



EXTENSIONNET

May - July
2000

Vol. 8 No. 1

Newsletter of the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (Inc)

A0029919P

Contact: 61 2 6024 5349

Australia Post approved PP347637000014

Self-managing groups - what does it take?

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INTRODUCTION

The use of groups in agricultural extension has been well established. Parallel to moving from individual contact to working with groups was a movement from giving advice - 'telling farmers how to do something new or better' - to encouraging them to understand the reasons for change and discover some solutions for themselves. The emphasis in operating styles (especially in groups) has been said to have changed from teaching to adult learning. This was assumed to require facilitated groups. Group facilitation has thus become 'a big industry' within extension. Yet there is a tendency for farmer groups to be highly



Ruth Nettle

dependent on external input for their funding, content, management and organisation. Researchers and practitioners are interested in investigating the factors that encourage groups to become more self-managing. This article reports on one such project within the Victorian dairy industry.

The Victorian Dairy industry through GippsDairy*** commissioned a project to VCG Pty Ltd* to design and test a process aimed at increasing the capacity of dairy farmers to access, gather, interpret and apply information to their own situation through a "self-managing" group. The topic, content and management of the group was to be driven by group participants (dairy farmers), with the assistance of an administrator/coach.

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Conference: Achieving change through improved knowledge systems - Palmerston North, New Zealand, 16-17 August 2000.

This conference was designed for professionals involved in technology transfer, innovation, improvement, change management, and compliance in the New Zealand land-based industries.

The conference provided an opportunity for the exchange of ideas between practitioners and researchers on a range of approaches to achieving change.

Presenters from a range of New Zealand and Australian organisations outlined

their experiences of coping with change, mainly through the use of case studies. The conference also provided an opportunity to introduce APEN to New Zealanders working in the field of achieving change.

Conference proceedings will be available for \$45 (incl. gst & P&P). For details contact John Stantiall:
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APEN Contacts

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to acknowledge
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FROM THE CHAIR

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Budgeting Extension into the Program

Reflecting on issues that confront people involved in extension is fascinating. One of the hot topics at the moment seems to be **developing a culture that allows for budgeting and planning for extension when designing research programs.**

At the Institute for Horticultural Development, we are engaged in working through the issues of effectively planning for extension and evaluation when submitting research proposals. The process is fascinating, and as challenging as working with a grower group.

It has posed some interesting questions: Are research scientists the most conservative of people? Which tools in the extension tool box are most suitable for convincing this highly educated and intelligent audience to change the way they think about research and extension? It has been easier to find the positives of adoption for growers than for scientists - "you will make more money" is usually the best. Research scientists have reacted to our ideas of

incorporating extension into research proposal with comments like "It is more work, and I don't have time for that".

One way around the research-extension conundrum is to develop a recognition of extension as a profession. Perhaps we need to change the way we refer to ourselves - instead of "research scientist" and "extension officer", why not use "scientist - extension" and "scientist - research"? Other steps along the professional super-highway include **publishing the results of extension programs, participating in conferences and forums about extension.**

Which of you have planned and evaluated your extension programs, and discussed them in an open forum - in house, at an APEN forum, or in a journal? Have you nominated yourself or a colleague for the APEN Extension Award? Have you submitted an abstract for the posters at the "Creating a Climate for Change Forum"? Go on, it's easy - **just identify when you are going to do it, and go for it.**

FROM THE EDITOR: MARK PAINE



Welcome to the new format ExtensionNet! (Our plan however is for 8 pages every two months!). In this issue we have a number of articles that share a theme dealing with the special role performed by extension to cross professional boundaries.

Ruth Nettle discusses a group process that has set about the task of learning based on the principles of self empowerment. Ruth and **Peter van Beek** have tested the

idea that farmers are fully capable of mobilising their own knowledge and skills to form interest specific learning groups that are completely autonomous and that *invite* professional extension agents to their groups rather than *depend* on these professionals for the continuity of the group.

Stuart Morriss discusses experiences with groups in New Zealand that have a membership of Natural Resource Management, Farm Production, Science and Policy professionals. He describes an innovative approach to making each type of profession aware of their unique roles and their interdependences as they work on a common problem.

Fionnuala Frost raises the issue of knowledge systems and social learning in her article. Challenges have emerged from the areas of landscape and natural resource management that have accentuated the need for a more effective alignment between science and community action. This need for alignment raises some fairly fundamental questions about what we consider reliable knowledge (and what we mean by knowledge).

