

An extension officer's perspective on practice change

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Abstract. Partnering with leading farmers to facilitate practice change by the wider farming community is explained and discussed in this paper. Leveraging off leading farmers will lead to faster practice change as farmers learn best from other farmers. Four steps to achieve practice change are outlined: first identify a need, then create tension or appetite for change, propose options in the context of farmer goals and finally follow up. The catalyst that underpins success through these four steps is the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the farmer and change agent. Experiences with a leading farmer group focused on profitability (called the Green to Gold (**GtoG**) group) using the four step process has resulted in on-farm change. Profiling this success to the wider farming community through field days has led an appetite to practice change in the region.

Key words: leading farmer, change agent relationships, partnering, practice change community

Introduction

This paper looks at the process of practice change as experienced by a field extension officer over eight years. It sets out a four stage process to achieve change demonstrated through the example of the Green to Gold farmer group. This group is an example of how extension work with leading farmers can be used to motivate other farmers to practice change. Green to Gold is a leading farmer group which looks at the efficient use of resources to achieve business and personal goals. "Pasture conversion into milk" is a key focus of GtoG. GtoG is a leading farmer group in the upper quartile of profitability in Northland region of New Zealand and it meets five times per year. Full farm information disclosure, including financial information, is a requirement of group membership. This ensures that all recommendations are fact-based. GtoG follows a four step process which resulted in on-farm change over a period of 3 years. This change is rapid in farm-systems terms, where changes can take a considerable time to filter through from initial concept to changes on farm.

"To understand people one needs to understand what leads them to act as they do, how they act is influenced by their goals" (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992).

The catalyst to facilitate change in farming communities is interpersonal relationships. An interpersonal relationship is the way two or more people affect each other because they are related in some way (Macmillan dictionary). Interrelationships are built when one focuses on the other person proving the statement "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". How much one can facilitate is the bond that keeps the relationship together.

Experience working with leading farmers suggests that they are a valuable resource in reaching a wider group of farmers who are traditionally harder to engage in practice change. In extension circles it is a widely held belief that farmers learn best from farmers. If this is the case it is important that extension services continue to work with those farmers who are seen by their peers as inspirational examples. The GtoG group is a good test case for this theory, and one where we can also make some observations about the rate at which practices catch on to the wider farming sector.

With GtoG there were four important steps to achieve practice change. First, identify a need. Second, create tension/appetite for change. Third, propose options in the context of farmer goals. Fourth, follow progress.

Green to Gold case study

The GtoG experience has reinforced that the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the farmer and change agent is the catalyst underlining the success of the extension officer as a 'change agent'. A quality relationship is a precursor in what Black (2000) describes as a participatory, "bottom-up", approach to progress through the four steps outlined below. Extension officers have a sea of opportunities to establish trust and relationships such as working with farmers in adverse events (floods, droughts, current credit crunch) and planned ongoing, day-to-day group interactions with farmers. These types of forums can enable extension officers to build relationships, identify needs and eventually stimulate practice change.

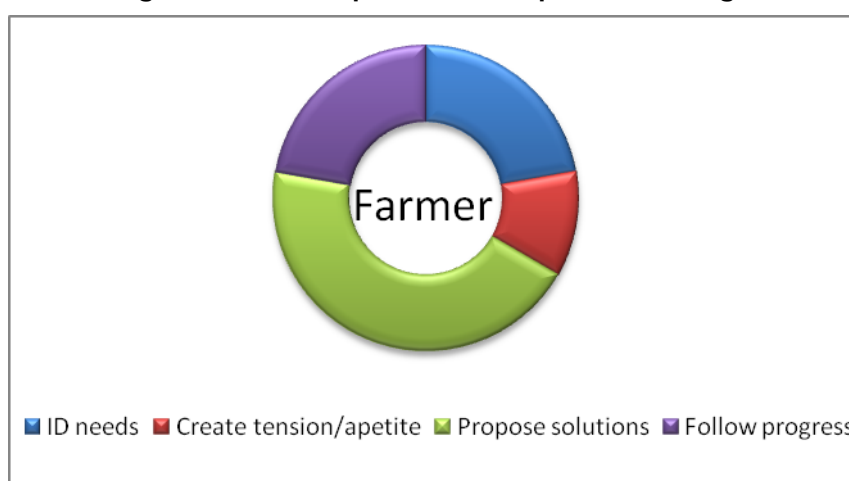
Four steps to practice change

Personal extension experience working with farmers in the GtoG group shows that practice change can be achieved through this four step process.

Over time the members of the GtoG group have become more familiar with the process and changes in the pace of adoption have been observed by those members. GtoG value is illustrated by a 2009 member survey in which 100% of the members report objectives being fully achieved and 100% of the members will recommend this group to other farmers. This survey also demonstrated additional value per member of \$100,000 over the last 6 years. Below is an outline of how the four step process was used with the GtoG group to achieve practice change and examples of how that has been leveraged to achieve change by the wider farming community.

Figure 1 above shows the four step process. The process starts from the 12 o'clock position and progresses clockwise. The farmer is central to this process as the farmer is responsible for the practice change. When change has occurred the process restarts, focussing on a different need. The process repeats more rapidly through each cycle as the farmer learns from experience and success is repeated.

Figure 1. Four steps to achieve practice change



Identify needs

Accurate diagnosis of needs comes from a clear understanding of farmer goals. Goals could be personal development, environmental, financial or social.

