



Lesley Petersen
The Mentoring Specialist

Aquaculture New Zealand Mentoring and Coaching Pilot Programme

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Methodology.....	5
Evaluation Activities	5
Programme Activities.....	6
Programme needs analysis	6
Mentor-mentee partnership matching	6
Programme launch	7
Training Workshops.....	7
Mentor-mentee partnerships.....	8
Communities of Practice (CoP).....	8
Webinar Series	8
Findings	8
Training Workshops.....	9
Mentee Training Experience	9
Mentor Training Experience	9
The Mentoring Partnerships	10
Mentors' Feedback	10
Mentees' Feedback	11
Community of Practice (CoP) meetings	11
The Mentors	12
The Mentees	12
Community of Practice no.3.....	13
Webinar Series.....	13
Conclusion	14
Insights for Future Programme Design	14
Proposed programme model for future implementation	15
Figure 1. Mentoring and Coaching Programme Model.....	17
Recommendations	19
Appendix 1. AQNZ Mentoring Toolkit.....	20
Appendix 2: Mid-programme Check-in Evaluation Questions	28
Appendix 3: Final Evaluation Questions	29

Executive Summary

The Aquaculture New Zealand (AQNZ) mentoring and coaching pilot programme, funded by the Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), was designed to support the growth and retention of emerging leaders within the aquaculture sector. Initiated in response to earlier industry workforce insights, the pilot aimed to develop an evidence-informed mentoring model tailored to the sector's leadership capability needs, emerging through the design, delivery, and evaluation of the programme.

A six-month pilot was delivered to a cohort of fourteen participants – seven mentors and seven mentees - representing a diverse range of aquaculture enterprises across Aotearoa New Zealand, including oyster, salmon, and sustainable seafood operations. The programme design was shaped by an initial needs analysis, which helped clarify how mentoring and coaching could support leadership growth.

Participants engaged in structured monthly mentoring meetings, training workshops, and group learning sessions designed to enhance their leadership knowledge, confidence, and communication skills. Insights from this analysis informed the structure and activities of the pilot, including a mentor-mentee matching process, a virtual meet-and-greet event, training workshops for both mentors and mentees, monthly partnership meetings, and development of mentoring resources such as templates and checklists to support relationship development and goal-setting. The programme also offered group learning opportunities through a series of Community of Practice (CoP) meetings and webinars focused on leadership and communication.

The CoP meetings were highly regarded by both groups as a valuable space to explore challenges, build sector connections, and share resources. These sessions created a trusted space for mentors and mentees to explore challenges, share insights, and strengthen their leadership and mentoring practice. Two webinars contributed meaningfully to the pilot outcomes, reinforcing the programme's emphasis on reflective leadership and inclusive practice. The *Leadership through a Māori Lens* session deepened participants' understanding of mana-enhancing approaches and values-driven leadership, while the *Having the Difficult Conversation* webinar helped participants manage sensitive interactions with greater awareness and confidence.

Evaluation was integrated throughout the programme, using an iterative approach to capture participant insights and inform ongoing improvements. Data was gathered at multiple points via a midpoint check-in, the CoP meetings, and informal feedback loops. The training workshops also provided early insight into participant expectations and experiences. This layered approach enabled a responsive evaluation process that strengthened the relevance and impact of the programme.

Mentees reported improved confidence, greater clarity in their roles, and enhanced communication skills. Mentors noted increased reflection on their own leadership style and valued the opportunity to give back to the sector. Suggestions for future improvement, raised through these sessions and other feedback mechanisms, included

more role clarity upfront, regular check-ins, and stronger alignment between mentor and mentee expectations and goals.

Several operational insights emerged through the programme coordinator's observations. These included the need for longer lead times for mentee recruitment, more structured mentor-mentee matching that accounts for sector dynamics, and earlier engagement with line managers. Clarity around online meeting platforms and reinforcing the importance of attending the initial training workshops were also noted as important for strengthening participant commitment and programme cohesion.

Two key outputs aligned with the aims of the pilot include the development of an evidence-informed, five-phase mentoring and coaching programme model and the creation of a Mentoring Toolkit containing practical checklists and templates to support the mentoring partnerships, mentees' goal-setting, and reflective learning. The programme model offers a flexible and scalable structure for future delivery within AQNZ and across the wider food and fibre sector.

The findings from this pilot highlighted several ways the programme could be strengthened in future iterations, for example, improving early communication with managers to support mentee engagement and embedding te ao Māori into the programme design and delivery. Additional recommendations are outlined at the end of this report to help guide the refinement and scaling of the programme across the aquaculture and broader food and fibre sectors.

Introduction

The Aquaculture New Zealand (AQNZ) mentoring and coaching pilot programme was established to support the retention and development of emerging leaders within the aquaculture sector. Initiated in response to findings from the 2013 Workforce Perception Survey and subsequent employer advisory group discussions, the pilot aimed to identify and trial a mentoring approach tailored to the unique needs of AQNZ's emerging leaders. This initiative was funded by Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), who also expressed interest in exploring how the mentoring model and resources could be adapted for wider application across the broader food and fibre sector.

The project included a staged design and delivery approach: conducting a needs analysis to inform programme design; selecting appropriate mentoring resources and participant support strategies; delivering the pilot programme to a group of fourteen participants; and evaluating its outcomes and applicability for wider sector use. A mentoring model was developed and refined through the pilot, shaped by participant experiences and ongoing feedback, with structured resources and training intentionally embedded into its design. Mentors and mentees received a Mentoring Toolkit (Appendix 1) that included templates, checklists, and guidance to support their roles and optimise the partnership experience. The final phase of the project involved capturing and reporting on the process, outcomes, and insights gained through the pilot to inform future mentoring provision within AQNZ and beyond.

