



Farm Coaching to Support Farm-Team Communication

A Guide for Professionals to Develop a Four-Session
Communication Coaching Program



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Introduction

This guide outlines a model of farm coaching that was developed as part of the project “Facilitating Communication in Farm Families with Personalized Coaching” funded by Northeast Extension Risk Management and Education (NERME).

Maine has a vibrant farming sector and fortunately, it also has a robust and responsive agricultural service provider (ASP) network to serve this farm sector. Since 2012, ASPs have collaborated as part of the Beginning Farmer’s Resource Network (BFRN). It is through BFRN that the need for more support for farmers’ communication and relationship challenges was first articulated. ASPs reported encountering serious relational “stumbling blocks” when meeting with farmers about financing, succession planning, and rudimentary business planning, for example.

ASPs noticed that farm teams were struggling with communication skills like how to listen, show and feel empathy, see another’s perspective, collaborate, and express one’s own needs and values. Thanks to the on-the-ground finding, a group of ASPs collaborated to address these needs. Prior to the NERME funding, a grant from NESARE, “Supporting Relationships for Farm Success” provided support for trainings for ASPs and the creation of a communication skills Toolkit for Agricultural Service Providers (contact the authors).

This guide was created through NERME funding to support direct service with farmers to provide on-farm communication coaching. The coaching sessions were designed collaboratively by the authors with input from the families that participated in coaching and an advisory group of ASPs and farmers. The advisory group included: Gary Anderson (University of Maine Cooperative Extension), Erica Buswell (Maine Farmland Trust), Leilani Carlson (AgrAbility/UMaine Cooperative Extension), Bo Dennis (MOFGA), Kathy Ruhf (Land for Good), Julie Ann Smith (Maine Farm Bureau), and Linda and Laughlin Titis (AgMatters).

Thank you to Erica Buswell and Leilani Carlson for their reviews. We are grateful for our collaboration with Atina Diffley of Organic Farming Works, who created many of the resources used in farm coaching (links to her website are provided throughout). And thank you to the farm families who helped shape this work.

This guide is for ASPs to provide a four-session program using a broad and flexible set of tools for farmers in any phase of their farming career. It is not written in script form. It is meant to be an overview of the process and learning tools that the authors gathered and developed. As new teams use this guide to develop new coaching programs, the authors suggest that each coaching team create new agendas (See Appendix) and basic scripts for each coach.

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Background

The farmers: In 2018-2019, we began a pilot project offering farm coaching to any Maine farmer or farm family that was interested in working on communication skills, developing a communication plan, and/or team building for the season. Participants in the pilot project included farm couples, multigenerational farms, farms with and without farm managers, and farms moving toward future transition.

The coaches: The authors were the coaching team, and our experiences reflected a variety of skills across the four individuals. Subject matter expertise varied from individual to individual and included production agriculture, mediation, inquiry, education, and land succession. The role of the coach was to be a guide and advisor, not a case manager, clinician, or to provide legal advice. Two members of the coaching team were farmers who had training and experience in facilitation and mediation. We recommend that if farmers are part of the coaching team, they have prior training in facilitation and mediation or are provided the opportunity to gain skills in these areas before coaching.

Coaching Design

Two coaches were paired with each farm and met with the farmers four times over a 5-month period, from winter-summer. Each session was 2 hours in length. Sessions were scheduled in person or using videoconferencing based on the availability of the farmers and others involved.

We used the following structure for the four coaching sessions. The farming metaphor was used to better clarify the goals and approach of the coaching sessions.

- **PRE-PLANNING** - coaching team only. Metaphor of “crop planning, gathering supplies, and preparing the soil.”
- **SESSION 1** – coaching team in partnership with farmers. Metaphor of “planting seeds.”
- **SESSION 2** – coaching team in partnership with farmers. Metaphor of “weeding, watering, & thinning.”
- **SESSION 3** – coaching team in partnership with farmers. Metaphor of “harvesting.”
- **SESSION 4** – coaching team in partnership with farmers. Metaphor of “washing, packing, & marketing.”