Peter Van Beek provides us with a metaphor for improving our ability to empathise and appreciating the understanding and experience of others with whom we work. His brief article is a salient reminder that as professionals with a particular interest in

learning and knowledge management we need to continually appraise our own attitudes to learning and change.

I hope you derive as much inspiration and pride in your profession as I have received while editing this issue - ours is a highly innovative discipline!

(As an editorial committee we are continually seeking feedback and suggestions for improvement, so please send me any comments, now matter how brief, and indicate whether you want your comments published).

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PROJECT PROCESSES

The project consisted of *Inner circle* activities involving two farmer-groups, and *Outer circle* activities, involving the steering committee and others in setting up the project, assessing the worth of the project, and continuing beyond the duration of this project.

Inner circle activities

From April to June, 1999 two groups of 8 farmers came together (through personal contact with the steering committee and advertisements in local papers) in two specific-interest learning groups (Building a New Milk Harvesting System, Young Farmers Futures). External facilitation was provided to start the groups, train the farmers in functioning as learning groups, and to some degree *coach* them.

In designing the research process an analysis of some of the reasons behind current group dependence on facilitators was needed. In general it was determined that facilitators use but do not share with participants a set of skills in the areas of: learning processes, group processes and information processes. As part of the pilot some skills were acquired by group members in order for them to not only develop their capacity as learners, but also enable them to take control of group processes. Training to acquire these skills involved an individual learning style assessment, skills in using knowledge networks, asking questions and interviewing people, problem solving tools (McIntosh, 1997), meeting procedures and learning in groups. From the outset, the role of the coach was to focus on transferring skills in group and learning processes while avoiding providing technical input or directing the group towards particular outcomes.

Coaching also involved helping the group to determine and meet their agenda, and provide administrative support. The groups existed to complete defined tasks within a limited time, and both groups met four times.

Group members carried out a diversity of tasks between meetings and reported their findings at subsequent meetings.

Participants took over the running of the group as agreed at the first meeting and the role of the coach became one of providing administrative support, guidance and challenges to widen their thinking - rather than agenda setting, group control or organisation.

Both groups accepted some basic rules:

- The responsibility for success and failure of the group rested with the group, not the coach;
- The responsibility for all group processes were to be shared, even though they appointed a chair for the day; and
- All participants were to be encouraged to speak and contribute, and be given a 'fair slice' of the time available.

Changes in role from facilitator to coach

By the second meeting, the farmers had "warmed" to the idea of "controlling their own outcomes". Notes from my learning journal: "*I sensed a real 'baton change' - of input, control, ideas, planning - from me to them. I was part of the group, the group asked me for guidance if they got stuck on 'where to from here', but otherwise - I had to ask if I could add something.*"

The facilitator is a learning coach: That is, they help the learning process in any way by challenging, questioning, clarifying how the group is going according to their goals, have they sought out and used the knowledge system fully? Have they challenged their own assumptions about the topic? Have they sought out opposing views have they reflected on their actions? The way this is done is by clarification of the facilitators role by the group in question. The learning coach doesn't organise events or speakers or determine the direction the group should go in, or draw conclusions.

(Continued Page 4)

From the APEN Secretariat

Membership Renewals

There has been a good response to the first invoice for subscription renewals. A reminder invoice will go out early in September to those who have not yet paid.

Remember, the amount that goes to each Chapter from membership subscriptions will be based on the number of financial members at 31st October 2000.

At present there are 484 on the membership database, 185 are financial - so keep those subscriptions coming in folks!

Chapter Round Ups

Unfortunately we did not have any information for this ExtensionNet about activities in and around the Chapters. In the future issues of ExtensionNet we would like to include **more "People Information"**, so please let us know any tit-bits you would like to share - new job, award received, a good joke etc. I will be emailing the Chapter Contacts every couple of months to remind them to send the information in - so either go through your Chapter Contact, or email me direct on rcurrie@albury.net.au

APEN 2000 National Forum

Keep the **25th and 26th October 2000** free for this important event at the Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre. Registration details are within this newsletter.

3rd Australia Pacific Extension Conference

Monday 10th to Wednesday 12th September 2001. The conference is to be held at Coolumb on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. The steering committee is in the process of firming details for the theme and streams for papers etc. We'll keep you posted with more information.