

Making decisions in agriculture: the conflict between extension and adoption

Pennie Scott

Postgraduate student, The University of Sydney, Orange NSW 2800 Australia
White Knuckle Marketing, 35 Ryall Street Canowindra NSW 2804 Australia
whiteknuckle@ozemail.com.au

Summary. Landholders have been the 'recipients' of a plethora of information from many government and commodity agencies over the past few years and almost all the material has been aimed at encouraging greater uptake of sustainable production systems. Despite the widespread distribution of these packages the important difference between agricultural and natural resources management (NRM) extension personnel and their respective audiences, has not as yet been clearly articulated. This paper discusses the differences in decision-making processes adopted by self-employed people (the majority of landholders) and those on a salary (the majority of extension personnel) and why these differences may be a reason behind the less-than-expected uptake of sustainable and NRM practices across Australia. On the other hand, this paper hypothesises that there might be fundamental differences between the two 'specimens' in the management language of natural resources and understanding of the intimate relationship with the land.

Introduction

When psychographic segmentation analysis is applied to the multiple actors who have to deal with land management it is fascinating to realise the diversity of perceptions in terms of relationship to the land among the different 'specimens' that interact around the natural resources. However, one of the most revealing realisations for understanding the relationship between these actors, and therefore the conflict between extension and adoption, since the actors are coming from different social segments, is the significant difference between the income-generation processes of those supposed to be the adopters and those carrying out the research and extension. There are significant intrinsic and extrinsic differences between being self-employed and being on a salary – *especially in the decision-making processes.*

Being self-employed means being fully aware of and responsible for your decisions because your financial wellbeing is dependent on the outcome of any decisions taken. This is living on the financial knife-edge. There are other pressures that can come into play when one is in a potentially economic make-or-break situation.

The amount of risk attached to these processes can be consciously and subconsciously calculated, incorporating a checklist of criteria. The degree of importance will be prioritised against family, environmental, social and long-term income generating potential. This can include the following:

- ◆ Is this a project-based or seasonal timeframe?
- ◆ Will it or can it extend into another financial year?
- ◆ Does this match my principles, ethos and integrity?
- ◆ Will I derive enjoyment from the process of doing?
- ◆ Will it add value to my and other stakeholders' lives?
- ◆ Will my reputation be enhanced or hindered?
- ◆ What might I have to give up in order to achieve my desired outcomes?
- ◆ What risk management strategies can I deploy?
- ◆ What is the worst-case scenario and can I afford to accept that?
- ◆ How can I avoid that worst-case scenario?
- ◆ What long-term effects could there be, and these should be extrapolated to the *n*th degree.

Personality types will contribute to the levels of comfort in risk-taking, which is the fundamental element of primary production in Australia. In the US and Europe, there is not the same economic pressure on farmers because the subsidy system enjoyed by their northern hemisphere counterparts underwrites and economically supports production levels.

One of the major challenges for departmental extension personnel over the past few years has been the increasing focus on accountability, especially in the expenditure of taxpayer funds. There will be consensus on the amount of paperwork and 'red tape' that has steadily increased and can now occupy up to 50% of any position description. The need to be accountable has superseded the need to be effective and one can ponder where this applied pressure actually originates. On one hand, the need to be accountable with someone else's money is honourable. On the other hand,

there is an expectation, to use investment *parlance*, for maximum return on the investment (in measurable outcomes).

Both these arguments co-exist, yet friction as to which is most important actually diminishes the effectiveness anyway. One can sympathise with extension personnel as they grapple with conflicting needs and objectives – to satisfy the multiple-levels of ‘masters’ on the one hand and yet to be effective on the other.

There is a possibility that eventually, altruism for a project is gradually eroded from each employee's system and cultural conformity sets in. Then, we have the Catch 22 situation: salary-safety that creates a different mind-set and *modus operandi* that is so different from the self-employed constituents. Taking risks is not encouraged and any expenditure has to have measurable results. Quantification is justification and, as a recent election campaign in our country proved, the mentality of the money-handlers (politicians) is to throw more dollars at a problem and that will ‘fix’ it. Naturally, and hopefully, there are exceptions to the rules, but firebrands in the public service are usually asked not to apply.

