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Project Title: Farmer to Farmer Learning Groups: Curriculum for Establishment and Facilitation.

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## Final Report

### Overview

Farmers cite other farmers as a major source of information when making decisions about their farm businesses. Farmers practicing sustainable agriculture indicate that they use other farmers for guidance. Facilitating such farmer to farmer learning and transfer of information can be accomplished through developing learning groups.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Cayuga County has successfully implemented learning groups over the last six years. These learning groups focus on bringing together farmers to share experiences, exchange information and seek out ideas. This concept has generated interest among other Extension Educators, farmers and agri-service businesses and organizations. There have been other programs and projects that have successfully implemented group learning.

This project involved the development of an educational guidebook for establishing and facilitating learning groups. Farmers and agri-service people who are involved in learning groups were identified through various methods. A survey was developed to obtain pertinent information on how effective learning groups are established and facilitated. The survey was sent to the people on the mailing list and the responses were used to develop the guidebook. In addition, individual interviews were done to gather more in-depth information.

The guidebook draws on the practical experience of farmers, extension agents and agri-service people. Example of effective groups illustrate the methods described. This guidebook gives practical methods that can be used to start a learning group. Group dynamics, adult learning, facilitation skills and educational activities are provided.

## Objectives:

1. Encourage the establishment of farmer to farmer learning groups that enhance sustainable agriculture.
2. Survey existing farmer to farmer learning group participants and facilitators to determine effective methods for developing and facilitating farmer to farmer learning groups.
3. Develop and adapt educational materials in the form of a guide book for the implementation of farmer to farmer learning groups. These materials would emphasize practical examples and case studies that illustrate the following three components: 1. Recommendations and methods of establishing groups. 2. Educational methods for facilitating groups. 3. Educational tools for obtaining groups learning goals.
4. Publish, market and distribute developed guide book to Cooperative Extension Educators, farmers and agri-service organizations in the SARE Northeast Region. The first copy would be complimentary to Extension Educators.

## Specific Project Results

### Accomplishments:

Existing farmer to farmer learning group participants and facilitators were identified through a review of literature, electronic bulletin boards and lists, agricultural publications and word of mouth. A survey was developed to determine how groups were established, what were the benefits and effectiveness of groups, how the groups were

facilitated and what activities have been most useful. Positive and negative experience were solicited. Interviews of several people involved in groups were done to gather more indepth information.

A guidebook has been developed drawing on the survey and interview results. The guidebook provides: 1. Recommendations and methods for establishing groups. 2. Educational methods for facilitating groups. 3. Educational tools for obtaining groups learning goals.

The guidebook will be published, marketed and distributed to Cooperative Extension Educators, farmers and agri-service organizations in the SARE Northeast Region.

Potential Contributions and Practical Applications of the Professional Development Program

Potential Benefits or Impacts:

The interest in farmer to farmer learning groups is increasing all the time. The survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the impact the groups have made on their farms and their lives. This type of enthusiasm is contagious and I believe strongly that more and more farmers will be looking for groups to be involved with. Up until now information on how to establish and facilitate groups has been by word of mouth or extrapolated from the general study of group work and dynamics. This guidebook offers easily read and applied methods for starting groups and maintaining them.

Feedback from Farmers:

Feedback from farmers has been in the form of responding to the surveys and interviews. Farmers have found farmer to farmer learning groups to be and extremely valuable way to improve their farms and their lives as a whole.

## Future Recommendations and Areas Needing Additional Professional Development Efforts

Professional training for Extension Educators should include a significant emphasis on learning groups. The success of these groups as an educational method justifies Extension Educators being trained in how to establish and facilitate learning groups. Extension Educators have traditionally used workshops, demonstration, lectures and personal contacts in their educational programs. Learning groups require some new methods and skill Extension Educators on the whole are not familiar or comfortable with. Specifically, group facilitation skills training in the context of learning groups would be very useful.

