



*A Guide to Grower Groups*

**GROWING FARMER COMMUNITIES FOR  
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND CHANGE**



This guide was created for the Ag Solidarity Network platform and administrative infrastructure however the tips and processes will work for any online community. With the relative newness of online communities like these, many of the learnings in this Guide have also been gleaned from the experiences of 'in person' communities of practice and support.

If you have questions about this guide or you are interested in forming a Grower Group on the Ag Solidarity Network, contact Victoria Ostenso (victoria.ostenso@marbleseed.org) or info@marbleseed.org.



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# GROWER GROUP BACKGROUND

Grower Groups are an open-ended, semi-structured opportunity for farmers to create the community support that will contribute to economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially responsible farming enterprises. These farmer-directed groups share organic practices that are regionally adapted. Whether transitioning to organic production, growing the business through expanded scopes or markets, or working through social-emotional challenges that occur in farm families (born or chosen), this approach relies on the guidance and support of an experienced community to help farmers navigate a myriad of issues. Organic farmers learn from each other ways to reduce tillage and build soil health, and they have also chosen to tackle health and farm-life balance, or collectivizing efforts in marketing, processing, or delivery. Above all, the farmer-led groups are adaptive to the needs of their communities. For example if farmers need to gather together for greater power in the marketplace, a group could form a cooperative or create a joint venture.

Farmers rely on other farmers for information and advice on practices. Traditionally, this has been through relationships with neighbors and nearby family. With organic agriculture, a beginning farmer or farmer looking to transition to organic might not know any other organic growers in their own neighborhood or personal networks. Farmers can find it overwhelming to understand the regulations and best organic practices to follow on their farm. Today’s successful organic farmers reached this point by helping each other improve their operations.

The types of communication can be shown in three groups. In person, real time communication includes teleconferences, web conferences, and online chat rooms. Not in person, not in real time options include e-mail, listservs, message boards, wikis, blogs and podcasts. With the rise in popularity of online communities, the potential for connection and collective action broadens beyond proximity. Initially the Grower Groups that were going to form as a result of the grant funded program<sup>1</sup> which defined these groups as “communities of practice”, we envisioned based on geography. Funding was earmarked to enable farmer groups to meet in person, build community around organic and sustainable agriculture, and sustain themselves beyond the grant based on shared interest and agricultural goals. However, the pandemic caused a shift in the program. Rather than assuming geography to be the shared identity, farmers expressed interest in cross cutting topics like mental health and wellness, anti-racism work, and adding value added products to extend seasons and diversify income.

IN PERSON	Face to Face Meetings	
NOT IN PERSON	Teleconferences Web Conferences Online Chat Rooms	E-mail Listservs Message Boards Wikis Blogs Podcasts
	REAL TIME	NOT IN REAL TIME

FIG. 1: TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

In the Fall of 2021 Marbleseed reached out to allied farming organizations in the upper Midwest to gauge interest of creating an online platform. Beyond social networking, the vision for this network was to engage farmers via the “Grower Group” communities of practice to not only share resources but to activate farmers around the topics that were most relevant. By February 2022, the platform named the “Ag Solidarity Network (ASN)” was ready for beta testing. By the spring of 2022 there was an app available for both iOS and Android phones.

Moving some of the Grower Groups and active farmer list serves onto the ASN is ongoing work. Because this is an online community, collectively operated and farmer-led, Marbleseed created this quick-start guide for group moderators administrators on the platform. Although the focus of the Grower Groups shifted to more remote gathering and learning, this guide could also be utilized for groups that decide to create communication and education engagement that is in-person, on-line or a hybrid of both.

The long-term goals of Grower Groups are to build resilient organic communities throughout the Midwest and possibly beyond. Farmers own and lead the groups, and the groups organize with minimal support from Marbleseed or outside staff. We hope that this Grower Group Guide: Growing Farmer Communities for Continuous Improvement and Change will enable farmers to engage in groups that meet their needs and are sustainable beyond the founding membership.

## PURPOSE

### *First steps to forming a Grower Group*

#### *Identify a Clear Purpose*

The first step is to identify the membership and purpose. These two questions will shape many of the things to follow. It will also enable the group to grow its membership if that is desired. The number of members is often less important than the engagement and input from farmers who have come together around a shared identity, geography, or production method or farming challenge.

