



Unit Leadership: Best Practices for New Agent Onboarding

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Introduction

Unit-level leadership positions within Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) carry a wide range of responsibilities. This publication draws from an online seminar series featuring unit leaders from across the state who share their insights, experiences and guidance on key issues they manage as Unit Coordinators (UCs) or Unit Extension Directors (UEDs).

The content presented here - and in the accompanying tipsheets - is distilled from the *UC Best Practices* seminar series. It is intended to provide practical recommendations and strategies for individuals serving in unit leadership roles.

Onboarding new agent hires is a collaborative effort at the state, district, and local levels. Unit leaders play a vital role in this process. It is important that UCs/UEDs know all aspects of the VCE Onboarding process as they prepare for a new hire in their unit.

The [New Agent Onboarding Roadmap](#) provides the framework for significant steps in VCE agent onboarding. It includes a suggested timeline and identifies key individuals who provide leadership to the new agent for each step along the process.

Pre-Employment

District Directors

- Share the start date with the Employee Development Specialist (EDS) and UC/UED for planning purposes.
- Select and assign mentors; provide the [Mentoring Handbook](#) to guide onboarding.
- Meet with key players (UC/UED, mentors, EDS) to plan onboarding for your new hire.
- Create a clear plan, expectations, and training schedule for the first 2-3 months.

Unit Coordinators

- Ensure workspace and equipment are ready prior to the start date; communicate needs to the district and/or local IT coordinator.
- Space should be clean, old files removed, and basic supplies in place.
- Reserve space in your schedule for unit onboarding and intentional time with the new hire.

Start of Employment

District Directors follow VCE Onboarding Checklist which covers:

- VCE Organizational Structure
- Policies (VCE and University)
- Personnel Issues
- Employee Professional Development
- Reports & Planning
- Fiscal Issues

Unit Coordinators facilitate introduction basics for the local level:

- Clear your schedule to be available for unit office and local introductions.
- Set a welcoming tone from day one: allow new hires to see themselves as part of the team under the leadership of the UC/UED.
- Facilitate introductions with coworkers and key local leaders.
- Familiarize new hires with volunteers and regular visitors to the unit office.
- Review office communications, reporting lines, and operating norms.
- Provide a list of key departments and contacts necessary for operations or client referrals (i.e. building & grounds, common service providers, maintenance).
- Review local government (key agencies, legislators and representatives) and how your unit fits into the local structure.

- Explain unit procedures for filing key records and document retention policies
- Inquire about their needs: set aside funds for specialized purchases to personalize their office space.

Partnerships and Resources

The UC is the key figure at the local level to help new hires make connections within their community and VCE resources, including:

- Support and ensure connection with assigned VCE mentors.
- Customize onboarding options based on the new hire's program area and facilitate meetings with relevant agents in surrounding localities for shadowing and support.
- Help identify key stakeholders in program area of focus for new hire (Figure 1); help make introductions and schedule meetings to explore partnerships. See Figure 1 for a suggested list of local partners and stakeholders to meet.

Table 1. Suggested list of local partners and stakeholders, based on program area of new hires.

4-H	ANR	FCS
School Administration	Farmer/Producer Groups	Health Department
Youth Organizations	Soil & Water Conservation	Social Services
Civic Organizations	Farm Bureau	Financial Institutions
Homeschool & Alternative Education	Agricultural Supply Dealers	Parenting & Family Groups
Parenting & Family Groups	Economic Development Groups	Food & Nutrition Services
Youth & Family Service Providers	Commodity Groups	Court Referral Services
Youth Advisory Groups	Agriculture Lending Institutions	Prevention Service Providers
Youth Mental Health Providers		Healthcare Service Providers

- Connect the new hire to local marketing, social media, and other outlets.
- Review major events, committees, and other networking opportunities in the area.
- Help link the new hire to additional resources at the local and district level, including local businesses, for programmatic supplies.
- Encourage partnerships that help address the unit's priority issues and set goals in line with the identified needs in your community along with guidance from the District Director.

Ongoing Support

- Maintain awareness of state and local onboarding requirements; help balance local pressures for programming in the first year.
- Be a liaison between your new agent and your locality: advocate healthy boundaries and expectations given the significant training and travel requirements the new hire has in the first year of employment.
- Provide a supportive relationship and establish regular check-ins with new hires to:
 - Review professional development opportunities.
 - Identify training gaps and help new hires communicate needs to relevant VCE leadership.
 - Review progress and roadblocks related to the goals of the new hire.

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