Because this process was highly individualized for each farm, we offered a variety of activities, handouts, links, tools, and homework suggestions. In this guide they are organized beneath each session as possibilities (see below). For ease, we are providing external links for all documents. Each activity can be used “a la carte” depending on the needs and goals of the farmers.

PRE-PLANNING — Key Activities

Coach selection. Key competencies of coaches:

- Listen: Exemplary listening skills
- Clarify: Asks follow-up and probing questions
- Synthesize: Ability to bring various issues, feelings and needs together
- Reflect: Fluent in reflective language that reinforces farmers' voices/needs
- Model: Efficient, on-point, kind, curious, reflective
- Teach: Introduce and practice communication (interpersonal) tools and strategies

Preparation of coaches.

- Coach orientation and team building
 - Learn about each team member's skills and offerings
 - Learn about each team member's challenges/growing edges
 - Learn about each team member's life and work
 - Skill building: Based on assets identified above, individual coaches (or the whole team) might attend a workshop, discuss a paper, article or book to gain more skills in a particular subject area
 - Discuss as a team the various pertinent modalities: mediation, teaching, modeling, support, providing resources, coaching, referrals.
- Decide on a working definition of "coach" for this program (see key competencies above)
- Discuss as a team how the coaches will:
 - plan
 - collaborate
 - communicate
 - offer feedback
 - handle conflict

Farmer Recruitment. Our project used these (not exhaustive) efforts, all of which were effective:

- Offer 1-3 hour communication workshops and recruit participants who were interested in a deeper dive into this work
- Promote coaching through list-servs and existing service provider networks
- Direct referrals from the Maine Beginning Farmer Resource Network network of service providers

Coach-to-Farmer Matching. We considered:

- Conflict of interests between coaches and farmers (e.g. same markets, towns, or industries)
- Farmers' goals
- Coaches' experience
- Geographic location of farmer and coach(es)

Logistics.

- Scheduling. One coach makes all scheduling calls/emails based on a shared online document that had all coaches' availability
- Download and familiarize coaching team with Zoom (or other videoconference) platform
- Scout meeting places should farmers prefer to meet off-site
- Acquire flipcharts, markers
- Develop farmer intake form
- Request that farmer complete intake form by mail, email or phone
- Preliminary prep amongst coaches (review intake forms, finalize Session 1 (S1) agendas)
- Prepare notebooks for each farm family with resources
 - How to design an agenda
 - Roles on the farm
 - Decision making
 - Basic communication handouts
 - More as decided by coaching team
- Schedule S1 with each farm
- Send out pre-work to farmers
 - Strength/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Challenges (SWOC - Self Assessment) Document (done individually, not shared until S1)
 - Time Management & The Eisenhower Box: <https://atinadiffley.com/time-management-the-eisenhower-box/>
 - Send out S1 Agenda 5-7 days before S1

SESSION 1 (S1): Planting Seeds

Goal of S1— Understand the opportunities and challenges and begin to organize thinking.

Opening: Welcome everyone and review goals of S1, expanding on each concept:

- Create trust and safety
- Encourage voice and choice
- Create a responsive process and aim for flexibility. Coaches will:
 - Flex with childrens' needs (e.g. crying toddler)
 - Listen to farmer feedback about forms, tools, homework
- Ask about farmers' willingness/access to videoconferencing technology
- Ask if there are any questions about the coaching sessions
- Hand out a resource binder to each farm team