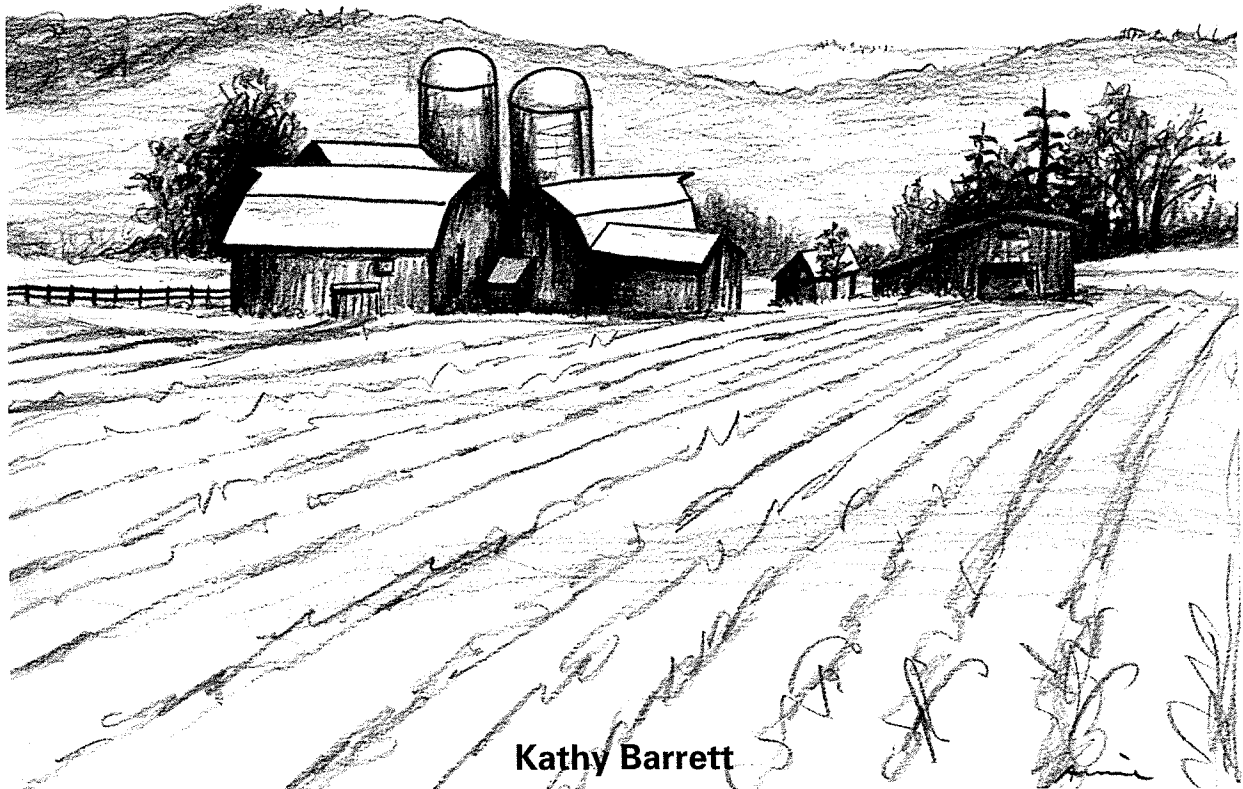
### Publicity for Activities and Programs:

The guidebook is being marketed through Cooperative Extension, agri-service, agricultural publications and electronic lists and bulletin boards. Over 200 guidebooks have been distributed in this manner. A Cornell Cooperative Extension In-service for 60 agents included a session on farmer to farmer learning groups where was distributed.

# Farmer

# Farmer

## Learning Groups



**Kathy Barrett**

**in collaboration with  
D. Merrill Ewert, Ph.D.**

Cornell Cooperative Extension  
Northeast Region SARE/ACE Project

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## **Cornell Cooperative Extension**

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“The New Zealand Experience,” page 6, was written by Louise H. Calderwood, University of Vermont Extension.

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# Introduction

Because of declining resources and a smaller number of farms, extension can no longer rely primarily on paid professionals to provide education programs to the agricultural community.

Fortunately, farmers themselves are the best extension agents. Farmers cite other farmers as a major source of information when making decisions (Croscombe and Ewert 1996).

Farmer to farmer learning groups consist of farmers who meet regularly to discuss and exchange ideas concerning their farms. The power of these groups is that they are self-directed and rely on the shared knowledge of the farmers within the group. Discussing the pros and cons of that practice enables group members to share ideas, offer advice, and formulate opinions about whether a practice will work on their own farms.

This guide was written for farmers, Cooperative Extension educators, and other

members of the agricultural community who are interested in establishing and facilitating farmer to farmer learning groups. We developed these guidelines by asking farmers, extension educators, and industry people who have been involved with learning groups why the groups met, what integral purpose they served, and how they operated.



## Why Form Learning Groups?

Farmers trust the experience and knowledge of other farmers who are in situations similar to their own. Their desire to meet and talk with each other has spurred the formation of various groups that range from formal cooperatives to informal gatherings of neighbors once a week for breakfast. Some groups have formed around specific issues (e.g., nutrient management), production practices (e.g., organic agriculture), marketing (e.g., buying groups), empowerment (e.g., input to policy and research agendas), and education.

For example, a group of dairy farmers was concerned about nutrient management. At several meetings, members explained how they were handling it on their farms. To get a better understanding of this complex issue they invited industry and university experts to join the group and share their knowledge. They visited farms that were implementing innovative practices. Group members tried different practices on their own farms and told the group how these practices were working out. Eventu-

ally, the group participated in a university field study, helped form a local community work group on nutrient management, and secured funding for an on-farm demonstration project. Clearly, a farmer learning group can have a substantial impact.

