Young Professionals Platform on Agriculture and Research for Development (YPARD)

THE YPARD PEER TO PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

"The notion of 2 and 2 being 22 and not 4 is my view to mentoring"

By Krishna Kaphle, Nepali/Canadian YPARD member- 2011

The Strategy

Grace Mwaura
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Contents

Background information

Mentoring is the passing on of knowledge by a more experienced, possibly older person, to a less experienced one, through enabling a better understanding, providing guidance and support. Mentoring focuses on the potentials of an individual (mentee), on their present needs and potential, and thus prepares them for leadership and success in future. It has a long history with its roots stretching back to the 8th century B.C. where it got its name from the elderly friend and counsellor of Odysseus, named Mentor, who also offered guidance and acted as tutor to Odysseus' son Telemachus[i]. It encompasses *coaching*[ii], making it unique and adding value to career growth and leadership skills of any individual.

Organizations, learning institutions, and businesses have continuously relied on mentoring to advance the capacity of their employees, invest in new inexperienced staff, prepare staff for promotion, and even more importantly prepare young professionals for employment/business. Research institutions have relied on mentoring and coaching to enable young inexperienced researchers gain skills, and experience on research work, writing, and publishing. Likewise, in leadership, aspirants seek mentors in the leadership who assist them acquire soft skills, and learn from their experiences as leaders.

Mentoring is desired as it identifies and improves areas requiring development in one's profession, provides access to expert guidance, supports continuous learning, and enhances productivity and teamwork. It takes different forms including, the widely used regular junior senior mentoring, e-mentoring, coaching, reverse mentoring, role modelling, peer mentoring, and invisible mentoring among others. Peer to peer mentoring model couples people of the same age group, providing them with an opportunity to learn from each other and advance their own skills and careers. Peer to peer mentoring focuses on sharing outstanding skills, capacities and strengths with a peer for the benefit of sharpening, improving and learning other new skills and capabilities. Unlike the regular junior senior mentoring, peer to peer mentoring is best used to demonstrate mutual and reverse learning between the two persons of the same age group. The model, whether formal or ad hoc, is a double-edged sword. Both mentor and mentee gain skills, knowledge and experience from a peer-mentoring programme: one is a mentor or mentee at any point in the program given the need at hand. Well-structured and guided peer-to-peer mentoring enables young professionals share their skills, develop and achieve their career goals in a better, directed and motivated way.

Most formal mentoring programmes have a specific focus on career, business, and leadership among other areas. Informal mentoring programmes evolve as one's needs evolve. However, they all address one common issue: identifying one's potential and forging ways of how to support this, acquiring new skills and especially soft skills from the subjects. Therefore, any mentoring relationship will start by the mentee identifying his/her needs, and commits to seek a mentor who can match his/her needs. The mentor also commits to assisting the mentee realize his/her goals and provide feedback to each other. It's a relationship that always has life changing impacts on both subjects, and each must be ready to learn something new.

For a long time now, agriculture has not been presented as an appealing career to most young people around the world. It is rarely packaged to attract young professionals seeking job opportunities and career advancements. Most young people view agriculture as the work of the uneducated people in the rural society. Most rural farmers, who include rural young people, participate in farming not as a career or source of employment, but as a source of just food for the day. The slightest opportunity to migrate to urban areas to look for white collar jobs is seized, and this has led to the intensification of urban social crimes due to high unemployment rates.

YPARD, the Young Professionals' Platform on Agricultural Research for Development (ARD) was conceived to however counter this challenge. It seeks to broaden the opportunities for young professionals to participate in ARD. The platform finds mentoring as one of the avenues to support members with expertise and networking opportunities in the field of ARD. Mentoring will not only interest the young professionals in ARD, but it will also provide them the opportunity to cloud source and take action on best practices. Mentoring helps unlock their potential and develop this human capital to effectively contribute to ARD in their countries, thus the YPARD Peer to Peer Mentoring Programme.

Goals

While traditional mentoring processes focus on the benefits derived for the junior mentor, from the experience of the senior mentor, YPARD is looking to promote a 2-way mentoring process which benefits both subjects who are possibly of the same age group. This programme, which has both coaching and mentoring components, will provide great opportunities for learning; effective questioning that brings insight, fuels curiosity, and cultivates wisdom and networking.

The overall goal of YPARD peer to peer mentoring programme will be to increase the number of young professionals seeking careers in ARD. This online mentoring programme will provide a platform for the young professionals to identify their potentials and forge ways of how to support each other, acquire new skills and experiences in the field of ARD.

