



**CHRIS NELSON**  
Guest Columnist

## Mentor now to retain talent and prepare for the future

**I**VE SPENT THE BETTER PART OF MY life in the produce business.

I eat, sleep, and breathe fruit and vegetables. The fact that my father was co-founder, and for 25 years the president, of Royal Packing Co., one of the largest growers of lettuce in the U.S., had a lot to do with my choice of vocation and passion for produce.

More importantly, he taught me a lot about the business, as it was his life, too. When I think back, I realize that he mentored all those around him, including me, through his words and actions.

**NEW PEOPLE:** The people who join your organization will eventually make up the fabric of your company culture. They will show up every day and work for years to become experts in their field. They are the ones who will develop ideas, solve problems, and generally do what it takes to get the job done.

*Business Week* reports that over 35% of employees start looking for a new job if they are not mentored within 12 months of being hired. The leading issues that drive people to look for something new are a sense of stagnation, how their boss treats them and not feeling valued. To address these areas collectively, consider establishing some type of mentoring program.

**DEVELOP A PLAN:** There are only a few fundamental steps to take to establish a planned mentoring program.

Find out why talented employees you wanted to keep decided to leave your company, create a formal or structured process for selecting and matching mentors

and participants and make a concerted effort to develop people to their fullest potential.

Conduct career conversations and planning sessions at least once a year.

Ask participants specific questions like the following:

■ What aspect of the business would you like to learn next year?

■ Do you have any short- or long-term career interests I can help you get ready for?

■ This is a new project that would be a good growth opportunity for you. Would you like to work with me or Joe on it?

Building relationships between employees with disparate levels of experience can create strong personal bonds, enhance teamwork, and underscore the belief that time invested in the development of people is a priority.

Senior-level employees get the opportunity to share the acumen they've gained over their careers. Less-experienced employees gain insight into the business that might otherwise take years of learning, often by trial and error.

**THE LONG RUN:** It is common knowledge that baby boomers are the largest segment of our population. When we look at the simple, yet revealing, fact that every 7.5 seconds a boomer retires, we see that there are fewer people entering the workplace to take the place of those leaving. This may cause serious problems for the business that is not planning for this inevitable change.

If the knowledge and familiarity of lessons learned are passed on to the next generation of employees, the cornerstones of culture, integrity and work ethic built over many years can be maintained and enhanced.

*Los Angeles Times Magazine* recently ran a story about the Maloof brothers, Joe and Gavin, owners of the NBA's Sacramento Kings.

My favorite anecdote detailed a trip the family took to Milwaukee. Joe Maloof remembers his father saying, "Let's keep track of all the people we run into and see who goes out of their way to cater to us."

They came into contact with 57 people — bellmen, taxi drivers, flight attendants, etc. — and out of 57 people, there was one waitress who really went out of her way to serve them as if they were part of her family.

That experience had a huge impact on the sons and, as a result, they run their businesses to

day based on exactly that type of customer service approach.

The next five to 10 years are going to separate the prepared from the unprepared with regard to lack of new talent infusion. In the fresh produce industry, given the prevalence of family-owned businesses, mentoring as part of any organizational development plan can help attract and retain talented people.

**RETAINING 'A' PLAYERS:** Mentoring supports the retention, development, and commitment of your "A" players. A simple orientation or training period is standard operating procedure for most companies. You can separate yourself from the competition by making ongoing development of people a key aspect of your culture.

Over the past 10 years, the United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association/DuPont Leadership Program has set the standard for our industry by selecting talented people and establishing a structured process to prepare them personally and professionally to become tomorrow's leaders.

Tanimura & Antle are long-term participants in an intern program conducted in cooperation with California Polytechnic State University. College students engage in a learn-by-doing approach facilitated by mentors from the company.

In 1988, Ken Silveira participated in the intern program while still in college and joined the Salinas-based grower-shipper after graduation. In late 2003, Ken was named T&A's president and chief operating officer. These programs serve as excellent examples for all of us to carry these worthwhile objectives to our own companies, staff and employees.

There's one final reason that mentoring is so fulfilling: As a mentor, you generally receive as much as or more than you give. Sharing the wisdom of our achievements and pitfalls of our mistakes can only serve to benefit our people and, in turn, this great industry.

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