➡ **Activity: SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges)**

- Review and record individuals' S & W on one large SWOC doc (flipchart)
 - Each person holds their own S & W list
 - Each person narrates what they want to share and coaches record (in different colors for each farmer) on one large, combined SWOC document
 - Coaches notice and name resonance and dissonance
 - Coaches acknowledge when farmers recognize strengths in self or others
- Review and record individuals' O & C on the same large SWOC doc (flipchart)
 - Each person holds their own O & C list
 - Each person narrates what they want to share and coaches record (in different colors for each farmer) on one large, combined SWOC document
 - Coaches notice and name resonance and dissonance
 - Coaches acknowledge when farmers recognize opportunities in self or others
- Once combined SWOC is complete, farmers circle one S or W that has particular heat or importance to them.
 - Discuss as a group
- Farmers circle one O or C that has particular heat, weight or importance to them
 - Discuss as a group

➡ **Activity: Introduce Eisenhower Box**

- Introduce, use and model future use of the Eisenhower Box. Use the O & Cs identified in previous activity to populate as an example.

➡ **Activity: Introduce Action Plan**

- Choose an action item/urgent need from the Eisenhower Box and chart it all together in the Action Plan.

Homework:

- Getting Thoughts on Paper: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Qb_RD8mwahzq3fNmI8Pnq_UiM7JTok15/view
- Use the Eisenhower Box for home, personal and/or farm priorities.
- Personality/Style Inventory
 - DISC (Dominance-Influence-Steadiness-Conscientiousness) or Leadership Compass activity.
 - Another inventory can be selected based on the coach's experience and familiarity with the tool.
- Plan a farm meeting with an agenda.
- Mission/Vision alignment (Do you have one? Does it need to be revised? Do you need to write one?)
- Use the Action Plan to chart a few farm or home priority activities.

Closing: Self-evaluation

- Coaches model answering the question "How did I do?" Expressing appreciations and correcting any gaffs, oversights, unintentional harms, etc. that may have occurred. Farmers are invited to do the same.
- Expressing appreciation bulletin: <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/4801e/>

Closing: Plan next meeting time and place

Send out S1 Notes 5-7 days after S1 meeting

Send out S2 Agenda 5-7 days before S2 meeting

SESSION 2 (S2): Weeding, Watering and Thinning

Goal of S2 — Understand team member strengths and develop communication strategies.

Group check-in

Review Homework from S1:

- DISC or Leadership Compass or other
 - What are your types?
 - What did you learn about yourself? Your farm collaborator(s)?
 - Might this be a useful tool with your crew?
 - Are there characteristics of others on your team you'd like to appreciate?
 - How might you approach your perceived shortcomings and/or weaknesses?
- Getting Thoughts on Paper Review
- Farm meeting debrief
 - How was it?
 - Who was there?
 - What issues surfaced?
- Tools Review. Did farm team use/implement any of the tools introduced in Session 1?
 - Eisenhower Box
 - Action Plan
 - SWOC reflections
- Mission/vision Review:
 - New?
 - Revised?
 - What has changed?
 - What did you learn?

Activity: Needs

- Pass out needs inventory
- Allow 5-10 minutes for each person to fill it out on their own, quietly.
- Discuss as a group.
- What are each person's core needs/values?
- Notice resonance/dissonance.
- Record on flipchart paper.

Activity: Active Listening, I-statements, Feedback

- Read and review and practice handout.

➔ **Activity: Scale**

- Determine if scale of enterprises/farm operation for year or foreseeable future needs to be scaled back or scaled up or other.
- What is the process for analyzing enterprises/markets to scale back?
- Who works on gathering the data needed? How do you delegate?
- Does one person do most of the gathering and the other review and consult?
- When and what will the agenda be for your family stakeholder meeting?
- Would you like to talk about this at our Session 3 meeting?
- How else can we help you prioritize, answer questions, make decisions?
- Are there key dates if you are changing the scale of the farm or making any other changes that you'd like to use to monitor your progress and ensure that you're staying on track?