When we asked farmers why they belong to a learning group their first response was, "exchange of ideas." A close second was social interaction, which is often unplanned but can be the most rewarding aspect of being part of a group. Farmers tend to be isolated and lack opportunity to meet with others on a regular basis. Learning groups provide a means for them to form professional relationships with each other. As these relationships strengthen, the dialogue within the group becomes more personal and meaningful.

Other reasons farmers gave for joining a learning group included

- keeping up with the latest information or technology.
- keeping abreast of industry trends.
- learning more about a specific technology (e.g., grazing).
- meeting people their own age.
- interacting with farmers they respect.

## Establishing a Farmer to Farmer Learning Group

Learning groups are most effective when they have a targeted membership such as organic farmers, young dairy farmers, or grazers. If members' philosophies are too diverse, the practical exchange of ideas will be greatly hindered. Farmers will quickly become disenchanted with the group because of the lack of application to their own situations. That is not to say that a learning group will not explore different ideas. A very real benefit of learning groups is the opportunity to try out new concepts in a constructive, safe environment.

In New York, the Mohawk Valley Sustainable Agriculture Network was formed so farmers of various commodities could meet and discuss organic and sustainable practices. The commodities represented are diverse, but the group shares an overall philosophy of sustainable farming practices.

## Finding Members

Once the need for a group has been determined, there are various ways to identify prospective members.

**Word of Mouth.** Finding an individual who has a strong interest in starting a group is a good first step. This person may know of other farmers who have a similar interest. Some learning groups have relied heavily on farmers recruiting other farmers to join the group. Other groups have used an agriservice person such as an extension agent or veterinarian to identify and contact potential group members. In both cases farmers usually say they attended their first group meeting because they were asked personally. Visiting the farm and speaking face to face with the farmer is time consuming but can be worth the effort, especially if the person making the contact does not know the farmer well and is acting on a referral. Direct contact offers the opportunity to explain what a learning group is and how it differs from other educational programs.

**Mailings.** Because direct contact isn't always possible, some groups are formed by mailing meeting notices to targeted lists of potential members. A general open invitation can also be used. This works best when the group has a very clear audience in mind, such as pasture users. The meeting notice is sent to all farmers in the community but makes it clear that the group is meant for farmers using certain practices. Both kinds of invitation should briefly explain what a learning group is and the basic philosophy of that particular group. Farmers can then come to the first meeting prepared to share ideas and ask questions and not expecting a lecture. Many farmers surveyed said that they attended the first meeting because they knew they would have an opportunity to meet and talk with other farmers they respect.

## The First Meeting

**Acting Facilitator.** The person who formed the group will usually facilitate the first meeting. Later the group can choose a permanent facilitator. The acting facilitator should read the section on the facilitator's role (see page 8).

**Meeting Location and Time.** The acting facilitator usually decides on the time and arranges the location for the first meeting. The meeting should be held at a time that works well for farmers such as between milkings or after morning chores. A central, convenient location is preferable. Serving a meal or refreshments helps set the stage for people to talk informally. Name tags may be helpful if the farmers don't know each other.

## Goals

A group must determine its goals at one of the first meetings to help define its overall direction. The group needs to answer the questions, What do we want to accomplish? and What is our purpose? The goals will serve as guidelines for discussions and activities. If possible, the

group should arrive at its goals using consensus decision making (see Decision-Making Methods, page 5).

## Ground Rules

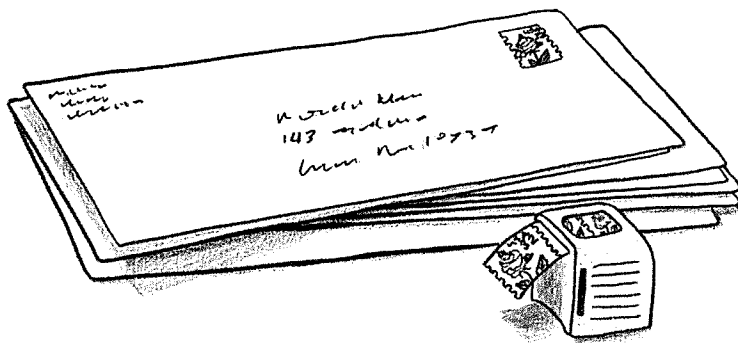
Ground rules serve as guidelines for the conduct of group members. They should be established by the whole group. At the first meeting, the acting facilitator can suggest the following common ground rules to get the discussion started:

**Confidentiality.** Open discussion is important to a vibrant learning group. People need to feel confident that what is shared in the group will not be discussed elsewhere without their permission. This is especially important in discussions regarding finances or family issues.

**Respect.** Everyone has the right to express his or her ideas without fear of insult or sarcasm. Each person is accepted and given due respect.

**Sharing of ideas.** All group members have the right to share ideas and concerns. Every member has something worthwhile to contribute.

**Responsibility.** Regular attendance and active participation are necessary. If a person chooses to leave the group, he or she should let the group know.