In addition to specific production focused groups (poultry, fruit, grains, etc), Grower Groups have formed around interests and identities such as:

- Mental Health and Wellness
- Anti-Racism
- Queer Farmers
- Fair Farm Labor
- Small Meat Processing Solutions
- Value-Added Products
- Land Access

#### *Define your Group Purpose*

The topics of interest can be as varied as farmers in the community. However, the first step in convening a group is to define the issues and purpose of coming together. The group needs to reflect on what aspects of the topic or identity they want to address. Here are some questions to consider in defining a group's purpose:

##### *What do we have in common?*

Define what it was that brought you together as a group. Name it and potentially use this as the group's identifier. For example, a group of women from a specific geography, all interested in sustainable farming called themselves "Green County Women in Sustainable Ag".

##### *What are we hoping to learn from coming together?*

Grower Groups were initially envisioned as 'communities of practice'. Groups like this typically are attempting to gain knowledge or strategies via collective wisdom and problem-solving. This approach might include applied and practical research or presentations made by members or those outside the group.

*Are there things that we hope will happen as a result of our meeting for us personally or for the community as a whole?*

A group with this type of purpose may end up forming a cooperative or writing a funding proposal together. Or they may choose to share stories to advocate for a policy or program within an organization or governmental body.

Once you answer these three questions, put the answers together and see what has emerged. After you determine your purpose, the next step will be to think through how you want to be in community to meet it.

*Reference pg. 8 for a worksheet on group purpose.*

## STRUCTURE

### *“How will we function as a group?”*

*Do we have the expertise among us or are we hoping to get outside perspective or expertise on the issue(s) that brought us together?*

Many communities of practice rely solely on the wisdom and experiences of the group. Some groups appreciate approaching an outside expert to present or inform the group. The Growing Wellness community regularly would have guest speakers on a topic, recorded for others to watch as well. And then after the formal presentation, they would have discussion that was not recorded which preserved confidentiality expectations the group had established.

*Do we need structured leadership?*

There are times when the approach of everyone doing everything results in no one doing anything. It is best practice to establish some set roles for group members to keep everyone engaged. Depending on the group's purpose, these roles may be different. But typically there should be someone who is sending out reminders of meetings or events. Someone else may act more as the group's moderator or membership monitor.

*How will we be accountable to meeting our group's purpose?*

Once you identify the purpose, this question, taken with the one about structured leadership will potentially lead to a determination of what roles will be necessary to keep the group relevant and on-purpose. There will likely also be expectations for members of the group in terms of posting information or engaging additional members (again depending on your group's purpose).

*Do we have expectations for engagement related to our purpose?*

Talk together about what would make the group feel successful related to the purpose. If the purpose of the group is to let more farmers know about funding or programming, there may be less need for everyone in the group to be actively engaging. Instead there may be more of an expectation of sharing out resources to members' friends or networks. Alternatively, if the group is hoping to provide information on perennial crops, then there may be an expectation that certain members of the group are responsible for answering questions that are posted or even posing common questions, sharing pictures or videos and then explaining further for the purpose of informing others. In some cases groups may identify a challenge or issue, and may even seek a solution. The Growing Wellness group recognized the ongoing challenge of farmer mental health and access to mental health services, particularly in rural areas. This led to the implementation of a certified peer support specialist program established through grant funding sought at the request of Growing Wellness members.

Discuss as many of these questions as possible, using your group's purpose to shape the expectations you have of group members. Write the purpose and expectations down so that new members of the group can also be clear about the group. These answers may shift as the group grows or has been around for a while, but the initial agreements and understandings will also help guide growth and keep change grounded in the original purpose.

*Reference pg. 10 for a worksheet on group structure.*

## SHARED VALUES

*Values are something we often forget to discuss when we come into community or form groups.*

Assumptions of shared values can create tension and end group life. Identifying shared values has the potential of bringing folks together that assumed they did not have common ground. Organic farmers have the shared value of production that does not utilize pesticides, herbicides, and GMO seeds, but they may not share the value of alternative economies. If this group stays focused on organic tree nut production, it may not ever be an issue. Whereas if there is member interest in forming a tree nut cooperative, those values differences may surface and become a place of division. If the group laid out its purpose at the beginning around production of tree nuts, with a value of organic methods, this new effort could warrant the formation of a new group with cooperative formation as its purpose, sharing members based on interest and values alignment. Clarity of purpose resulting in creating an additional group with a different purpose will make sense and will not likely cause bad feelings.