In the GtoG group each hosting couple outlined their SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) goals. These goals were captured in a pre-visit made to collect facts and identify needs for the host farm. Factual data on key performance indicators (**KPI**), such as pasture eaten, farm working costs/kg Milk Solid are also collected to provide benchmarks upon which to base recommendations. For example, a financial goal might be to increase farm profit by 50% from \$1000/ha in three years. Data on KPIs provides clarity to the GtoG members when providing recommendations to the host farmer.

Businesses have many, sometimes conflicting, needs, challenging the change agent to identify the priority needs. An understanding by the change agent of the fundamentals of an efficient farm system assists in identifying needs in those instances where the farmer is not clear on goals or when the basics are not being implemented well.

Creating tension/appetite for change

Identifying the benefits of achieving goals or highlighting the consequences for inaction creates a healthy tension to motivate farmers to take action. Peer pressure from trusted colleagues in the GtoG group ensures feedback is positive, and it is backed up by personal experiences from fellow farmers or the change agent, such as evidence from research/other businesses. At the conclusion of each meeting, feedback, or an action plan, is recorded for the host farm. This is reviewed by the group at the next group meeting to check on progress. This ensures ongoing motivation for change by the farmer.

For example: A farm business structure needs review as it could be liable for 50% less tax on the basis of good advice. The money saved could be invested in drainage, allowing an increase in pasture utilised, thus increasing profitability.

Propose options

A suite of potential options allows the host farmer freedom of choice. The following are examples of options for increasing farm profit:

- Increase pasture utilised/eaten by increasing stocking rate or reducing supplements
- Attend a specialist pasture group (for example DairyNZ's Pasture Plus)
- Involve a consultant to build either business capability or staff knowledge and ability?
- Monitor daily feed demand and supply
- Increase days in milk by reducing calving spread by using interventions
- Provide heat detection training for staff and/or talk to your vet about an In-Calf programme
- Implement a financial budgeting program to monitor actual versus budget and/or talk to your banker about this aspect of your business.

In the GtoG group options were identified by breaking into smaller groups, a chair was chosen for each sub group and then asked to report options back to the host farmer. Allowing adequate time for discussion increased the quality of the responses. The host farmer had the opportunity after each group presentation to respond to recommendations, which were then typed up and used as a discussion starter at the next group.

Follow up

To ensure practice change occurs farmers need support as they make the changes. This support can be in the form of referrals to specialists or a regular call by change agent for an update on progress.

Following up on recommendations at the next event creates tension for change in the GtoG group, as farmers know they will be held accountable. After a goal has been achieved the whole process is repeated, focussing on the next goal. Successful practice change presents an opportunity for the change agent to leverage off the process the GtoG farmer has undertaken for use with a wider group of farmers not in the GtoG group.

Leveraging off GtoG farmers

Using the opportunity to celebrate a farmer's success in a key area of the farm system by hosting a field day has allowed multiplication of the rate of change throughout the farming community by leveraging. Attendance to GtoG farmer field days is double the numbers to other field days. Personal experience working with farmers has shown that farmers learn best from other farmers, especially if they reside in the same community.

Each year one of the GtoG members hosts a field day open to all farmers in the region to showcase how they have improved business performance. This is a form of 'celebrity farmer' endorsement. Farmer selection is based on excellence in particular areas and is backed by having a specialist speaker (scientist, agronomist etc). The field day is structured around the steps the farmer took to achieve good performance as well as the sharing mistakes made in the process.

Feedback results from scoring the event on a scale of 1 to 5 from 200 farmers who attended two GtoG farmer hosted field days showed that 85% of the farmers reported the field days were excellent (5), 5% rated them average (3) and 10% rated them below average (1 or 2) at achieving their purpose. The purpose of the field days was to outline steps taken to achieve practice change. These findings show that leading farmers are stimulating thinking or interest that assists adoption by the wider community. One of the farmers managed to reduce empty rate from 18% to 5% over 2 years and increased production by 30kgMilk Solids/ha/yr or increased profit by \$150/ha/yr, primarily as a result of attending one of the field days.

Follow up to assist interested field day farmers, so that they can achieve practice change, is still lacking in our programme. Change agents should ideally allow adequate time for follow up to complete the four step process with newly engaged farmers. This can be hamstrung or enhanced by how extension is funded and managed. An opportunity exists for change agents to formalise farmer to farmer mentoring to ensure that follow up happens.

In a related benefit, the GtoG farmer group provides ideas on future extension needs prior to recognition of those needs by the general community, as these farmers tend to be months ahead of the majority in thinking. One such idea led to a New Zealand-wide extension focus on operational and financial management with tight times in the dairy sector three months before it was headline news.

Conclusion and recommendations

Change agents can achieve on-farm change quickly by establishing inter-relationships with farmers and following the four steps to achieve change. Once change is achieved change agents must leverage off leading farmers as a platform for wider community practice change. It is recommended that:

6. Farmers learn best from other farmers. To accelerate this process change agents need to leverage off leading farmers who are already achieving success in an area they would like the wider community to adopt.
7. If farmers are unhappy with how part of their business is running they will benefit from finding and modelling from another farmer who is achieving good performance in that area.
8. Extension agents will achieve more change on-farm if they allow time to follow up and support farmers making changes. This requires time and resourcing, but is critical to move from good to great extension practice.

A final comment about the GtoG experience: leading farmers innovate. Extension and science must keep an eye on what top farmers are doing to advance their own professional knowledge and science.

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