "If you struggle with finances, look for a retired banker who is patient and can coach you."

Find Your Advocate. Ilene Gordon, president and CEO of Ingredion Incorporated, a Fortune 500 company that makes sweeteners, starches and nutritional ingredients, says it's common to have several mentors throughout your life and credits much of her success to her mentors.

The perfect mentor should be a person who knows you well. "You need someone to be your advocate and to encourage and praise you for your successes," Gordon says. "But your mentor should also be strong and honest enough to tell you when you might need to change course."

Both mentors and mentees benefit from a strong relationship. Gordon says good mentors tend to be busy people, but not to let that discourage you. "Don't wait for a mentor to come around; you have to seek them out," she says. "Explain to this person that you value their perspective and you wish to consult their wisdom."

Once you identify a potential mentor, initiate a meeting, Gordon advises. Be sure to have a written agenda for the meeting that outlines what you want to accomplish so no time is wasted, Gordon says, noting that it's important to be sensitive to their time. **TP**



Get more tips for selecting a good mentor and read about other mentor-mentee relationships at www.TopProducer-Online.com/mentor.