Methodology

The pilot programme was piloted over a six-month period with a group of fourteen participants in various leadership roles, comprising seven mentors and seven mentees representing diverse aquaculture enterprises across Aotearoa New Zealand. The pilot followed a staged implementation approach, grounded in qualitative inquiry and participant engagement. The programme model that was developed through the pilot was informed by the principles of good practice defined in mentoring rubrics created for Food and Fibre CoVE, which emphasise structured design, reflective practice, and continuous improvement (2025, foodandfibrecove.nz/vocational-excellence-rubrics/).

Formative and summative evaluation activities were integrated throughout the programme. Thematic analysis was applied to identify common themes, programme strengths, and opportunities for refinement. This approach enabled an iterative and responsive delivery model, with participant voices shaping both the ongoing experience and future recommendations.

Evaluation Activities

Ongoing evaluation formed a key element of the programme methodology, with structured reflection points embedded at the mid-point and conclusion. Evaluation activities aimed to track progress, gather participant feedback, and provide insights to support immediate improvements and shape future iterations of the programme.

Mentors and mentees completed a mid-programme evaluation through an online questionnaire (Appendix 2). Participants were invited to reflect on the value and frequency of their one-to-one meetings, progress towards the mentee's goals, any challenges encountered, and whether additional support was needed. These responses provided early insights into how the partnerships were progressing and helped guide adjustments for the remainder of the programme.

Importantly, the CoPs offered an additional layer of formative evaluation throughout the programme. These group-based sessions, held separately for mentors and mentees, created regular opportunities to reflect on what was working well, identify challenges, and suggest improvements. The CoPs enabled an iterative approach to evaluation, allowing programme adjustments to be informed by participant experiences in real time.

The final evaluation was embedded into the third and final mentor and mentee CoP meetings (Appendix 3). Participants were asked to reflect on their overall programme experience, including the strengths and limitations of the mentoring partnerships, the usefulness of tools and activities, and suggestions for future enhancements. Capturing feedback in this group-based format generated practical insights that informed the programme's final evaluation and recommendations.

Programme Activities

Programme needs analysis

As the first phase in the programme development process, a preliminary needs analysis was conducted with the AQNZ Workforce Implementation Lead, who also served as the pilot programme coordinator. The purpose of this discussion was to gather early insights to shape the programme design and ensure its relevance for the aquaculture sector. The conversation highlighted the importance of tailoring the mentoring and coaching approach to reflect industry realities, including seasonal pressures, geographic spread, and varying levels of leadership experience across enterprises. Flexibility, relationship-building, and a clear programme structure were identified as essential to support effective mentor and mentee engagement. The Workforce Implementation Lead also emphasised the importance of including Māori mentors, bringing attention to the need to embed equity and cultural responsiveness into the programme approach from the outset.

Other key themes that emerged included the absence of formal leadership pathways for early- and mid-career professionals across the aquaculture sector. While technical expertise is typically gained on the job, many individuals lacked structured support or opportunities to reflect on their leadership practice. Mentoring and coaching were viewed as practical and timely solutions, offering developmental support whilst also strengthening sector relationships and building confidence among emerging leaders. Several strategic drivers and design priorities were identified to guide the programme approach:

- The need to build sector-wide leadership capability and address succession planning.
- Gaps in professional support for those in regional, emerging, or niche aquaculture roles.
- A desire to affirm and develop new leaders through connection, reflection, and peer learning.
- Opportunities to enhance sector cohesion and reduce professional isolation.

Practical suggestions included providing early communications to employers and managers, offering robust training and onboarding resources, and ensuring clarity around expectations for both mentors and mentees. These foundational insights directly informed the initial programme framing and the development of tools and activities to support implementation.

Mentor-mentee partnership matching

Expression of Interest (EOI) forms were developed for both mentors and mentees. These forms outlined the programme's structure, expectations, and commitments, including engaging in the training workshops, monthly partnership meetings, participation in CoP meetings, and attendance at the professional development webinars. Applicants were asked to describe their motivations for participating, what they hoped to gain, the skills or experience they could bring (mentors), and the areas in which they sought support (mentees).

Using data from the EOI forms, a structured matching process was carried out. Each mentee was matched with a mentor based on compatibility of goals, experience, and areas of development. Seven partnerships were established representative of key areas within the sector, including oyster, salmon, and sustainable seafood.

Programme launch

Following the matching of the partnerships, the programme was formally launched through an online Meet & Greet event held on 13 February 2025. This event served as an informal starting point for the pilot, bringing all participants together in a shared space before beginning their mentoring journey. The purpose was to introduce the programme structure and expectations, clarify roles, and build early rapport between participants. Hosted by the AQNZ Workforce Implementation Lead, the session reinforced the programme's purpose and aims and highlighted the core activities participants would engage in over the six-month period.

The Meet & Greet created space for each mentor and mentee to introduce themselves and share their motivations, professional interests, and experience with mentoring. Participants shared what they hoped to gain, identified their strengths, and discussed what success might look like in their mentoring relationship. This event provided early momentum for the mentoring partnerships and reinforced the programme's commitment to relationship-building, sector connectivity, and reflective leadership development.