*Reference pg. 9 for a worksheet on group values.*

## HOW TO KEEP GROWER GROUPS ENGAGED

### *Roles for engaged groups*

#### *Facilitator/Moderator Roles for Engaged Groups*

The role of moderator or facilitator for an online Grower Group or learning community may be more ongoing and less focused on meeting agendas or events. Over time your group may choose to meet in person, but to maintain excitement, learning, contact and fulfill the group's purpose consider the following:

- **Be responsive:** Create a time when you check your group's posts and respond to questions or inquiries. You do not need to know the answers to all questions, but re-post any you do not know and ask for others to chime in. Members will want to know that others in the group are paying attention for their needs and interests.
- **Break stereotypes:** Check in your own assumptions when responding to group members. Does a post or topic provide an opportunity to break down beliefs that are not serving the farmer community?
- **Don't try to be everything for everyone:** Rely on the wisdom of the group for responses or solutions. If someone in the group proposes a topic that takes the group outside of its expressed purpose, refer them and/or post their topic to another group, if possible, where they can get their question answered.
- **Empower group members to take cause-driven actions:** Even if your group does not have activism as a purpose, there are many other opportunities across the ASN for farmers to engage with causes and policies that will make a difference. Highlight events and content related to your group's purpose that could

provide farmers with an outlet for action.

- **Engage with group members' content:** Even if there is no question or request, like or share content from group members. This will demonstrate your engagement and that you are listening to the group.
- **Share content that inspires you:** Even if you are in the moderator role because your job or no one else wanted to do it, you will be seen as a leader. Find content that is relevant and thoughtful related to your group's purpose and share it.
- **Highlight group members and encourage them to provide information:** If you have information about someone in the group, their farm or something unique that they could share, support them in posting or offering their expertise. The more people that contribute, the stronger your group will be. Re-posting or sharing group member posts or other activities in other places on the ASN is also a great way to do this.
- **Be accessible and focused on the group's purpose:** Continually remind the group through posts and other ways of the group's purpose. Offer for folks to contact you or the other members of the group with questions or concerns.
- **Take an active role in creating a safe space:** The ASN will be a closely moderated space generally, taking advantage of the fact that we are not in the larger Meta-universe of Facebook. There will be zero tolerance for hate speech or troll-like behavior. The organizations that collectively put up the ASN will support you as the group moderator in asking someone to leave your group and the platform. Please contact [info@Marbleseed.org](mailto:info@Marbleseed.org) with concerns related to safety on the site.
- **Identify resource needs:** If someone in our group is requesting resources, particularly around educational content, please share those requests with the ASN administrators. We are hoping that these requests and needs will surface through the Grower Groups enabling the organizations contributing to the ASN via events, webinars and other content to be relevant and add value to the farmer community.
- **Be timely:** Similar to be responsive, try to have someone in your group respond to requests for information or answers to questions within 24 hours if at all possible.
- **Uplift group members and others doing incredible things or innovating:** Encourage farmers in your group to share out what they are doing. If someone's experience or wisdom could benefit the larger community, suggest a webinar or an article that could be shared more broadly.
- **Encourage/employ the principle of 'edutainment' with videos or gifs related to the group's purpose:** When you can, contribute content with alternative forms like short videos, podcasts, and even gifs. Remember to have fun even with "on task" content. Encourage members to take pictures from their farms.
- **Pose questions and engage with the answers:** To keep the group lively and contributing content, consider posing questions related to the group's purpose. Be sure to respond to members that provide answers to keep it going.
- **Build trust and value through content that solves problems and addresses concerns of group members:** Continue to put content and resources in front of your group that directly speaks to the purpose of the group. Reach across groups to find related to your purpose or find opportunities for shared concerns on cross cutting issues. The ability for groups to connect across the platform is a value that the ASN adds that Facebook does not have.

## **Grower Group Facilitators: A Community of Practice**

As you can see, a key to success for farmer-led groups is engaged leadership. In order to form strong groups, and to strengthen existing Grower Groups around the region, The Ag Solidarity Network hosts a Farmer-Leader Community of Practice (CoP). Via webinars, quarterly online meetings, and possible annual in-person meet ups, farmer-leaders will coach each other and share tips and information to keep their groups engaged. The first Farmer-Leader CoP is scheduled to form early Winter of 2022 through the Ag Solidarity Network. The experience of leaders or moderators of online communities will be key in strengthening this approach to sharing knowledge and building community.