## Decision-Making Methods

A group must also decide how its decisions will be made. Because farmer learning groups emphasize exchange of ideas and shared learning, there is the danger that decisions will be made by default or by the facilitator.

Using the *majority rule* method, a vote is taken and a decision is made based on its outcome. This method is useful with large groups or when timeliness is important. Small groups may use this method for relatively unimportant decisions that are not crucial to members. The disadvantage of this method is that it tends to create winners and losers. It is easy for people in the minority to become disenchanted, which can limit their feeling of commitment to the group and to the decisions being made.

The *consensus* method is most practical with small groups. Consensus involves skillful facilitation of the discussion about the issues involved until the group can agree. The strength of this method is the quality of the decision and the commitment of the group to the decision. This can take time and energy but the outcomes are worth the effort. A pitfall is the tendency to make compromises just to move the decision along. The result can be a reduced level of interest and dedication to the group.

## Mohawk Valley Sustainable Agriculture Network

The Mohawk Valley Sustainable Agriculture Network in New York is a group based on farmers' shared learning about sustainable agriculture practices.

In 1993, a group of farmers, agencies, and agriservice people began meeting to address sustainable agriculture issues. Farmers were invited via an open mailing through the various agencies. At the initial meetings the common ground of sustainable agriculture was introduced and discussion followed on how the group would operate. It was decided that the group would be educational and not political. The group chose to have an open membership that is not commodity specific. Because sustainable agriculture reaches across all crops and commodities this seemed like the logical choice. The group also decided to have a somewhat formal structure with an elected president,

vice president, treasurer, and secretary. Bylaws were developed by the group. Minimal dues were established to cover the costs of mailings and the like. The group chose to meet on the second Wednesday of each month.

Since its initial meetings the network has evolved into a dynamic group that provides farmers with an open forum to discuss innovative ideas in sustainable agriculture. Group members have the opportunity to share ideas and ask questions of other farmers who have a similar interest. Members have written and obtained grants to do field research on sustainable practices valuable to them. The progress of these field research trials is readily shared at meetings.

The Mohawk Valley Sustainable Agriculture Network is a viable means for farmers to further their understanding of sustainable agriculture.

## The New Zealand Experience

Dairy farmers in New Zealand have used discussion (learning) groups for forty years as a way to share ideas, solve problems, and learn tips about farm management.

**Group Organization.** In New Zealand, most discussion groups meet from 11:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. every four to six weeks. The important thing is to pick a time of day that dodges chore time for most farmers. A common number of farms in a group is thirty, and anywhere from five to sixty people attend meetings.

Sometimes farmers are sent a written notice of the upcoming discussion groups. Meeting times and the host farmer's name are listed for meetings for the next six months. Occasionally, topics are listed on the notices, but more commonly the host farm identifies the topic closer to the date of the actual meeting.

Two or three days before a meeting, the "farmer convener" telephones group members to remind them of the upcoming meeting. Even when written notices are sent, farmers and consulting officers feel the convener's phone calls are necessary to keep attendance up.

**Consulting Officer (CO).** Keeping the group on target while encouraging interaction is quite a challenge, so that the ability of the CO is critical to the success of a discus-

sion group. Typically, COs have a college degree equivalent to a bachelor's degree in the United States. Their communication and facilitation skills are outstanding. Additionally, most of them provide technical findings at each discussion group meeting. Therefore, they also have a solid understanding of farm techniques.

### Farmer Conveners.

Besides the CO, the farmer convener plays an important role in keeping groups motivated. The convener usually serves for one year. New Zealand farmers feel it is important for the convener to take the job seriously. A phone call from the convener is a necessary reminder for most farmers to attend the meeting. The convener also helps the CO identify topics and reports on any agricultural meetings they attend. In some groups, the convener takes an active part in facilitating the discussion.

### A Typical Discussion

**Group Meeting.** The CO meets with the host farmer a few days before the meeting to fill out a farm data sheet (see page 19). By outlining the current herd, pasture, and management situations on the data sheet, the CO has something around which to develop discussion. Advantages and disadvantages of the farm, as well as farm goals, are also listed on the sheet.

At the beginning of the meeting, the host farmer usually gives a quick overview of the farm. For ex-

ample, during breeding season, farmers describe how many cows are cycling and how many have been submitted to A.I. (artificial insemination); they may explain anything they are doing that is different from their neighbors. A quick rundown of milk and pasture production is given at the same time.

Because New Zealand milk production is largely pasture-based, no discussion group is complete without a farm walk. The farm data sheet is used to highlight topics addressed during the walk.

Following the walk, participants gather in the "milkshed" or parlor for bag lunches and a short presentation by the CO. Most COs use dry-erase "white boards" to present research findings about a topic picked by the host farmer. The presentation might focus on a weakness of the farm or a farm goal. Sometimes the farmer is curious about how a particular management change might affect his or her farm.