Training Workshops

Separate online training workshops were facilitated with the mentors and the mentees in the early stages of the programme to build capability and ensure clarity of roles. These sessions explored the key responsibilities of the mentoring roles and outlined the resources available to support effective partnerships. Both sessions introduced participants to a range of practical tools and provided opportunities for individual reflection and group discussion.

For mentors, the workshop focused on developing confidence in guiding emerging professionals, balancing support and challenge,

For mentees, the workshop focused on clarifying their role, building confidence in supporting their mentees, and strengthening key communication skills such as active listening and asking purposeful, open-ended questions. They also had the opportunity to discuss strategies for navigating common mentoring scenarios such as boundary-setting and mentee motivation. The mentees were guided through setting their goals, understanding how to get the most out of the mentoring relationship, and preparing for conversations that would support their leadership development. All participants were provided with the Mentoring Toolkit to help them structure conversations and track mentee progress.

Participant feedback on the training sessions was very positive. Both groups appreciated the clarity, relevance, and supportive tone of the sessions, with several noting that the training helped them feel more prepared and confident to engage in their roles.

Mentor-mentee partnerships

The core of the programme centred around partnerships between experienced leaders (mentors) and early- to mid-career professionals (mentees) working in the aquaculture sector. These partnerships were designed to provide mentees with structured leadership support, sector insight, and a trusted sounding board for reflection. Mentors contributed their time and experience voluntarily, and participants represented diverse roles and regions across the Aotearoa New Zealand aquaculture industry.

Each partnership was encouraged to meet monthly over the six-month programme, with flexibility in how and when meetings occurred. To support these engagements, both mentors and mentees were encouraged to use the resources provided in the Mentoring Toolkit to guide their discussions and help ensure meetings were meaningful and productive. These tools also aimed to build confidence in mentoring practice, particularly for those new to the mentor role. The partnership format provided a confidential space for mentees to test ideas, explore challenges, and grow their leadership capability through reflection and personalised support.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

To complement the one-to-one mentoring partnerships, a series of three CoP meetings were held separately for mentors and mentees during the pilot. These sessions provided a structured, facilitated space for participants to reflect on their experiences, share practice-based insights, and engage in peer-to-peer learning. The CoP model was intentionally embedded within the programme design to reinforce principles of reflective practice, collaboration, and continuous improvement. The third and final CoP meeting also served as an opportunity to gather feedback as part of the final evaluation.

Webinar Series

Two leadership-focused webinars were delivered during the pilot to support mentor and mentee development. The first explored how to approach difficult conversations with clarity and empathy, introducing a four-step framework to build confidence in navigating challenging interactions. The second webinar offered a values-based perspective on leadership through a Māori lens, encouraging participants to reflect on identity, relational responsibility, and legacy. Together, these sessions reinforced the programme's aim on growing confident, culturally grounded leaders within the aquaculture industry.

Findings

The findings from the pilot programme draw on a range of data sources collected throughout its duration, including structured evaluations, participant reflections, and the facilitated group activities. Insights gathered across these touchpoints shaped the evolving design of the mentoring model and highlighted what mattered most to participants.

The following sections present key findings drawn from participant voices, illustrating what worked well and where enhancements could be made. Together, they offer a comprehensive picture of how the programme was experienced by mentors, mentees,

and the programme coordinator, and the ways in which the programme's design features contributed to its overall effectiveness.

Training Workshops

The first programme phase focused on participant preparation and onboarding. This included separate training workshops for the mentors and mentees, designed to equip them with the knowledge, tools, and clarity needed to begin their partnerships confidently.

Mentee Training Experience

The training workshop played a pivotal role in helping mentees understand their role and responsibilities within the mentoring partnership. It reinforced the importance of taking ownership of the process, particularly in setting clear goals, preparing for meetings, and communicating openly with their mentor. Mentees reported that this clarity helped boost their confidence and made the mentoring relationship more productive. As one mentee commented, *"It helped me realise that mentoring isn't just something that happens to me; I need to drive it."*

There was a strong emphasis on developing self-awareness and becoming receptive to feedback, both key leadership behaviours. The practical strategies discussed in the workshop prompted mentees to approach the mentoring experience with greater intention and structure. As one mentee reflected, *"I hadn't realised how much I needed to come prepared and have clear goals. I've approached each meeting much more intentionally since."* This feedback indicates that the training not only clarified expectations but also positively influenced mentees' engagement and leadership mindset throughout the programme.

Mentor Training Experience

The mentor training focused on building confidence in supporting emerging professionals through non-directive, developmental conversations. The workshop introduced several practical strategies to strengthen the mentoring relationship, including how to build trust, clarify expectations, manage boundaries, and respond to different learning styles. Mentors were encouraged to create space for mentee reflection, ask open-ended questions, and support mentees in working through challenges themselves. One mentor shared, *"The training made me think differently about how I offer support. It's not about telling them what to do but helping them figure it out for themselves."*

Mentors also explored key communication techniques such as deep listening, giving constructive feedback, and knowing when to step in with support versus when to let the mentee take the lead. As one mentor stated, *"It reminded me to slow down, listen more, and trust the process. That's where the growth really happens, for both of us."* These skills were reinforced through discussion of mentoring scenarios and common challenges. The mentors valued the opportunity to connect with each other, reflect on their own leadership practice, and clarify their role.

Overall, the training sessions were well received. Participants valued the dedicated time to build capability and enter the mentoring relationship with clarity. As one mentor commented, *“It set the tone for what we could expect and how to get the most out of it.”*

The Mentoring Partnerships

After completing their initial training, participants commenced their mentoring partnerships. These partnerships formed the core of the programme, providing structured yet flexible opportunities for guided learning and leadership development. Each partnership paired an experienced aquaculture leader with an emerging leader, cultivating a relationship grounded in sector understanding, mutual respect, and developmental intent.