The programme will aim at providing a platform for the young professionals to continuously interact with each, guide and support each other, and provide coaching on ARD issues and thereby influencing more young professionals become more engaged in ARD at different levels and capacities.

YPARD envisions an online peer-to-peer mentoring programme strengthened by a cluster of several peers who receive occasional coaching sessions on specific skills/areas. Coaching sessions will be facilitated by a more experienced senior professional in the field of ARD who will be identified by the peers in the cluster in conjunction with the YPARD mentoring Facilitator. The country/region based clusters will be further permitted to engage in activities or projects geared towards meeting their mentoring needs.

Justification

This programme is based on the need to replicate best practices and fill the gaps identified from various mentoring programmes that focus on ARD. It will also be based on the feedback gathered by YPARD during surveys carried out in 2008 and in 2011 on the membership needs. The main features of this programme will be the **self selection of the peer mentoring partner**, and **levels of commitment based on one's availability to mentoring**. The mentoring programme will also heavily rely on the **ability of the peers to effectively and regularly communicate with one another** and amongst themselves in a cluster and the larger network. It will thus provide an informal peer to peer mentoring platform and formal cluster coaching sessions for those participating in the peer to peer mentoring relationships. This online based mentoring programme, will provide a solution to gaps identified and

recommendations made during the desktop review of other mentoring programmes relating to ARD; these include:-

- Any mentoring relationship is firstly based on a **purpose**, which then follows, that the partners develop a learning agreement, with **expectations and timelines**;
- **Communication** in mentoring relationships is crucial. The ease with which the partners communicate should be enabled, inexpensive, as well as not time consuming. It should also provide for feedback sessions;
- The **selection of a partner should be by self**, but should be guided by the needs identified prior to deciding on joining a mentoring relationship. One can have more than one mentor/mentee as long as they meet their shared goals;
- Mentoring **timelines should be flexible** and decided by each participant; and
- The **sustainability** of the mentoring programme needs to be defined even before rolling out the programme.
- **Cluster coaching sessions** reduce the time the senior experienced persons spend guiding the juniors, thus reducing the rates of burn outs. An informal (but guided) peer to peer mentoring relationship, coupled with formal cluster coaching sessions is preferable for persons of the same age group; with different career goals; and in need of coaching in their careers.

Guiding Principles

The structure and components of this mentoring programme will be based on the following underlying principles:-

1. A guided informal peer to peer mentoring programme will be strengthened by a formal coaching of a cluster of peers (from the same country/region) by an experienced senior professional in an area that the peers agree on.
2. The participants will be added to the online network only after they have participated in a Needs Assessment Process, which helps assess their strengths and weakness, and 'identify what they bring and what they expect to gain from the mentoring relationship'. This will be through an application form that each prospective participant will fill in.
3. The mentoring relationships will start of after an online self matching of peers, development of learning agreements and setting of the timelines of the mentoring relationships. The learning agreement must include the expectations of each peer and other challenges that they hope to address through coaching sessions.
4. Peers in a cluster are encouraged, where possible to participate in YPARD programmes and projects or initiate their own projects relating to ARD where they can put into use the skills they have acquired from the peer mentoring and coaching relationships.

As well, the peers will be expected to observe other guiding principles when in the mentoring relationship which include:

> "*Open mindedness; Confidentiality; Professionalism; Time management; Honesty; Knowledgeable; Patience; Respect; Example based lifestyle; Desire to share; Devotion; Self discipline; Human heart; Passion; Good listener; Critical thinker; Creative minds; Integrity; Inclusivity; Flexible; Trustworthy; Credibility among others.*"

The Components

1. **Informal peer to peer mentoring relationships-** these are the relationships and mentoring between two peers of the same age group, who have self matched from the online platform. Participants must apply to participate in this mentoring relationship. During and after the mentoring relationship is completed, the partners will be required to evaluate their achievements based on their initial expectations. Peers from the same country will be grouped in clusters which will be the basis of the next component.
2. **Formal Cluster Coaching Sessions-** Expertise and experience of the mentors will be brought to bear, to help fashion out and advance the career pathways of the peers during these coaching sessions. Peers of the same cluster will choose a leader who will guide them in setting their coaching goals and objectives and identifying prospective coaches. Cluster leaders will be assisted by the YPARD mentoring coordinator.
3. **Multi disciplinary online network platform** – this is the online platform on which self matching and the discussions of the peers and clusters will be based. It will be the main platform where the peers will share most of the information for instance opportunities, events, general questions etc
4. **Monitoring & Evaluation-** this being a new kind of mentoring and coaching programme, we shall evaluate and monitor the progress at each stage and incorporate the feedback from the participants back in to the general structure.