The ‘free-market’ approach to attitude and behaviour dictates across commercial and public sectors, with a lexicon now quite common to all. Public institutions are now expected to conform to this notion, such as the NSW Department of Health. In a recent decision the Minister announced that productivity and service would be improved by the merging of 16 Area Health Services into seven, with the reduction of 600 personnel (New South Wales Health 2004). This was to facilitate more front-line personnel and reduce the number of administrative positions thus reducing duplication and improving efficiencies. In reality, administration overload has been caused by departmental staff having to spend more of their time on paperwork than on providing clinical services in order to prevent litigation. We return to the conundrum – by whom and how has this situation been created and have there been actual improvements in the standards of front-line care?

In a similar move, the NSW Minister for Primary Industries, announced recently that research in agriculture would be reduced, and research stations closed or ‘down-structured’ as a strategy to save AU\$20m (NSW Farmers Association 2004). This is yet another nail in a vital coffin. With severe reductions in publicly funded research by successive governments, ideal conditions have been created for corporate funded research into agriculture and pharmaceutical areas, further eroding the possibilities for truly independent research. Universities and research institutions are hamstrung when their research funding is provided by vested interests. There is no incentive or climate to discover the new or the novel.

However, these examples are indicative of the hegemonic culture and subsequent language of the western world today. There is more emphasis on cost cutting than innovation. It is deemed more important to be competitive than excellent. Efficiency is regarded as the master over competency and expertise; and expendability is practiced over longevity.

As a consequence, decision-making processes are influenced by many factors – both internal and external. Other factors which may have a bearing as to why the desired transfer of information is not achieving the expected results, include the following:

- ◆ Have the extension agents actually lived and worked on a property? Have they heard the magpies in the early morning when they're returning from checking lambing ewes, knowing there's the threat of wild dogs, foxes or crows waiting until you leave the paddock to attack the helpless infants?
- ◆ Have they felt the landscape – not just driven across it, but intimately felt the energies that emanate from the different areas? These energies change from hour to hour and day to day. As many indigenous cultures know, there are more than four seasons in our year with all their subtleties. What experiences have been learned from this level of intimacy?
- ◆ What training has the extension agent been through?. Perhaps environmental or agricultural science with their concentration on the biophysical and cognitive processes, and reliance on technical solutions.
- ◆ What profound learning experiences have the extension agents been through during their life? The most significant and lasting learning experiences are those that involve the emotions - this is when practice change is most likely. Shared emotional experiences will connect two people more soundly and profoundly (try laughing or crying with someone) than a highbrow discussion on recharge. Have these avenues been explored in this context?.
- ◆ How many experiential learning activities and scenarios are created and provided within the structure of projects, and are they sincere or simply tokenistic? Participatory and action-

learning principles are being used more often, but what are the expectations of the amount of 'giving' from each stakeholder?.

- ◆ Within the concepts of participatory and action-based learning, does the expectation exist that the majority of 'the learning' is to be done by the landholders? If so, then the process will remain unbalanced.
- ◆ What are the extension agent's own personal philosophies on natural resource management? Are they being practiced on a daily basis in their own, personal realm? In other words, how is the walk being talked?.
- ◆ What personal risks do the extension agents take on a regular basis? Are they prepared to risk establishing an intimate relationship after the last one collapsed?. Are they prepared to learn to ride a motorbike or bungee jump? Are they willing to become a model for a life drawing class? When was the last time you did something for the first time?.
- ◆ What is the agent's attitude to learning? Is it fired by curiosity, fear (of litigation), compliance, or economic gain? Whatever the reason, these are similar to some of the motivations that arouse landholders to engage in formal and informal learning processes.
- ◆ How many ways is the agent aware of learning and ultimately, knowing? With the majority of current natural resource management information and formatting targeted to the cognitive, western-culture style, this is ignoring women's ways of knowing, indigenous ways of knowing, radical ways of knowing, ecological ways of knowing and emotional intelligence, amongst others.