Through regular meetings, mentors and mentees engaged in conversations that explored real-world leadership challenges, strengthened critical thinking, and supported confidence-building.

The feedback provided by the mentors and the mentees on their partnership experience highlighted the depth of learning, the relational quality of the partnerships, and the overall impact on leadership capability development. The following two sections present findings from each group, using participant reflections to illustrate what worked well and what could be enhanced in future iterations.

Mentors' Feedback

Mentors found their participation to be both personally and professionally rewarding, with many describing the experience as mutually beneficial. As one mentor noted, *“It was a two-way street. I think I gained just as much as I gave.”* Early in the programme, mentors emphasised the importance of structure and consistency, with most partnerships meeting monthly or fortnightly for focused, reflective conversations.

Mentors observed significant growth in their mentees' confidence, leadership capability, and communication skills, particularly around managing difficult conversations and building team relationships. For example, some mentees shifted from directive to more inclusive leadership approaches; in some cases, colleagues of mentees provided informal feedback that validated these observed changes.

Mentors themselves experienced personal growth, particularly in terms of self-awareness and leadership reflection. Many reported becoming more intentional in how they lead and mentor, learning to step back, ask better questions, and creating opportunities for mentees to reflect. As one mentor explained, *“I became much more conscious of how I show up in conversations. Instead of jumping in with advice, I learned to pause, ask better questions, and create space for the mentee to respond.”* This shift in approach not only strengthened the mentoring relationships but also contributed to mentors' own professional development as leaders.

Mentors valued the resources and support provided, including the CoPs and webinars, however, they made several suggestions for improvement. These included better scheduling support, early engagement with managers, improved virtual meeting

etiquette, and the inclusion of face-to-face opportunities when feasible. As one mentor noted, *“Getting managers onboard early would definitely lift the impact. It connects the dots back at work.”*

Most partnerships were described as positive and well-functioning, underpinned by trust and shared commitment. However, a small number experienced disruption due to changes in work circumstances or limited engagement. Mentors highlighted the importance of setting expectations early and ensuring consistent follow-through.

Finally, mentors recognised the programme as a strong and scalable model for leadership development within the aquaculture sector. *“It’s a privilege to be part of something that’s growing people, not just skills.”*

Mentees’ Feedback

Mentees described their experience as transformative, reflecting positively on the impact the mentoring relationship had on their confidence and leadership development. The safe space created by their mentors allowed them to explore leadership challenges more openly, especially around topics such as team management, strategic thinking, and communication.

A common theme was the value of being heard without judgement and being guided rather than directed. One mentee reflected, *“He didn’t tell me what to do, he helped me think it through for myself. That’s where the real learning happened for me.”* Mentees particularly appreciated having a mentor outside their immediate workplace, offering a neutral and experienced sounding board. Many reported feeling more confident in holding difficult conversations, leading others, and identifying their strengths and priorities.

The frequency and quality of meetings varied slightly, but most mentees reported meeting at least monthly and appreciated when meetings were well-prepared and purposeful. A few mentees expressed frustration when scheduling became inconsistent or when sessions lacked depth. They recommended clearer expectations at the outset, both for themselves and their mentors. They also suggested earlier communication with their managers, more structured support for goal-setting, and greater guidance on how to maximise the mentoring experience. Participants found the Mentoring Toolkit helpful, also suggesting that they would have benefitted from a clearer walkthrough of how to use it early on in the programme.

Overall, the feedback was very positive. Mentees saw themselves as more equipped to lead their teams, make strategic decisions, and influence others. As one participant put it, *“It made me think differently about how I want to show up as a leader.”*

Community of Practice (CoP) meetings

The CoP component was embedded in the programme as a structured yet informal space for shared learning, reflection, and professional exchange. Held quarterly in separate mentor and mentee groups, these sessions complemented the mentoring

partnerships by enabling participants to connect with each other, build networks, and enhance learning through shared insight and peer support.

The Mentors

During their CoP meetings, mentors shared insights on maintaining boundaries, managing the balance between support and direction, and reflecting on their own leadership styles. Many described the shift from 'problem-solver' to 'guide', highlighting how mentoring challenged them to step back and support mentees in finding their own solutions. As one mentor reflected, *"It has helped me reflect on how I listen. I'm used to solving problems quickly, but this space reminds me that mentoring is more about guiding than fixing."* Another mentor shared, *"I've realised how important it is to let the mentee take the lead. It's not always easy to hold back, but that's where their growth happens."*

The meetings provided a valuable opportunity for mentors to share diverse strategies and learn from each other's experiences. Topics included how to frame effective mentoring conversations, support mentees through challenging dynamics, and encourage goal setting without taking over. The exchange of ideas encouraged greater self-awareness, with several mentors commenting that the CoP had improved their confidence and strengthened their own leadership practice. Many expressed strong interest in continuing the CoP format beyond the pilot, noting its role in building professional networks and sustaining reflective leadership practice within the sector.