➔ **Activity: Mapping Patterns.** Using above generated Needs/Values, discuss/record:

- What are the patterns that follow these met and unmet needs for each person?
- When/where are the foreseeable bottlenecks?
- Stress patterns. What do they look like for each person?
- How to mitigate stressful situations? What words and/or actions can help?
- How do you say no to people and/or opportunities?
- How will you know when to ask others for help?
- How will you recognize another's request for help?
- How will you negotiate shifting schedules?
- How might you identify "no fly zones" for communication?
- What are your preferred modes of communication?
- How might each person make new opportunities and/or change behaviors to address their needs more healthfully?
- Make a chart on a large piece of paper: Column 1: Challenges, Behavior, Outcome, and Column 2: Need(s).

Example:

Challenges, Behaviors, Outcome	Need(s)
Regular meeting	Efficiency
Shared decision making/division of labor	Collaboration, Harmony
Prioritize time for self, family and relationship	Warmth, Spontaneity, Joy, Companionship, Intimacy, Empathy, Authenticity

Homework:

- Any activities/tools from S1 that are applicable.
- Make a personal communication goal based on something you learned in S1 or S2 about yourself or your farming partner(s).
- Have a meeting called “3 Things in 10 Minutes” where the farmer who asks for the meeting brings a 3-item agenda, beginning with gratitude for something the other person(s) has recently done or is bringing to the day. For example:
 1. *Gratitude for noticing that the chick brooder light was not on last night at 9 pm.*
 2. *Today’s delivery to Portland: timeline and driver.*
 3. *Irrigation in hoophouse. Do we need to switch from drip to overhead?*
- Consider “mind-mapping” to get clear about your short and long term planning needs. (Resources: simplemind.eu/how-to-mind-map/basics/ and armmarketingsolutions.com/blog/mind-mapping-vs-linear-planning)
- The Carrot Project has webinars and planning resources for farmers. (http://thecarrotproject.org/farmer_resources/videos_and_webinars)
- Contact specific support people/organizations (Small Business Development Center, insurance company, lawyer, etc.)

Closing: Self-evaluation

- Coaches model answering the question “How did I do?” Expressing appreciation and correcting any gaffs, oversights, unintentional harms, etc. that may have occurred. Farmers are invited to do the same.

Closing: Plan next meeting time and place

Send out S2 Notes 5-7 days after S2 meeting

Send out S3 Agenda 5-7 days before S3 meeting

SESSION 3 (S3): Harvesting

Goal of S3 — Highly individual based on specific goals and needs of Communication Plan.

Activities selected if appropriate.

Group check-in

Review Homework from S2

➔ **Activity: Roles and Responsibilities**

- What jobs does each person do?
- How does staff know who to go to for what? Where/how is this communicated? (Employee manual, orientation, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs))
- Which jobs are wonderful? Which ones are slogs?
- How to minimize slogs and plan for more wonderful?
- Which do you like to do alone? Together?
- Are there seasonal shifts (ie: from transplanting & planting to harvest)? How do these change/impact daily and seasonal schedules?

➔ **Activity: Identify and/or develop a few SOPs** (e.g. hiring, farm stand management, cleanliness, vegetable processing, crew meetings, microgreen production)

➔ **Activity: A ranking tool to assess and evaluate opportunities/choices/changes**

➔ **Activity: Plan a Team Building Meeting for/with farm crew**

- What are the goals of the meeting?
- Have each crew member do a SWOC and share with group?
- Plan for crew meetings through the busy season.
- Do crew members need role clarification?
- Does a particular area of the farm need a whole crew troubleshooting session?
- Are there policies that need refining, discussion, development?
- Does the crew need help with disagreements, grievances?
- Craft an agenda and materials list based on the findings from the above questions.
- SOP article from North Carolina State Extension:<https://ncfreshproducesafety.ces.ncsu.edu/ncfreshproducesafety-gaps-standard-operating-procedures/>

➔ **Activity: Craft a Communication Plan.** (This may be saved for S4 or done at S3 with an amount of time for implementation prior to S4)

A Communication Plan might serve the farm team in:

- Prioritizing tasks
- Making financial decisions
- Managing staff
- Planning off-farm work
- Planning for childcare

Brainstorm the following parts of a Communication Plan:

- What (meetings for prioritizing, meetings with financial focus, staff/management meetings, personal needs like fitness, reading, family time, etc.)
- Where (on-farm, over dinner out, etc.)
- Who (Managers? Family? Crew?)
- When (Daily, weekly, monthly, annually)
- How (Email reminders? Farm calendar as a communication tool?)