To wrap up the discussion group, a CO will often ask group members to highlight strengths and areas of opportunity for the host farm. These items, a summary of the group's ideas, are listed on a large sheet of paper, which is left with the host.

## **Closed versus Open Membership**

A group must decide whether to have a closed or open membership.

A *closed membership group* has a specific set of people as members and does not open its meetings to the general farm community. Such groups usually determine their membership at their first few meetings. Once the group agrees on its goals and structure, new members are not solicited to join.

Relationships between group members, which develop over time, foster the open exchange of ideas. Closed membership allows people to get to know each other and form strong relationships. In addition, group dynamics stay fairly consistent, which can help make the group more cohesive and committed and thus more apt to discuss sensitive topics or share personal information.

The disadvantage of closed groups is that the set membership limits the number of ideas and perspectives presented. A closed group can become stale without new people to offer fresh ideas and experiences. In addition, other farmers in the community may view it as elitist or cliquish.

*Open membership groups* allow anyone who is interested to attend their meetings, even though they may be targeted to farmers with a particular concern. New members can join at any time and participate fully in the group's activities and discussions. The first few meetings are used to determine the group's goals and structure, which may need to be revamped more often because dynamics change with new members. Open membership groups tend to be larger than closed groups and often adopt a more formal structure. The formal structure helps new members understand more quickly how the group operates. As new farmers join, their fresh ideas and experiences enrich the discussion. Members have an opportunity to meet and hear the ideas of a more varied group of people.

Disadvantages of open membership groups are that their large size and changing dynamics make them less cohesive than closed groups. As membership changes, the goals and underlying philosophy may also change. Initial members may become disenchanted and leave the group. The more formal structure limits the depth in which a topic can be discussed. Members are less likely to form strong personal relationships.

## **Informal versus Formal Structure**

An *informal* structure works with groups of about ten people or fewer. A small group can operate effectively with only a skilled facilitator and coordinator. Group members can discuss topics in a conversational manner without the constraints of rules of order. Common social rules usually enable small groups to run smoothly. A facilitator keeps the discussion on target, balances personalities, manages conflict, and summarizes the discussion. A coordinator handles meeting arrangements and group details. (These roles are described more fully below.)

A *formal* structure tends to be effective in larger groups. The following are common group officers:

*President.* The president chairs the meetings, follows the agenda, and keeps the group to its appointed task. In some cases the president may facilitate the meetings. In other cases, another person takes this responsibility. If the president fills the facilitator's role he or she should develop the necessary skills (see Facilitating Learning Groups). The president may also be responsible for representing and promoting the group.

*Secretary.* The secretary keeps a written record of the group's meetings and activities. Recording minutes is

## Dealing with Challenging People

### How They Act

1. Monopolize/  
Talk too much

### Why

Believes he or she must be the center of attention; may also be very well informed and anxious to show it, or just naturally curious.

### What to Do

Don't embarrass the person or be sarcastic. Try saying, "I'm getting concerned that time is running out and we need to move on." Let the group take care of as much as possible. Privately say to the person, "When you keep us busy, I can't help others get involved."

2. Highly argumentative

Sees as challenge to reveal fallibility of resources, set self up as intelligent, or to assume leadership role.

Keep temper firmly in check. Honestly try to find merit in one of his or her points, express agreement, and move on. Use group assistance. "What seems to be happening in the group right now?" Talk to the person privately. Avoid a power struggle.

3. Rambler

Talks about everything except subject. Uses far-fetched analogies; gets lost. May do so for recognition or because believes his or her problems are more important than those of others.

When person stops for breath, thank him or her, refocus attention by restating relevant point, and move on. Ask, "How does what you're saying relate to what we're discussing?" Ask, "Could we go on and come back to this later if there is time?"

4. Personality clash

Two or more members clash. Could divide group into factions.

Emphasize points of agreement; minimize disagreement points. Focus attention on goal or interests. Cut across with direct question on the topic. Bring a more neutral member into the discussion. Keep personalities as separate as possible.

5. Wrong subject

Not rambling, just off base.

Say, "Sounds like we're getting off track," or "Sounds like a different point." See if group agrees.

6. Obstinate

Won't budge. Hasn't seen your point. Prejudiced.

Often group members will straighten him or her out. Say, "Is this a decision you can't live with or can you accept the group viewpoint for the moment?" Say, "What specifically are your reasons behind your objection?" (Look for facts versus assumptions.)

*continued . . .*



## How They Act

### 7. Side conversationalist

## Why

Comments may be related to the subject or may be personal. Distracts you and others.

## What to Do

If you're mobile, move near the talkers.

Don't embarrass them.

Sometimes eye contact will take care of the problem.

Say, "Hang on, Bob. We can only keep track of one conversation at a time."