Learning and practising risk-taking in unison

With an operating system that continues to maintain the technological transfer model, (the scientist 'discovers' the information, the extension agent 'learns' about the information, which is then transferred to the recipient, who, in turn, is required to implement the 'discovery'), there is an uneven balance in the belief of who holds the share of knowledge-power. Added to this, is the heavy focus of biophysical solutions to landscape situations, which are usually created with human involvement.

As the saying goes, actors should avoid working with kids and animals if they want to prevent the unexpected. Similarly, NRM bean counters seem to prefer quantitative projects rather than qualitative – the latter can be so messy and almost impossible to measure and one can never tell what outcomes may arise when humans are involved. Once again, the conundrum arises when one asks, where does all this emanate from?

There is another way to combat the different mind-spaces, experiences and decision-making processes of salaried extension agents and self-employed landholders – and that is to explore the unknown in unison, as learning partners with an attitude of expecting the unexpected. By working in partnership, all parties are contributing to capacity building.

Taylor (Gender and Water Alliance 2004, pers. comm., 13 October 2004) describes partnerships thus:

- ◆ they should be distinguished by the 'added value' each party brings;
- ◆ there need to be mutually agreed objectives;
- ◆ there needs to be shared risks and benefits;
- ◆ there needs to be transparent lines of communication; and
- ◆ the partnership must be voluntary and equitable.

As Taylor states, partnerships cannot be generalised and different structures and arrangements will be appropriate for different circumstances and situations. From his wealth of experience, he has found that local ownership and leadership improves benefits, relevance and the commitment of the partners. Open and inclusive partnerships maximise local skills and knowledge.

It is all very well to cite altruistic and lofty objectives, but unless there is a culture to encourage inquiry and innovation, there is little hope for NRM agencies and their extension agents to move beyond where they are now – measuring biophysical changes, tearing their hair out at what 'other people' are doing to the landscapes, and conforming to the safety and sanctity of their salaries. The power bases that exist within certain agencies are also destructive and totally counter-productive to improving any environmental situations.

It takes tremendous courage to leap outside the square; just thinking outside it is easy. Challenging the multi-level (departmental and ministry) masters and mistresses, and the existing conformist culture requires vision, energy, persistence and sheer grit. It helps to have accomplices as critical mass can actually move molehills – and that is a start!. Declaring a culture of curiosity in the workplace and then producing that reality is the beginning of creativity and practice change. This may be just the catalyst to start learning about risk-taking; a situation the self-employed face almost every day in their operating environment.

Conclusion

With a different operating model to transcend the distinctions between extension agents, landholders and their decision-making processes, the variety of experiences between them will enhance collaboration between the stakeholders.

There is no better or worse distinction between the salaried and the unemployed; indeed, there are many self-employed people who would gladly have the comfort of an assured income, week after week.

For extension agents to have true empathy with their self-employed constituents, there is a pressing need for them to move beyond their personal and professional comfort zones. Living on a (financial) knife-edge creates new skill sets that can only be found at that precipice. Although I am not suggesting that (all) extension agents give up their positions and salaries, to assist in overcoming the chasm, now is the time to take up the challenge of change.

The majority of the information supplied to encourage practice change is based on the assumption that there is cognitive understanding and acceptance of the material provided, and ultimately its adoption by the landholders. With this expectation, what equivalent processes and disciplines do extension personnel apply to themselves to voluntarily practice change in their own realms?

My observations indicate a 'specimen' attitude by some researchers and extension agents towards landholders who, despite the best efforts of the extension personnel continue to refuse to change their practices. Perhaps a fundamental difference in the decision-making process between the two 'specimens' is one of the reasons. Another reason, in an hypothetical manner, might be a difference in the language of managing natural resources and a differential understanding of the intimate relationship with the land between the extension officer and the landholder. These latter hypotheses are my passion and the objective of my research and extension activity.

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