The Mentees

Mentees valued the safe, informal setting to share challenges and learn from peers. The CoP sessions provided a platform to explore practical issues such as team dynamics, career progression, and how to make the most of their mentoring sessions. Participants appreciated the opportunity to hear from others, noting how helpful it was to learn what approaches their peers were using in their one-to-one meetings. As one mentee reflected, *"I liked hearing how others set goals or structured their meetings. I've picked up ideas I want to try."*

The CoP sessions helped normalise the ups and downs of the mentoring experience. For example, one mentee commented, *"It helped me realise others were going through similar things as I was."* Other mentees highlighted how their relationships had deepened over time and that they were beginning to feel more confident in bringing challenging topics to their mentor. *"I'm feeling more comfortable to bring challenging topics to my mentor. It's getting easier to open up and ask for advice."*

Across both CoPs, the emphasis on reflective practice and peer connection stood out as key contributors to leadership growth and confidence building. These sessions offered a trusted space for participants to share challenges, exchange strategies, and gain insights that supported their development as both mentors and mentees.

Community of Practice no.3

The third and final CoP meeting served as both a concluding reflection point and an opportunity for collaborative evaluation of the programme. Participants revisited their mentoring experiences, shared insights into what worked well, and discussed areas for potential improvement. Mentees spoke about how their confidence and self-belief had grown over the course of the programme, especially through the support and validation received from their mentors. One participant noted, “*Being mentored by someone who understands my world has been a real gift.*”

Mentors, too, reflected on the power of stepping back, holding space, and guiding rather than directing. Several commented that their own leadership had shifted as a result of mentoring, as they found themselves listening more attentively and trusting the process. The CoP setting enabled both groups to learn from each other’s perspectives and collectively articulate the unique features that made the programme valuable.

Participants also identified key enablers of success, including the strength of the mentor-mentee matches, the Mentoring Toolkit of resources, and the space for facilitated peer conversations in the CoP meetings. The CoP meetings in particular highlighted how open, reflective conversations helped deepen learning and strengthen the programme. They provided valuable opportunities for both mentors and mentees to share their experiences, learn from one another, and build confidence in their leadership practice.

Webinar Series

Two targeted webinars were offered during the programme to extend participants’ learning and leadership development. These sessions complemented the mentoring partnerships and the CoP forums by introducing new tools, perspectives, and a reflective space.

The first webinar, ‘*Having the Difficult Conversation*’, was facilitated by the project lead and focused on practical skills for preparing and managing performance-related discussions. It introduced a four-step model for difficult conversations and highlighted strategies for building trust and reducing defensiveness. Participants appreciated the clear structure and opportunity to link the content directly to their mentoring and workplace leadership roles.

The second webinar, ‘*Leadership through a Māori Lens*’, was facilitated by a respected Māori leader in education and explored culturally grounded leadership values such as whanaungatanga (relationships), manaakitanga (care), and mana (integrity). The session invited participants to reflect on their own leadership through these concepts and introduced a values-based approach to navigating complexity. Participants found the session deeply thought-provoking and relevant to both personal and organisational contexts.

Both sessions were seen as valuable additions to the programme, though participants recommended ensuring that future webinars are closely aligned to sector realities and inclusive of diverse leadership perspectives. The combination of expert input and peer

discussion created a platform for reflection, learning, and practical takeaway for emerging and experienced leaders alike.

In summary, the findings illustrate a well-received and high-impact pilot programme that successfully supported both emerging and experienced leaders through structured mentoring partnerships and complementary activities. Across all elements - mentor and mentee feedback, training, Communities of Practice, and the webinar series - participants reported growth in confidence, leadership capability, and reflective practice. The one-to-one mentoring partnerships provided a valuable approach for developmental conversations, while the group-based activities added depth through peer learning and broader leadership insights.

Feedback gathered throughout the duration of the pilot also surfaced important recommendations for improving structure, communication, and manager engagement in future iterations. These findings offer a strong foundation for refining and scaling the mentoring programme to support leadership development across the aquaculture sector and the wider food and fibre sector. They are outlined in detail in the Recommendations section of this report.

Conclusion

This mentoring and coaching pilot has shown that a well-structured, sector-tailored programme can meaningfully support leadership development. Across the six-month period, participants engaged in one-to-one mentoring partnerships, training workshops, peer learning activities, and iterative evaluation processes. The combination of intentional design, flexible delivery, and evidence-informed adjustments contributed to strong engagement and positive feedback from both mentors and mentees.

Mentors described the programme as personally and professionally rewarding, with many highlighting its mutual value and the satisfaction of supporting emerging leaders. Mentees reflected on increased confidence, clarity in leadership style, and strengthened skills in areas such as strategic thinking, communication, and self-awareness. Both groups valued the inclusion of the Mentoring Toolkit, CoP meetings, and the webinars, which provided an additional source of professional development.

The programme's strength was its iterative design, which allowed for ongoing refinement and responsiveness to participant needs. Ongoing evaluation activities, particularly through mid-programme check-ins and the final CoP meeting, surfaced valuable suggestions for enhancement, including clearer early communications, improved scheduling processes, and stronger alignment with industry contexts. These insights now form an evidence base to guide future iterations.

Insights for Future Programme Design

In her role as programme coordinator, the AQNZ Workforce Implementation Lead offered valuable operational reflections to inform future programme design and delivery. A key

insight was the importance of allowing adequate lead-in time for mentee recruitment and the EOI process. When delivery is aligned with semester or seasonal industry timelines, this preparation period becomes even more critical to ensure engagement, clarity, and commitment from the outset.

The matching of mentors and mentees also emerged as a vital area requiring careful thought and planning. Sector-specific factors such as business competition, organisational sensitivities, and varying leadership development needs require a structured yet flexible matching process. The coordinator recommended the development of a centralised mentor/mentee database or matching matrix to support more efficient and appropriate pairings in future iterations. It was also noted that mentors should not self-select their mentees, and this expectation should be clearly communicated.