Homework:

- Any from S1 and/or S2 that are applicable
- Write up a division of labor SOP for staff so everyone knows:
 - Their job description, expectations and “chain of command”
 - Which manager/farmer is responsible for which tasks
 - How to communicate about that subject (email, text, in person, etc.)
- Contact specific support people/organizations (Small Business Development Center, Insurance company, lawyer, etc.)

Closing: Self-evaluation

- Coaches model answering the question “How did I do?” Expressing appreciation and correcting any gaffs, oversights, unintentional harms, etc., that may have occurred. Farmers are invited to do the same.

Closing: Plan next meeting time and place

Send out S3 Notes 5-7 days after S3 meeting

Send out S4 Agenda 5-7 days before S4 meeting

Example of a weekly plan of contact, meetings, farm needs, work schedules:

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
Person A	Work	On Farm	Work	Work	Work		
Person B	Work at Flower Operation		Harvest Day	Work at Flower Operation	Harvest Day	On Farm	
Person C		Fitness Class		Fitness Class			Farmers' Market
Person D		Preschool with child					
Farm Needs-Farm	15-minute Farm Meeting						
		CSA Newsletter				Financials Pay Bills	Day Off? Big Project Day? Evening Dinner?

SESSION 4 (S4): Washing, Packing, Marketing

Goal of S4 — Finalize planning, review of coaching to present, individualize as needed.

Group check-in

Review Homework from S3

- ➔ **Activity: Craft a Holistic Goal** (see handout: atinadiffley.com/wp-content/uploads/Create-Your-Holistic-Goal-1.pdf)
- ➔ **Activity: Craft a Communication Plan** (If not completed at S3)
- ➔ **Activity: Appreciation and feedback** (see handout at <https://docs.google.com/document/d1Aduesq1mT6S60fjzG5jrOYdN9C38Qex0JES9ex3DGKY/edit>) and University of Maine Cooperative Extension bulletin #4801, Why “Thank You” Matters Expressing Appreciation Toward Partners and Family Members Farming Together” extension.umaine.edu/publications/4801e/)

- What are three talents or skills that your spouse/partner (or your parent, child) contributes to the farm, family, and community that you really appreciate?
- What is the best part of your day?
- In what ways do others help you on the farm?
- How can you acknowledge your appreciation for the work and talents of your spouse/partner (or your parent, child, farm)?
- “I messages.” For example, “I appreciated when you did _____. It matters to me because_____.”
- What methods and timing is used?
- Annual evaluation with staff?
- As needed feedback to address problems/challenges?

➔ **Activity: Non-violent Communication Introduction**

- Observation, Feeling, Need, Request
 - See “Feelings Handout” at <https://www.cnvc.org/training/resource/feelings-inventory>

➔ **Activity: S4 SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges)**

- Revisit the S1 SWOC that was created, and the areas the farmer(s) decided to focus on
- Coaches acknowledge what they see for S (strengths) of the farmers as a unit, the skills that were learned, and the work that was done. Farmers contribute to this section as well.
- Pay little attention (if at all) to the W (weaknesses) section.
- Fill in new collective OC (opportunities and challenges) in response to the question, “After seeing your first SWOC, and experiencing the previous three sessions and all the time in between, what opportunities and challenges do you see moving forward?”

- Discuss
- Offer reflection on DISC or Leadership Compass or other inventory and how these might relate to WHO does what as related to challenges.
- Discussion of supports that are needed moving forward. Who can the farmers call if external help would be useful?