### 8. Asks for your opinion

Tries to put you on the spot.  
Tries to have you support one view.  
May be simply looking for advice.

Avoid solving their problems. Try to get other opinions first; "boomerang" the question back to the group. When you do want to give a direct answer, first try to determine the person's reason for asking.

### 9. "Yes, but . . ."

Usually has no intention of accepting new ideas or making commitments.

Can confront: "When you say, 'Yes, but. . . ' it sounds. . .".

Refer to group: "What is George really saying?"

Say, "What if we spent as much time planning for success as we do planning for failure?"

### 10. Won't talk

Bored, indifferent, feels superior, timid, insecure, has nothing to add.

First determine motivation for behavior.

Ask for person's opinion or comment on another's opinion.

If "superior," indicate respect for his or her experience. (Don't overdo it.)

If timid, compliment sincerely when person does talk.

### 11. Know-it-all expert

Feels compelled to have own set of facts to prove point(s).

Acknowledge value of new information or same information in different format. Arrange for all group members to have copies for future discussion.

### 12. Complainer

Usually has not been in a situation where concerns can be aired.

Keep personalities out of responses.

Determine reason for behavior.

Acknowledge issues.

Ask for answer to initial question.

Source: Cooperative Extension, U.S.D.A.

## Making Meeting Arrangements

The facilitator should make arrangements far enough in advance for meeting notices or invitations to be sent out in a timely manner. He or she should arrive at the meeting site early to check on arrangements. If the meeting is to be held on a farm, the farm must meet the objectives of the topic for discussion. If the group meets at a restaurant, the tables should be arranged appropriately; the servers should know when to take orders and bring the food. The size of the group and the meeting topic will determine the best table arrangement. A round table is ideal for a group of ten or less. It puts everyone on equal footing with no obvious leader. For larger groups a horseshoe configuration allows everyone to see each other. This shape also works well when a brief presentation will be given. Avoid classroom-style setups or other arrangements that inhibit discussion.

## Facilitating the Meeting

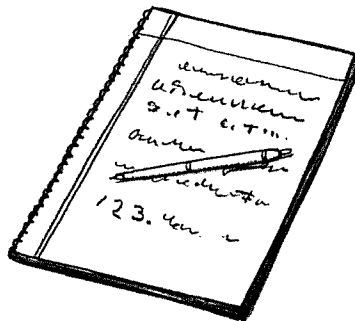
Before the meeting starts, the facilitator should greet the speaker (if any) and introduce him or her to the group members as they arrive. If the members have an opportunity to talk informally before the actual meeting they will be more at ease speaking up during the discussion. Most often, guests enjoy relaxed conversation before a meeting because it gives them a chance to connect with the group.

After all group members have arrived, the facilitator makes the transition from the informal gathering to the actual meeting. The guest (if any) is welcomed and introduced to the group. The facilitator introduces the topic that will be discussed; he or she can provide an outline of the meeting so that guests and members can envision how things will transpire.

## Adult Learning: What Every Facilitator Should Know

The learning group concept is based on the basic tenets of adult learning as defined by educational researcher Malcolm Knowles. Adult learning concepts include

1. *The need to know.* Learners need to know how they will benefit from what they learn. The facilitator must help adults become aware of their reasons for learning.
2. *The learner's self-concept.* Adults see themselves as responsible for their own lives and need to view themselves as self-directed.
3. *The role of the learner's experience.* Varied experiences lead to individual preferences for learning and provide additional resources for learning.
4. *Readiness to learn.* Learners become ready to learn whatever will help them in real-life situations.
5. *Motivation.* Learners are motivated by internal drives that urge them to improve themselves.



## Listening Skills

Active listening is a vital skill for a facilitator. It involves hearing, understanding, and relating the understanding through verbal and nonverbal feedback. Suggestions for improving listening skills are to

hear what is being said.  
Focus your attention.

pay attention not only to the meaning of the words but to the body language and vocal inflections of the speaker.

maintain attentive body posture and facial expressions such as eye contact, smiling, and nodding to show interest. Ask open-ended questions to encourage the speaker to give more information.

reflect understanding and interest by paraphrasing what has been said or by asking clarifying questions.

empathize with the speaker.

## Group Dynamics

All groups begin as three or more people interacting to achieve a goal. As new people join, the number of possible interactions increases, making the group more complex.

Regardless of their size or the scope of their goals, groups tend to go through similar phases. Group theorists and practitioners have noted a natural ebb and flow in most groups. One of the most common and easily applied models of group behavior (Tuckman and Jensen 1977) divides it into the phases of storming, norming, performing, and transforming (originally adjourning). Each phase has both positive and negative characteristics. The phases serve to cement and challenge the group's relationships and cohesiveness. By being aware of these phases, group members can manage them to meet their goals more effectively.

**Forming.** The first meeting of a farmer learning group is usually exciting. As farmers gather, they will talk about crops, livestock, and local events. If they know each other, they will discuss how things are going on their farms and how their families are doing.