From a communications and logistics perspective, several practical improvements were identified. These included ensuring consistency across meeting platforms (for example, disabling Teams when Zoom is being used) and establishing clear lines of communication for participants. Involving managers earlier in the process, particularly through the initial meet-and-greet event, was seen as a missed opportunity in the pilot. Earlier engagement could help managers better understand their role, support the mentee more effectively, and reduce the need for follow-up communications. The coordinator also emphasised the importance of both mentees and their managers attending the initial training session. This joint participation helps to reinforce the purpose and structure of the programme, establish shared expectations, and signal commitment to the mentoring relationship. When these early touchpoints are coordinated effectively, they lay a strong foundation for trust, momentum, and meaningful engagement throughout the programme.

As part of the programme's continued development, a plan is underway to more intentionally integrate te ao Māori into the mentoring model and supporting resources. This includes reviewing language, frameworks, and tools to reflect culturally responsive practice. Embedding these perspectives not only enhances inclusivity but also ensures that the programme reflects the cultural context and values of Aotearoa New Zealand. This work aligns with sector-wide aspirations to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and strengthen cultural capability across the food and fibre sectors.

Collectively, these reflections reinforce the importance of planning, clarity, and shared responsibility in ensuring the success and sustainability of mentoring initiatives. They offer practical, transferable lessons for future iterations within the aquaculture sector and the wider food and fibre industry.

Proposed programme model for future implementation

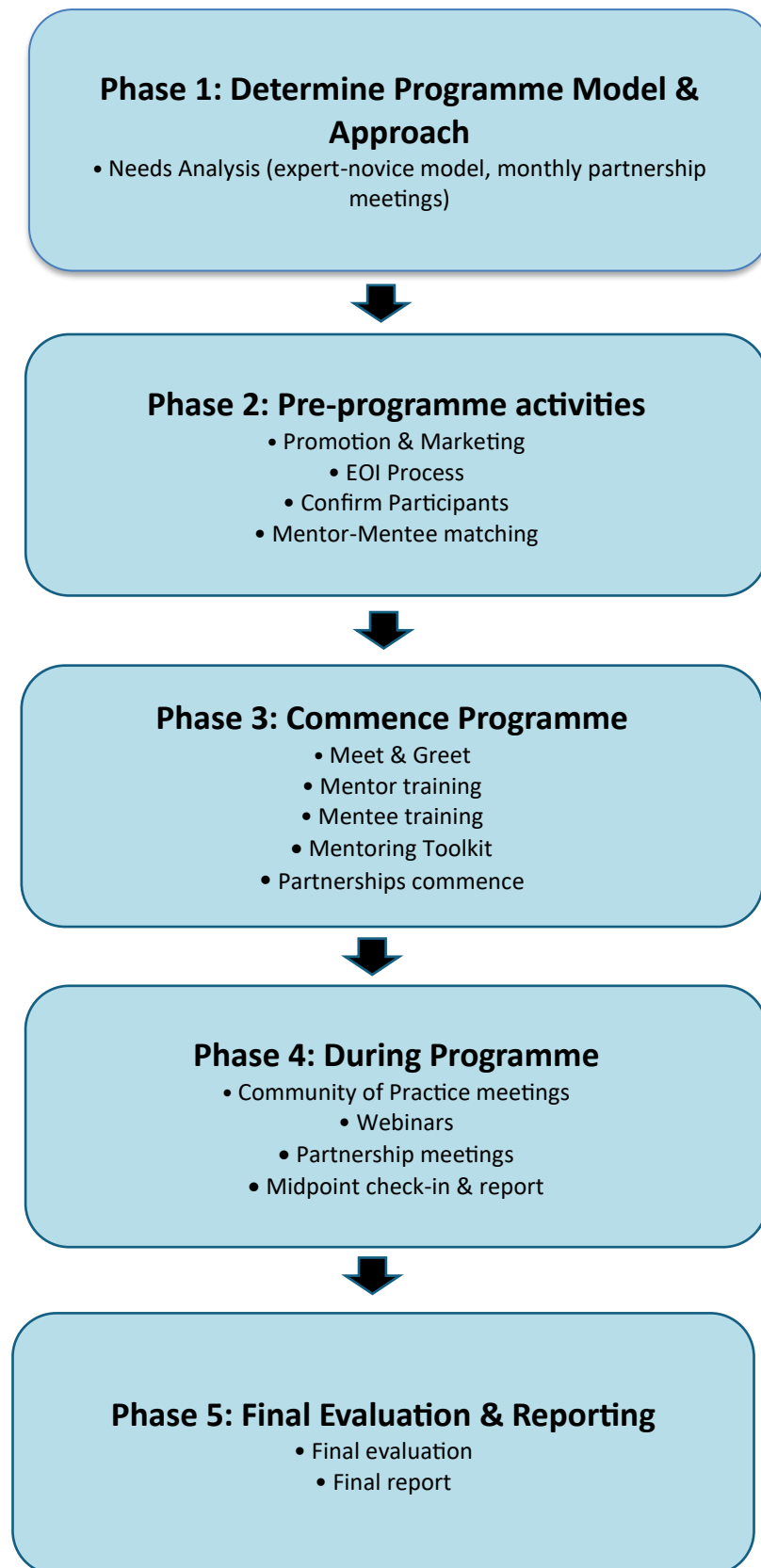
Informed by the design and delivery of the pilot programme, the following five-phase model offers a flexible and scalable framework to guide future implementation of mentoring and coaching initiatives across aquaculture and broader food and fibre sectors. It presents a step-by-step approach to supporting and strengthening leadership

capability in ways that are practical, people-focused, and relevant to everyday industry practice.