Simple Definitions

Peers- these are the mentor and mentee partners (are of the same age group), mostly not from the same country.

Cluster – Country/region groupings of peers depending on the numbers per country; depending on the number of peers per country, there may be more than one cluster per country. Joining a cluster is facilitated by an YPARD coordinator.

Peer mentoring network- is the whole group of peers who will be participating in this mentoring programme. They have an open discussion board where peers can discuss issues, and or share documents.

YPARD Coordinator/facilitator- A YPARD staff who will be coordinating this mentoring programme during this start up/pilot phase i.e. will be in charge of adding prospective participants into the platform, forming clusters and adding the peers. They will also assist clusters organize coaching sessions.

Administrator- the person in charge of the online platform i.e. web developer or communications expert.

Structure of the online platform

All the peers will belong to the peer mentoring network where they have general interactions and communications on peer mentoring relationships and coaching. The pairs of peers will have a private messaging system between them. The messaging system, if advanced should allow the peers to chat, and collaborate on documents remotely. However, this is private and none of the other peers or facilitators has access to this information. Any public information will be shared through the discussion board of the cluster or peer mentoring network.

The facilitator will group peers from the same country or region into clusters for the purposes of formalized coaching sessions. The clusters will be in charge of selecting a cluster leader (s) and thereby organize for coaching sessions based on their needs. Coaching sessions are physical meetings, seminars, workshops, expeditions, projects etc and they involve senior professionals with experience in this field. The frequency of coaching sessions will be determined by the clusters. Maximum number of peers per cluster will be 20 to allow ease in personalized communications and attention. The main purpose of the clusters it to provide for coaching sessions based on their needs. A cluster will communicate online through a private discussion board. Private, because only members of this cluster can access it. If a cluster would like to share information with other peers and other clusters, it will be posted on the peer mentoring network discussion board.

Main features of the online platform:-

- Messaging system (private between peers and among cluster members)
- Sharing of documents (any form of document should be shared) and leaving comments on them
- Ability to form a cluster
- Private cluster discussion board
- Public Peer mentoring network discussion board
- Have a profile page like for the case of the LinkedIn
- Ability to create events
- Ability for peers to provide feedback:- post comments, questions and FAQs about the process for the feedback process this should appear on their profile pages, their bilateral messaging page and their cluster pages
- Chat facility (Not priority)
- Ability to change status on the platform (Not priority)

Stages of the Mentoring Programme

*Note: **ASSESS**: this is the 0th stage where prospective participant's asses their mentoring needs before proceeding to the 1st stage*

1. **APPLY: -** Prospective participants will fill in an online application form from the YPARD website.

2. **ACCEPTANCE:** On completion, a notification is sent to the Administrator and Facilitator who adds the person on the online platform. This automatically goes to an online database of peers, with detailed profiles. Only **qualified applicants** will be added to the online applicants, those who don't qualify will be sent an automatic regret response.

3. **PEERS**: A notification is sent to the successful applicant to join the online platform membership and can start contributing on the discussion board.

4. **SELF MATCH**: From the online platform, peers self match, selecting the best match (based on their needs); their profile information changes to indicate who their peer(s*). *(*- you can have a maximum of two peers at any one time in the mentoring relationship).*

5. **LEARNING AGREEMENT**: After self matching, the facilitator/administrator requests the peers to develop and submit a learning agreement for record keeping. Read below and see Appendix 2 for the contents of a learning agreement.

6. **CLUSTERS**: After a sizable number of peers have self matched and started communicating, the facilitator creates clusters based on their countries/regions. Clusters will allow for coaching sessions of peers from the same country/region and may lead to other initiatives as peers deem necessary.

7. **CLUSTER LEADERSHIP**: Online cluster discussions are activated to enable the cluster peers select a leader, and prepare their goals and objectives as members of the Cluster. The leader of each cluster coordinates with the YPARD coordinator.

8. **CLUSTER COACHING SESSIONS**: After clusters have a leadership and a strategy for their mentoring and coaching needs, they start organizing coaching sessions, with assistance from the YPARD Coordinator.

9. **FEEDBACK**: Participants will be required to provide feedback on the programme regularly either through the cluster meetings or individually. The YPARD coordinator will notify the participants each time they are supposed to do so.

