

► SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Building a Structured Mentoring Program for Environmental Health Inspectors

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Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide relevant and useful information through the pages of the *Journal* for environmental health professionals. In a recent membership survey, we heard your request for information that spotlights successful environmental health programs across the different areas of environmental health and from different sectors of the profession. We listened and are pleased to introduce a new column that shines a spotlight on success stories from the environmental health field. These stories enable us to learn from our peers and provide an avenue to incorporate successful programs, innovative solutions, and unique approaches to our own programs and initiatives.

The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA, our funders, or our partners.

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Introduction

Environmental health professionals play a crucial role in protecting public health, but the field is facing serious workforce challenges. According to a 2023 national workforce analytic sample, nearly one half of the state and local public health workforce left their jobs between 2017 and 2021, with turnover rates exceeding 70% for employ-

ees under 35 years of age or with less than 5 years of experience (Leider et al., 2023). Like many environmental health programs, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Retail Food Program has experienced high inspector turnover, with a growing number of inspectors in the field with limited experience. In response, our team developed a structured mentoring program designed to

improve onboarding and job training efficiency, increase job satisfaction, and build long-term staff engagement.

This column outlines how we created and launched our New Employee Mentoring Program using a collaborative process. We share insights from our experience, including our development process, the tools we created, what we learned, and how other environmental health programs can adopt similar approaches to build and strengthen their mentoring programs.

Why Mentoring Matters

Historically, our MDA inspection programs provided informal mentoring for new inspectors, but these efforts were inconsistent, lacked the necessary training and expectations, and were difficult to maintain as staff turnover increased. New hires reported feeling isolated, especially in remote work settings, and unsure of what to expect from their mentors. At the same time, experienced staff expressed uncertainty about how to support new colleagues effectively as mentors were not being prepared for their new roles.

Mentoring is more than just sharing knowledge—it is about creating a culture of support and connection. Structured mentoring improves retention, builds leadership skills, and helps employees become effective more quickly. We saw an opportunity to formalize this process and design it with input from the people it would serve.

Laying the Foundation

We began by identifying a grant opportunity through the National Environmental Health Association, which aligned with our goals. To guide our planning, we developed a detailed project charter outlining the scope, goals,



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deliverables, and roles. The project charter was used as the basis when writing our grant and helped us stay focused, align with grant requirements, and ensure accountability. Gaining leadership support early in the process was key to committing to the grant deliverables and completing the project.

Creating a Shared Vision

To design the framework for the mentoring program, we gathered a group of mentors, mentees, supervisors, and program staff. We hosted an in-person workshop using Technology of Participation (ToP) facilitation methods, such as the Focused Conversation Method and Consensus Workshop techniques. A facilitator from outside our program led the workshop and helped us gather input in a way that was inclusive and productive.

The Focused Conversation Method guided the group through four levels of questions using the ORID (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional) Model, which helped participants reflect on past mentoring efforts, identify gaps, and surface new ideas. We then used the Consensus Workshop method to answer the key question: What are the required components of a successful mentoring program?

This process led to several shared decisions, including:

- Assigning an onboarding buddy within the first week for new employees
- Delaying mentor assignment for improved mentor–mentee pairing
- Making program involvement voluntary
- Developing a set of structured resources and tools to guide the mentor–mentee relationships

The Two-Stage Support Model

Our final program design includes two stages of peer support:

1. Onboarding Buddy Program

New employees are paired with an onboarding buddy during their first week of work. The buddy provides informal guidance, helps answer day-to-day questions, and fosters early team connections, which is especially important for remote staff. Meetings are scheduled weekly for the first month and then every other week until the employee is assigned a mentor, which happens later in the training process.

2. Mentor Assignment

Mentors are experienced staff who volunteer to guide new employees through more advanced aspects of the role. Once

paired, mentors and mentees complete a mentorship agreement to set expectations, outline goals, and define how they will work together. Meetings occur at regular intervals, and support continues for up to 1 year or longer, depending on the mentee's progress.

Tools and Resources Created

To support the program, we developed a suite of practical tools:

- New Employee Mentoring Guide
- Onboarding Buddy Guide
- Mentorship Agreement Template
- Meeting Frameworks
- Articulate E-learning Training Module
- OneNote Resources and a Teams Channel for document sharing and collaboration

We also incorporated the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality assessment to help mentor–mentee pairs understand communication styles and preferences. All the existing staff participated in the assessment to help their understanding of personality types. This added layer of insight can improve communication and connection and alleviate misunderstandings.

Measuring Success

Evaluation is an important part of our program. We assess effectiveness in several ways:

- Participant satisfaction: Surveys conducted during and after the program ask if mentors and mentees feel supported and engaged.
- Skills development: Supervisors and mentors provide feedback on mentee progress.
- Retention: Our long-term goal is to achieve a 75% retention rate for mentees over 3 years.
- Program engagement: We track participation in meetings, use of tools, and completion of agreements.

Initial feedback has been positive, with reports of increased confidence, clearer expectations, and stronger team connections.

Lessons Learned

We learned a few key lessons along the way:

- Time investment is a big consideration: Developing and maintaining a quality mentoring program requires time from both staff and leadership.
- Structured does not mean rigid: A flexible framework allows each mentor–mentee pair to personalize their experience while still meeting program standards.

- Resources matter: Our e-learning training was developed using Articulate software, which requires ongoing licensing to maintain. Programs using digital tools should plan for sustainability.
- Facilitation tools are worth it: ToP facilitation with an outside facilitator helped us gather authentic input and build shared ownership of the program design.

Conclusion

As environmental health professionals, we are tasked with protecting public health, but we cannot do that without a strong, supported workforce. Mentoring is not just a “nice to have” program; it is a strategy to build capacity, connection, and retention.

Our structured mentoring program provides a model that other environmental health agencies can adapt. Start with staff input, build a solid foundation, and provide the tools mentors and mentees need to succeed. Agencies can reach out to our training consultants at mda.food.liasons@state.mn.us for information or sample materials

to create their own mentoring program. With the right support, new employees can grow into confident, connected professionals who are ready to meet the challenges of today’s environmental health landscape. 🌸

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Do you have a success story to share with our readership? We are looking for stories that highlight successes across all areas of environmental health—from air quality to zoonoses—that represent the different sectors of our profession. If interested, please contact Kristen Ruby-Cisneros at kruby@neha.org for column guidelines.

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