Building on the programme's key elements, the model outlines core activities and engagement points across the mentoring lifecycle, from early planning and participant onboarding to evaluation and reporting. It incorporates foundational features such as mentoring pairs, structured monthly partnership meetings, and the Mentoring Toolkit developed during this pilot. The model is further enriched by integrated group learning opportunities, including webinars and CoPs, which extend learning beyond the one-to-one partnerships.

The model evolved over the course of the pilot, shaped by good practice principles in leadership development and adult learning, and strengthened through evidence gathered from a preliminary needs analysis, structured midpoint and final evaluations, and ongoing participant feedback, all of which contributed to a responsive and continuously improving programme design. Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the five interconnected phases that illustrate the structure and delivery approach of the mentoring and coaching model. These phases form a flexible framework that can be adapted and applied across sectors to support the development of emerging leaders in ways that are sustainable, inclusive, and contextually relevant. Accompanying the diagram is a more detailed explanation of each phase, offering a practical reference for those seeking to design or implement a mentoring and coaching programme using this model.

Figure 1. Mentoring and Coaching Programme Model



Programme Model: Phase Descriptions

The following descriptions are intended to support programme coordinators, sector bodies, or employers in further understanding how to implement the model in practice, with each phase representing a critical step in the design, delivery, and evaluation of a successful mentoring and coaching programme.

Phase 1: Scoping and Design

This phase involves identifying the purpose and objectives of the mentoring and coaching programme, as well as gathering input from key stakeholders across the sector. It typically includes a needs analysis to understand organisational goals, existing capability gaps, and priorities. Programme structure, eligibility, timelines, and participant expectations are defined.

Phase 2: Recruitment and Matching

During this phase, organisations promote the programme and invite applications from prospective mentors and mentees. Participant selection processes are established using an expression of interest (EOI), and a structured matching process is used to create partnerships. The matching process considers factors such as expertise, leadership interests, and compatibility to support successful mentor-mentee relationships.

Phase 3: Orientation and Training

Once participants are confirmed, a joint orientation session is held to clarify roles, responsibilities, and programme processes. Mentor and mentee training workshops introduce participants to key tools and resources, including a mentoring toolkit of resources, and begin to establish expectations for their partnership.

Phase 4: Engagement and Learning

Over the course of the programme, partnerships meet regularly (for example, monthly) to focus on mentoring goals and leadership development. Additional group learning activities such as webinars and Community of Practice (CoP) meetings are used to enrich the learning experience, encourage peer connection and collaboration, and provide guided reflection opportunities.

Phase 5: Review and Evaluation

This final phase focuses on gathering feedback from participants, evaluating programme outcomes, and identifying improvement areas. Evaluation methods may include midpoint and final surveys, individual reflections, and CoP discussions. Findings are used to refine the programme design and support planning for future iterations.

Recommendations

The findings from this pilot programme provide a strong foundation for informing mentoring and coaching initiatives in the aquaculture sector and beyond. Drawing on participant feedback, programme coordinator reflections, and evaluation data collected throughout the pilot, the following recommendations aim to support the refinement, scalability, and sustainability of future rollouts. They reflect both strategic and operational considerations to ensure the programme remains responsive, inclusive, and effective.

1. Allocate sufficient lead-in time for programme planning

Ensure adequate lead time for mentee and mentor recruitment and partnership matching by aligning programme timelines with seasonal and operational calendars in the sector. This will support participant readiness and allow more effective coordination.

2. Early engagement with employers and managers

Earlier communication with mentees' managers before programme commencement would encourage organisation buy-in, clarify expectations, and reinforce the value of the mentoring relationship in the workplace context. Include managers in the orientation and/or training phase.

3. Continue communities of practice (CoP)

Retain CoPs as a core component and strengthen in future programme cycles by incorporating options such as joint mentor-mentee sessions and resource-sharing platforms.

4. Standardise meeting platforms and provide clear virtual meeting protocols

Consistently use a single virtual meeting platform. Participants may benefit from guidance on virtual etiquette and tips for engaging meaningfully in online mentoring and group sessions.

5. Embed evaluation as a core design feature

Embed evaluation as intentional touchpoints throughout the programme to ensure responsiveness to participant needs and capturing outcomes effectively.

6. Embed te ao Māori principles and practices

Integrate te ao Māori into all phases of programme design and delivery, including culturally responsive language, frameworks, and support tools that reflect the values, knowledge systems, and leadership practices of Māori. This will enhance the programme's relevance, inclusivity, and ability to meet the diverse needs of participants across Aotearoa New Zealand's food and fibre sectors.

7. Promote the model as a sector-wide capability tool

The five-phase model developed from this pilot provides a strong foundation for future leadership mentoring and coaching initiatives. Promote the model across aquaculture and related food and fibre sectors as a practical, evidence-informed framework to guide programme implementation, adaptation, and scaling to support leadership development at all levels.

Appendix 1. AQNZ Mentoring Toolkit

Mentoring Agreement

This agreement supports the mentoring partnership between:

Mentor: _____ and

Mentee: _____

Date: _____

Agreed Objectives

Mentee (What I want to achieve through this mentoring partnership....):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Mentor (I will provide help in the following ways.....):

The ground rules for our mentoring partnership are:

[These should include your agreed responses to issues of confidentiality, time commitment, program of formal meetings, availability (when and where you can both be contacted between formal meetings), how you will review and revise the partnership arrangements].