The Learning Agreement

After successful application process, participants will be added into the online mentoring platform where they will be required to select a peer(s) within 10 working days. They are expected to immediately start the communication on their goals and expectations; what they hope to gain from the relationship; what they can/cannot offer; agree on confidentiality; commit to honesty and to developing a trusting relationship; make arrangements for frequent communication (timing,

frequency, and mode) among others. Peers are also free to design their own learning agreement, but which should be guided by the following details:-

1. A checklist of needs, and expectations from the mentoring relationship for each of the peers.

2. List of principles and values each participant has to observe in the relationship e.g. time management, language to be used, confidentiality, and property rights issues if any material under this category is shared

3. Average hours the peers hope to communicate with each other and the estimated timeline of the mentoring relationship.

4. Communication channels the partners are comfortable using. Note: Even though this programme will be based on the online mentoring platform, peers are free to decide on any other communication channel they wish to use. However, they will still be expected to contribute to the online mentoring platform.

The learning agreement can be terminated when both parties believe they have acquired the knowledge, tools, and abilities that can be offered. This should happen after they have participated in at least one cluster coaching session.

Expected Challenges

The biggest challenge expected in this mentoring programme will be to get the YPARD members accustomed to a peer to peer mentoring relationship. To address this challenge, literature materials on mentoring, what works and what does not work have been provided Appendix 5. As well, this document will be customized and provided as brief notes and FAQs to the YPARD members on the website in preparation for the rolling out of the mentoring programme.

Use of an online platform is presumed to be a challenge for some peers who do not fancy social media networks. To deal with this challenge, YPARD is piloting the start of this programme with a Yammer Community which restricts membership to invitation only, and thus makes this platform much less distractive. The programme will also require and make use of very few features, all of which peers are familiar with, for instance direct messaging, Discussion boards, sharing documents and Creating events online.

Contacting, maintaining a group of coaches who will be involved in the cluster coaching sessions may be seen as a challenge. YPARD will use its existing networks as well as those proposed by the peers to gather these seniors experts, inform them in advance and limit the number of times they will request them to coach sessions. In this way, we shall avoid burnout of senior experts who would otherwise provide coaching sessions.

This programme may attract many young professionals and thus more peers will be required. To deal with the high numbers, any participant will be allowed to have a maximum of two peers at any given time. The timeline of the mentoring programme can be as short as 3 months and as long as 2 years. The short timelines will allow peers to pick up partners for some specific needs and then terminate the contract once their needs are met, thus releasing each other to match with another peer who may be pending. Clusters will also assist in managing the numbers of peers. Cluster coaching sessions will be the formal sessions for all peers and will guide in providing control of the programme.

Sustainability

From the past reviews of mentoring programmes in the field of ARD, it was noted that finances were required to keep driving the success of a mentoring programme. The YPARD peer to peer mentoring programme has reduced the cost of mentoring in terms of efforts and time by decentralizing the system, and reducing the tasks of the facilitator, and increasing the tasks of the peers. This way, the cost of maintaining the mentoring programme can be met through the operational costs like staff cost.

The major cost of the mentoring programme will be in the cluster coaching sessions. However these costs can be met or avoided in the following proposed ways:-

1. A peer can volunteer to host the cluster in their office, university, meeting room at the work etc at no extra cost. This can be counted as a capacity development contribution to an organization.
2. The cluster leader, with the assistance of the members and the YPARD Coordinator can identify coaches who are willing to hoist the peers in their offices or meeting rooms at no extra cost. This pre requisite for this is that the cluster must be a very small group- of not more than 20, and as well, spending not more than 3 hours at the venue.
3. Cluster leaders must seek for coaches who are willing to volunteer their time to attend the coaching sessions.
4. The peers can identify public halls, green spaces, lecture rooms or any meeting places that are provided free where they can organize the cluster coaching sessions.
5. All peers must meet their travel and meals expenses to the cluster coaching sessions. The facilitator will consult with each peer to ensure that they are placed in clusters near their place of residence. The sessions should be at least half a day long.

This programme will be piloted with a few YPARD members who showed interest in a mentoring programme. For the first two months, the programme will be monitored, feedback obtained and integrated into a final YPARD Mentoring Programme.

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[i] Mason, M. K. (2011). *www.moyak.com*. Retrieved April 5, 2011, from Debate over coaching and mentoring in today's workplace: http://www.moyak.com/papers/coaching-mentoring-definitions.html

[ii] Coaching is supporting individuals, teams and/or organizations on their development journey to become the people and success stories they have only dreamt about in the past. Coaching focuses on the future potential and how it can be achieved. It's a form of consulting, which will identify strengths, weaknesses, goals, and needs, typically through a series of prearranged sessions over a period of months. The four core elements of the coaching process are support, modeling, step-by-step development, and encouragement.