

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Pursuing a Mentor for Success in the CACFP

Education and Training

Purpose: This handout provides the benefits of working with a mentor in the CACFP and the four stages of mentorship.

Have you ever considered working with a mentor? Mentoring is a process in which a person, the mentee, receives individualized support from a more experienced person, the mentor. The mentor agrees to share knowledge, experiences, and guidance with the mentee. Generally, a mentor can help achieve higher work satisfaction and career advancement than those who are not mentored.

Operators of the CACFP are no exception. Working with a mentor in the CACFP is one way to increase knowledge and skills as a CACFP professional. An experienced mentor can help explain and simplify CACFP processes. If your mentor is someone who works for a different agency or program, they may have unique views or perspectives to share. Mentoring can also help expand your professional networks and advance your career. A mentor often knows of other people and resources that can help you with your goals.

How to Find a Mentor

There are many ways to find a mentor, such as a:

- Peer or a supervisor in the CACFP
- Another CACFP professional in your community
- Retired or active professional with CACFP experience
- Child nutrition professional with knowledge of program responsibilities

Potential mentors are usually in a more advanced position, have the knowledge and skills you are seeking, and have the time and willingness to provide support. As you consider potential mentors, think about the following questions:

- Can they teach you the advanced knowledge or skills you are seeking?
- Do they have a willingness to help others?
- Are they someone who can communicate openly and honestly with you?
- Are they a good listener?
- Are they passionate and inspiring about their work?

Four stages of mentoring relationships

Stage 1: Build a relationship and establishing trust is a priority. As you get to know each other, share information on your backgrounds, experiences, and interests. Discuss your expectations for the relationship, including confidentiality. Set up a schedule for communicating regularly, whether it is by phone, email, or in person.

Stage 2: Discuss your career, personal vision, and goals. The following questions may help you prepare for this stage:

- What are your current responsibilities?
- What are your goals and priorities in your current job?
- What are your strengths, weaknesses, successes, and challenges?
- What actions have you taken in your job or career, and why?

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Stage 3: Work on your goals with ongoing feedback and advice from your mentor. Your mentor will guide you through ongoing conversations, written materials, and connecting you with other professionals. They may challenge you to try different techniques or approaches to achieve your goals.

While this can be a very sound stage of the mentoring relationship, it can also be one in which energy begins to wane. You may find that either you or your mentor have competing priorities for your time and energy. You and your mentor may have differences that were not obvious at the beginning of the relationship. Perhaps your mentor does not have all the answers you are seeking. The key to all of these challenges is to keep the lines of communication open. Communicate openly and honestly about any challenges that arise and work together towards solutions.

Stage 4: At this fourth and final stage, it is helpful to discuss with your mentor the types of support you might need in the future and where you can seek additional help. It is also an excellent time to think about “paying it forward” and being a mentor to someone else. Above all, thank your mentor for their time and dedication.

Having a mentor to guide you through the maze of CACFP policies and procedures can help you advance in your career as a successful CACFP operator. Remember, you are not limited to just one mentor. You may have multiple mentors as long as your goals are clear for working with each one. You do not have to establish a formal mentoring relationship. Informal mentoring relationships can occur spontaneously, such as from a more experienced peer.

References

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