Reviewing partnership purpose and objectives: (It is a good idea to review this agreement and your objectives at regular intervals).

We will review this agreement on: _____ (date)

The First Mentoring Meeting Checklist

Decisions/Actions	Who	Notes
Decide on the purpose of the mentoring support for the mentee		
Set ground rules to maintain focus of the meetings		
Clarify role expectations		
Decide when you will meet (set dates in advance)		
Decide how often you will meet (weekly, fortnightly, monthly)		
Decide where you will meet (carefully select the environment where meetings take place)		
Decide how long the meetings will be (30mins, 1 hour?)		
Decide on the structure of the meetings (how you will start, continue, and finish each meeting)		
Decide who will arrange the meetings		
What is the process if one person can't make the scheduled meeting?		
The mentee identifies goals for their learning and development		
Decide how the mentor can support the mentee to achieve their goals (helps direct the focus of the meetings)		
Decide on a feedback process		

The Mentee's Goal Sheet

Mentee's Development Plan	
Name:	Date:
Goal:	
What date will I achieve this goal?	
What outcomes do I want to achieve?	
What skills and/or knowledge will I have developed through achievement of this goal?	
Three things my mentor can help me with: 1. 2. 3.	
Challenges along the way – how can my mentor support me?	

Feedback Self-assessment Checklist

How well do I give feedback?

	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
I choose an appropriate time and place to give feedback			
I really listen to the responses of the person I am giving feedback to			
I focus on the steps in the feedback process to keep the discussion specific and on track			
I clarify my expectations if there is any confusion about my feedback			
I encourage the other person to give me feedback as well			
I try to understand feedback from the other person's point of view			
I am aware of different communication styles that may not be the same as mine			

How well do I receive feedback?

	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
I keep the feedback in perspective and don't overreact			
I try to learn from all feedback I receive			
I really listen to the feedback being given			
I focus on the steps in the feedback process to keep the discussion specific and on track			
I clarify meaning if I am confused about the feedback I am given			
I keep my emotions in check			
I am willing to learn from feedback			
I am committed to listening and learning in every feedback opportunity			
I am aware of different communication styles that may not be the same as mine			

Mentor Self-review Checklist

Increasing the depth of your mentoring practice is achieved through enhanced self-understanding. This self-review checklist intends to help you regularly reflect on your mentoring practice prior to, during and following the mentoring partnership.

Self-evaluation Question	Your Reflection
Why am I providing mentoring support for my mentee?	
Why is this important?	
What do I think I am influencing through my mentoring support?	
How is my mentee benefitting from this mentoring support?	
What is working well?	
What is challenging?	
What would/could I do differently?	
What would I do the same?	
What could be improved in the partnership?	
How am I benefitting from the mentoring partnership?	
How has the mentoring changed me?	

Mentee Self-review Checklist

1.	How I am working towards achieving my goals.	
2.	What is going well?	
3.	What is a problem I am facing and why is it a problem?	
4.	What are some things I can do or ask my mentor's advice on to deal with the problem?	
5.	Skills and knowledge that I am developing.	
6.	What new ideas am I gaining from the mentoring partnership?	

Periodic Partnership Review

1. How is the mentoring partnership working?	
2. What is working well?	
3. What, if anything, is working not as well as you had hoped?	
4. What are you both gaining from your experience of the process?	
5. What does your mentee appreciate about the support the mentor is providing?	
6. What additional support might the mentee welcome?	
7. What external constraints or difficulties are affecting the partnership? How might these be resolved?	



Mentoring Log

Discussion	Action Plan Step (What are you going to do after the discussion?)	Step/s Taken	Completion Date	Outcome
e.g., Goal identification	Write up goal plan and action steps for each goal	Step one in goal one implemented		

Bi-monthly Review				
Date of next meeting				

Appendix 2: Mid-programme Check-in Evaluation Questions

Mentors

1. How often and how long do you meet with your mentee for (generally)?
2. What is working well in the mentoring meetings? (e.g., discovering each other's strengths and weakness and how I can help encourage and support my mentee)
3. How are you and your mentee achieving value for time? (e.g., committing to a regular meeting date and time, regularly reviewing the mentee's goals, etc).
4. What have you found to be the main areas of support needed by your mentee?
5. What shifts or changes are you seeing in your mentee?
6. What benefits are you gaining from the mentoring and your role as a mentor?
7. What else could support the effectiveness of your partnership meetings?

Mentees

1. How often and how long do you meet with your mentor for (generally)?
2. What is working well in the mentoring meetings? (e.g., guidance on setting goals and ensuring they align with my personal values)
3. How are you and your mentor achieving value for time? (e.g., committing to a regular meeting date and time, regularly reviewing your goals, etc)
4. How do you think/know that the mentoring is supporting you?
5. What shifts or changes have you made since commencing the mentoring partnership?
6. What else could support the effectiveness of your partnership meetings?

Appendix 3: Final Evaluation Questions

General Experience

1. What is a memorable moment or a success story from your time in the programme?

Programme Experiences

2. What were some of the highlights/successes you experienced during the programme?
3. What were some of the challenges you encountered during the programme?
4. Were there any specific areas where you felt additional support or resources were needed?

Recommendations for Improvement

5. Are there any specific processes or activities you think should be added or removed to enhance the programme's effectiveness?

Future Considerations

6. What advice would you give to new mentors and mentees starting the programme?