Mixed in with the excitement is a feeling of apprehension. People will wonder if their expectations of the group will be met. Some may be concerned that individual goals will differ too greatly. Others may wonder how people will get along and whether there is potential for conflict. An effective facilitator will build on the excitement and address some of the apprehension.

During the forming stage the facilitator should give people the opportunity to get acquainted in a nonthreatening atmosphere. Introductory activities can smooth the way for people to meet and share some basic information about themselves. This is especially important for making shy people comfortable. This getting-acquainted period should take place before most other group tasks are undertaken. As group members become more comfortable the facilitator should guide them through the other tasks of the forming stage.

Either the facilitator or a group member should explain why the group is being formed and address members' expectations. It is during this stage that the group will discuss goals, organization, ground rules, and decision making methods (see page 5).

**Storming.** After the initial excitement wanes, conflict and tension will arise. Suddenly the honeymoon is over. If group members are unaware that this is a common occurrence it can cause high levels of anxiety and worry. Members may question the value of the group or its goals. The facilitator should reassure the group that conflict is normal and can be beneficial. Differences can be used to enhance the group and add dimension to the relationships among members. Conflict management skills play a crucial role in ensuring that conflict has a positive impact. A common



**Table 1. Group Development Process**

<b>Group Phase</b>	<b>Key Processes</b>	<b>Ups</b>	<b>Downs</b>	<b>Facilitator Behavior</b>
Forming	Orienting Getting acquainted Setting direction Defining task Setting goals Taking first steps	Meeting new people Clarity Organization	Anxiety Confusion Too much too soon Rigidity	Directing
Storming	Reassessing Exploring options	Fun Excitement Diversity	Tension Conflict "Bottoming-out" Loss of members	Coaching
Norming	Resolving Evaluating Making decisions	Cohesion	Groupthink (stereotyping, self-censorship, direct pressure)	Supporting
Performing	Implementing	Closure Completion Synergy	Footdragging Social loafing	Delegating
Transforming	Regrouping Disbanding Letting go	Time for new activities Reenergize Satisfaction	Holding on Sadness Sense of loss Disappointment	Variable

Source: *Working with Our Publics*, Cooperative Extension, U.S.D.A.

and effective group problem solving model has the following steps:

1. Acknowledge the problem.
2. Identify the needs of members.
3. Discuss a range of possible solutions.
4. Choose the most promising alternative and evaluate it.
5. Act on the chosen solution.
6. Evaluate the outcome of your choice.
7. If the results are not satisfactory, start again.

**Norming.** It is at this point that people really become a group. Goals and expectations have been decided.

Norms that reflect the group's values and goals have been defined. People in the group have informally or formally agreed on what behavior is acceptable and unacceptable. Relationships and friendships have become stronger.

A drawback to the cohesiveness of the norming phase is the potential for "groupthink." Groupthink occurs when cooperation in a cohesive group overrides realistic appraisal of alternative actions (Janis 1982). If the pressure to get along is too strong, members may sacrifice critical thinking. Groupthink can be counteracted by developing the norms of airing all doubts and exploring all alternatives by playing devil's advocate.

**Performing.** This phase is characterized by action toward the group's goals. At this point, learning groups share ideas, follow up on planned activities, and learn from each other while discussing topics chosen by the group. Being in a group that is at the performing stage is educational and exciting.

**Transforming.** Groups are complex and constantly changing. It is not unusual for a group to revert to an earlier stage. Or it may become stagnant and less vital. When this happens the group should decide to disband or regroup. If there has been a major change in membership it will be necessary to reexamine the group's goals so that they will be relevant to the new members. There comes a time when the old routine is no longer effective and it is time to try something new. In any case it is better to address these situations head on instead of avoiding them. Avoiding the issues will lead the group to disband before it is necessary.

# Activities

In addition to discussion meetings, many farmer learning groups participate in other activities such as farm tours, on-farm demonstrations, and field research trials.

## Farm Tours

Many groups use farm tours as their primary activity. Group discussions are held on the farm and center on the practices seen there. The following format is effective for farm tours:

**Premeeting Planning.** The coordinator or facilitator visits the host farm to gather information to be used by the group. The information gathered depends on the objective of the tour, which will have been determined by the group. For instance, if the group is interested in discussing nutrition the ration analysis and feeding strategy are made available to the group, ahead of time if possible, so members can become familiar with the farm.

**Meeting.** The group gathers and the host gives an overview of the farm or a technical presentation, if appropriate. The group then walks around the farm led by the host and the facilitator. Care should be taken that the group does not break off into small discussions that distract from the larger discussion. As the group moves about the farm, side discussions are acceptable but should stop when the group gathers at a particular spot.