Closing: Reflect on sessions, coaching experience, appreciations for self, other, coaches, farmers.

Send out S4 Notes 5-7 days after S4. Follow up evaluation by phone or email or left with farmer at session.

APPENDIX — Sample Session Agendas

Session 2 Agenda

Family X

Date, Time

Goals for Session:

- 1) Discuss traits and how to apply what's been learned
- 2) Introduce needs activity and application
- 3) Brainstorm for Communication Plan

5 min – Check in, agenda review

25 minutes – **Homework Review** Traits (from DISC or other inventory)

May we have an update on the DISC?

What are your types?

How are feeling about it as a tool for you?

What concrete ideas/tools did you walk away with or feel you still need?

5 minutes – optional review: Thoughts on Paper exercise

30 minutes – **Needs Activity**

Identify needs

Identify patterns of weaknesses and challenges

How to make opportunities and/or change behaviors to address these needs healthfully

30 minutes – **Brainstorming**

Communication Plan for Farmer 1 and Farmer 2; Communication Plan for staff?

Some possible questions:

- Scaling to meet potential
- Role defining?
- Troubleshoot a particular area of the farm?
- Develop any policies?
- What to do when there are disagreements?
- What activities/tools do we want to do with the team?
- Craft agenda and communication strategy

10 minutes - **Homework Ideas:** Continue list of what to put in Communication Plan, Complete Who Does What Handout, Read Scaling Up article; draft a flowchart or work plan for the year

15 minutes – **Reflection** & schedule next session

Session 3 Agenda

Family X

Date, Time

Goals for Session

- 1) Make a draft Communication Plan for the season
- 2) Practice Appreciation
- 3) How to raise concerns

5 min – Check in, agenda review

10 min – **Homework Review** - Progress on making a flowchart, or work plan for the year; feedback from Scaling Up article; review list for Communication Plan

40 min – **Communication Plan is Built in this session:** Clarifies the who, what, where, when and how for essential times needing communication to support farm and family. Revisit multiple times during session.

20 minutes – **Roles and responsibilities exercise for Draft Communication Plan**

Identify 3-5 roles you love/3 roles/responsibilities that are “slogs” – Handout

“Are your responsibilities in alignment with the roles/jobs on the farm you have?”

“How can you adjust the roles and responsibilities to reflect each of your needs and values?”

“What needs to be said? What needs to be agreed upon?”

20 minutes – **Plan Update**

Explore any changes to the plan as a result of this activity. Are there particular responsibilities and times to clarify expectations/needs or methods for communication? How and when do you tell your team who to ask for what? How and to whom and when do you articulate the standards and expectations for the parts where you have a responsibility?

20 minutes – **Appreciation Activity**

Giving feedback: appreciation, coaching, evaluation - Handout

Discussion about feedback, skills and comfort with types of feedback

What methods and timing of feedback is/will be helpful for farm?

Appreciation Feedback practice see University of Maine Cooperative Extension bulletin, #4801 Why “Thank You” Matters:

Expressing Appreciation <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/4801e/>

I-statements for feedback, see University of Maine Cooperative Extension bulletin, #6103 Effective Communication

<https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/6103e/>

15 minutes – **Plan Update** – Any changes to the plan as a result of this activity? How do you use feedback in the communication plan for each other and for your team? What methods? Could plan include how/when to communicate these expectations to staff?

15 minutes – **Raising Concerns**

How to raise concerns. What to do when disagreement/or needing time to respond as part of the plan? What to clarify between each other and also with staff?

A look at personal conflict styles. What helps?

Add to Communication Plans for specific times when these moments arise?

10 minutes – **Homework Ideas:** Refine Communication Plan and add self-care items, articulate the standards and expectations – create a staff manual (policies and expectations)

For Notebook:

Roles/ responsibilities/ I-statements / Feedback handouts

10 minutes – **Reflection** & schedule next session. Session 4, discuss expectations and wishes.



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