# REFLECTION WORKSHEET

## PURPOSE & SHARED VALUES

Topics of interest can be as varied as farmers in the community. However, the first step in convening a group is to define the issues and purpose of coming together. The group needs to reflect on what aspects of the topic or identity they want to address. *Here are some questions to consider in defining a group's purpose:*

*What do we have in common?*

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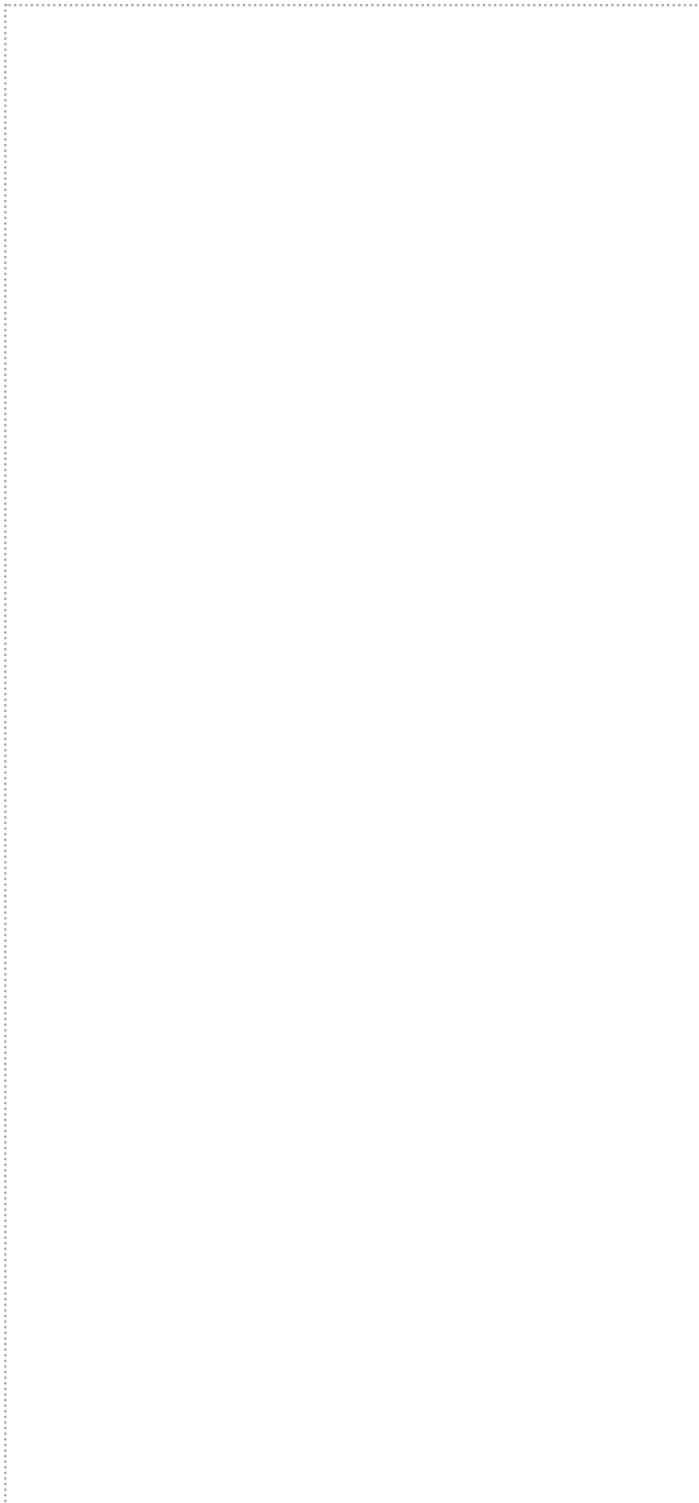
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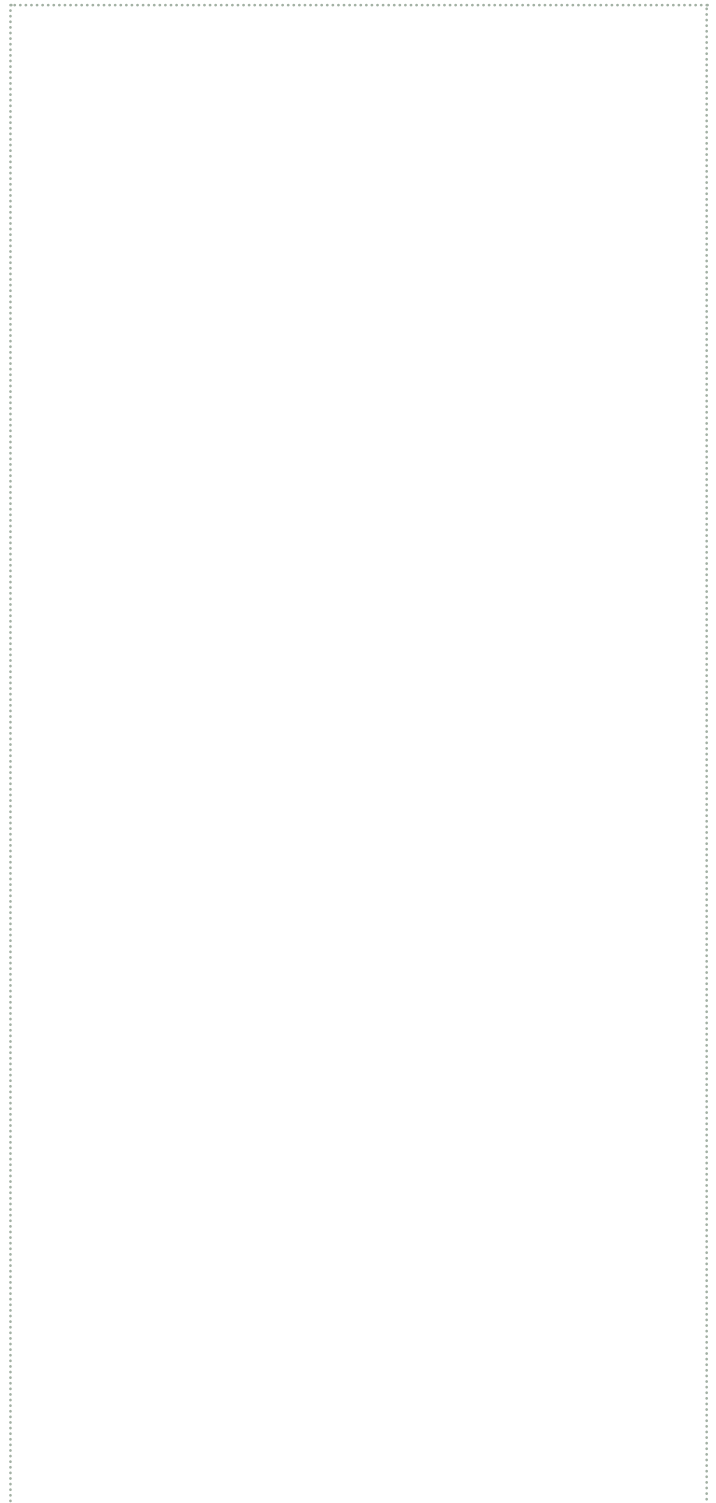
When engaging with others with a shared group identity, like fruit growers, the opportunity to identify values reinforces the notion that our fates are linked. Being curious about solutions and asking questions can signal vulnerability. Assuming that we all have the same ideas about how to reach a goal can create surprises that negatively impact the group.

*List the values that guide not only the solutions the group seeks, but how individual members will respond to each other. For values where there is a great deal of agreement, those can be listed under the group's purpose. (Examples of values might include respect, equity, organic, curiosity, generosity, etc.)*

### ***Guiding Values***



### ***Group Purpose***



# REFLECTION WORKSHEET

## STRUCTURE & FUNCTION

Consider the following questions about how your group will come together to meet its purpose. Refer to page 5 in the main Grower Group Guide for more context for each question.

*Do we have the expertise among us or are we hoping to get outside perspective or expertise on the issue(s) that brought us together?*

*Do we need structured leadership?*

*How will we be accountable to meeting our group's purpose?*

*Do we have expectations for engagement related to our purpose?*

# *GROWER GROUP FORM*

**Group Identity:**

**Group Moderator/Facilitator:**

**Membership Contact:**

**Purpose:**

**Shared Values:**

**Frequency of Meeting:**

**Primary Form of Communication:**

**Group Sign Up Questions (Can be added to ASN Form—suggest no more than 3):**

1.
2.
3.