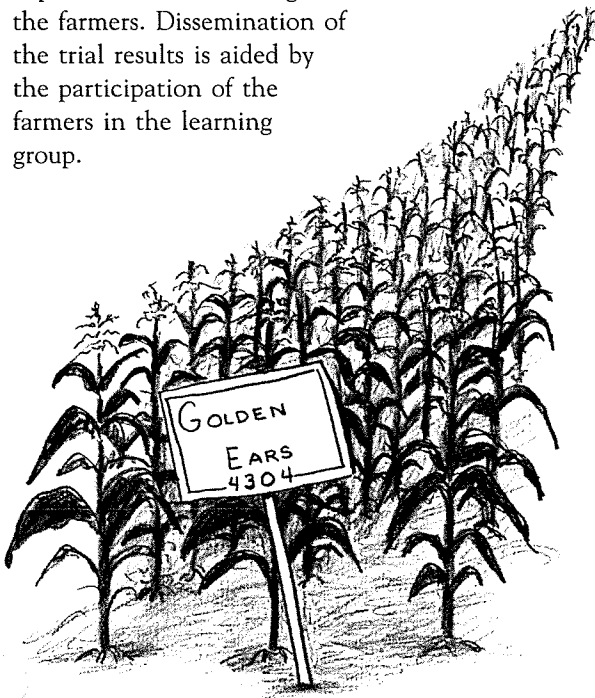


## On-Farm Demonstrations

On-farm demonstrations give farmers an opportunity to implement and evaluate farm practices and technologies in a practical situation. The host farm finances the cost of establishing and managing the demonstration. Group meetings can be used as an opportunity to view the demonstration and discuss it. On-farm demonstrations are not research trials, but they may provide good anecdotal information.

## Field Research Trials

The establishment of farm trials enhances participatory research between farmers and researchers. Trials run on group members' farms permit farmers to put more credence in the results. Researchers learn from the practical experience and knowledge of the farmers. Dissemination of the trial results is aided by the participation of the farmers in the learning group.



## Calf/Heifer Managers Group

The Calf/Heifer Managers Group in western New York gathers approximately once a month to discuss topics related to raising dairy calves and heifers. The group was initiated by a local feed dealer and an extension specialist who perceived a need for calf and heifer managers to get together and share ideas. The two developed a list of potential group members and mailed out invitations to the first meeting, calling it a "baby shower." The meeting was successful and the calf/heifer managers were interested in continuing to meet.

Word about the group spread through the local dairy community, and other calf/heifer managers expressed an interest in attending meetings. This group has an open membership, and about 100 people actively participate. Not every person attends every meeting, so meeting size may range from 20 to 100 people.

The common ground is the interest in managing dairy young stock to maximize health, growth, and economics. Topics have covered a broad spectrum, including nutrition, housing, employee management, stress management for the manager, manure management, and feed additives. To choose topics the group holds a planning meeting once a year, which any group member may attend. This

meeting is held at a member's house and usually consists of about ten people. The planning group chooses the topics for the coming year and decides how they will be addressed. In addition, suggestions for topics are sought from the entire group at the regular meetings. The group uses a variety of methods to address topics such as presentations, tours, and demonstrations. Regardless of the topic or method used, the emphasis is on the shared knowledge and experience of the managers attending and participating in the discussion.

The group has been very effective in working with agribusinesses to sponsor meeting expenses, especially those related to bringing a guest speaker to the meetings. Additionally, agribusinesses often pick up meal expenses for the group.

A newsletter, edited by a group member, is published on a regular basis. The cost of producing the newsletter is paid for by a grant from an agriservice company. Cooperative Extension manages the mailing list, printing, and the mailing itself. The newsletter currently is sent to anyone requesting it; recipients are not required to attend group meetings. The editor writes most of the newsletter, but some guest articles are included.

## Summary

In the past, extension education relied heavily on agricultural experts who provided lectures, field trials, and demonstrations. This method was very effective in furthering a technology-based agricultural system. As agriculture has evolved, the extension system that serves it has also evolved. Today fewer extension educators are serving a more intensified agriculture industry. As fewer dollars are made available for extension education, innovative approaches are necessary to serve farmers' educational needs effectively. Fortunately, farmer to farmer learning groups offer a means for farmers to learn from the people they respect the most, namely other farmers. By forming and facilitating learning groups extension can continue to play a role in improving the lives of farmers.

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# Farm Data Sheet

Farm Staff:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name	Name	Name
Position	Position	Position

Herd Numbers:

Cows	Heifers	Calves	% Young Stock

Farm Details:

Fertilizer Program:

Crop	Acres	Application Date	Type	Rate
Pasture				
Alfalfa				
Grass				
Corn				
Other				

Production Summary:

Milk	Fat	Protein	SCC

Farm Advantages:	Farming Goals:
Farm Disadvantages:	Factors Limiting Achievement of Goals:

Year				
Net Farm Income				

Management Practices:

Any Other Relevant Information:

Topics for Discussion Today: