

## Peer group mentors contribute to diversified, sustainable and innovative farming communities

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**Abstract.** The Otway Agroforestry Network (OAN), in partnership with the Australian Master Tree Grower Program (MTG) established a Peer Group Mentoring service in 2005. Experienced farmers and tree-growers mentor new members to integrate multipurpose trees and shrubs into existing farming systems. The goal is to support landholders in ways that help them achieve their own land management goals. The Peer Group Mentoring Service was started in the Otways with twelve long-term farmers and tree-growers who had all completed a Master Tree Grower Course. The twelve undertook some basic training on enabling farmers to achieve their own goals before the service was trialled for a year. During the trial, mentors attended farm sites with one of the OAN management team, contributed to site reports and followed up visits with offers of support to farmers. Support included advice and demonstrations on the preparation, establishment and management of plantations and visits to properties with existing, well integrated and established plantations in order to illustrate successes and increase networking opportunities. The following year, five additional mentors were recruited, a two-day training program was run with the assistance of Dr Digby Race and Dr Jo Millar from Charles Sturt University and a mentor training manual and program were developed. Since 2007 a mentor has attended each site visit and has been allocated to the landholder for ongoing assistance. Mentors have also been allocated to existing members who thought they could benefit from the service. More than 90 farmers in the region now have a mentor. Recognising the potential to extend the concept the MTG program developed two pilot PGM projects in Western Australia. The MTG provided guidance to two regional groups in the development of PGM projects, helped deliver extension training for mentors, contributed to technical sessions, provided funds to support training and delivery, and participated in workshops to evaluate the projects.

### Introduction

In 2005 the Otway Agroforestry Network (OAN) teamed up with the Australian Master Treegrower Program (MTG) to explore the concept of facilitating farmer-to-farmer extension. The proposal was to train, then pay, experienced local tree growers to act as peer group mentors (PGMs) who would support and assist other landholders thinking about investing in agroforestry, landcare or forest management projects. To date, twenty landholders have acted as PGMs providing one-on-one support to more than 90 landholders. They have also been involved in running regional farm walks, representing the network at local meetings and contributing to regional newsletters.

Recognising the potential to extend the concept the MTG program developed two pilot PGM projects in Western Australia. The MTG provided guidance to two regional groups in the development of PGM projects, helped deliver extension training for mentors, contributed to technical sessions, provided funds to support training and delivery, and participated in workshops to evaluate the projects. This paper reviews the concept of peer mentoring in agricultural extension and reports on the three PGM pilot projects (Table 1).

### Farmer-to-farmer extension theory

The PGM model is based on sound extension principles and clearly complements the approach adopted by the MTG program (Reid 2008) and reflects many of the views expressed in the recent review of the adoption of conservation practices by Pannell et al. (2006, pp. 1409–1412) who argue that:

‘social and information networks would be important influences on the decision to proceed to trial’

‘the more difficult the decision, the more the decision maker will engage and re-engage with their personal support network’

‘peer expectations of continued commitment or personal support and encourage will reinforce commitment and provide a buffer against setbacks’

‘one should expect that adoption behaviour to be influenced by the personality of the decision maker, their social networks, personal circumstances and family situation’.

A further quote from their paper has particular resonance with the PGM concept:

'A history of respectful relationships between landholders and advocates for the innovation, including scientists, extension agents, other landholders and private companies, is positively related to adoption through enhanced trust in the advice of the advocates'

Table 1. Agroforestry peer group mentoring projects, partners, activities and outcomes

PGM pilot programs	Training and review activities	Outcomes
<p>1. Otway Agroforestry Network (14)</p> <p>Federally funded through the Corangamite CMA. MTG program provided Rowan's time and costs.</p>	<p>2005 – 12 participants (mostly past MTGs) came together at Beech Forests to formalise the site visit process that was to develop into the PGM project</p> <p>2007 – 17 participants attended a two-day PGM training course at Apollo Bay led by Dr Digby Race.</p> <p>PGM Service Manual developed containing proposed processes, responsibilities, payment and reporting systems and supporting reference material</p> <p>2007 – technical training day for mentors in tree measurement and marketing</p> <p>2008 – Dinner meeting with mentors to discuss and review processes and roles</p> <p>2008 – tree growth, plot establishment and measurement training session for mentors</p> <p>2008 – Dinner meeting to develop skill matrix, resource needs and the way forward</p>	<p>Mentors completed more than 35 site visits to new member's properties with management team members and were made available for followup support.</p> <p>Directly assisted 33 existing members who wanted advice or to share experience on the design, establishment or management of agroforestry projects.</p> <p>Establishment of 'satellite' extension projects in areas with low participation</p> <p>Group attendance at the Albury AFG conference</p> <p>Assistance in the design and delivery of the Heytesbury MTG course to demonstrate the role of PGMs</p>
<p>2. Australian Sandalwood Network (21)</p> <p>Partly funded by the MTG program (\$10,000) and administered by AvonGro with the support of the WA Forest Products Commission.</p>	<p>July – 2007 Introductory training day</p> <p>Feb – 2008 Technical training day with Dr Geoff Goodall</p> <p>Mar 2009 Refresher and review workshop</p>	<p>Although only a few of the Sandalwood PGMs undertook mentoring of other growers under the program the enthusiasm remains high</p> <p>One PGM approached more than 20 landholders and assisted many with their applications for host species</p> <p>Some had received PGM payment for presentations at field days and seminars</p>
<p>3. WA Sawlogs Growers (8).</p> <p>Partly funded by the MTG and administered Trees South West with the support of the WA Forest Products Commission and SW Catchment Council.</p>	<p>Feb 2008 – Introductory training day (Bunbury)</p> <p>Winter 2008 – Technical training for PGMs led by Bob Hingston in tree measurement and silviculture</p> <p>Dec 2008 – PGM Review Meeting</p>	<p>6 PGMs undertook a total of 14 paid mentoring visits during 2008. 10 of the visits were self generated (not referred).</p> <p>One PGM took it on themselves to promote the project locally with success</p>

Internationally, the importance of engaging local landholders as partners in the delivery of agricultural extension programs is well established. Early (pre 1990s) farm forestry extension programs in the developing world have been criticised as being 'top down' and having a rigid structure that saw landholders as passive recipients of predefined forestry designs (Glendinning et al. 2001). Whilst participatory extension models have since become fashionable in development programs overseas the top down technical approach has remained the dominant extension strategy adopted by federally funded farm forestry programs in Australia (Reid and Stephen 2007)

At the heart of participatory extension models is the recognition of the importance of facilitating and strengthening farmer-to-farmer dialogue. Glendinning et al. (2001, p. 293) found that Swedish farmers 'checked with leading farmers and village leaders' when sourcing materials, checking for possible negative impacts and verifying claimed benefits. Phillips (1985) highlights the important role that intimates and non-expert acquaintances, many of them being other farmers, had on the major decisions taken by dairy farmers in New Zealand (Figure 1). Whilst professionals or experts were effective at introducing new ideas and information to a farming community (the fuel) Phillips founds that they actually played a very minor role in terms of validation and support.

This coincides with the experience of adult educators who understand that the most effective learning in this sector comes from peers in a non threatening environment (e.g. the farm)



The identified aim of the Avon Sandalwood PGM was to instil confidence in the wider adoption of sandalwood plantations by using experienced local growers to support landowners who are thinking about becoming sandalwood growers. For those in the fledgling Australian Sandalwood Network it was also seen as a means of encouraging growers to take greater ownership of the developing sandalwood industry, influencing the direction of research and development programs.

What is a peer group mentor?

Most participants were quick to recognise that a peer group mentor did not need to be an expert in all aspects of tree growing (P1). It was more important that PGMs recognised their role within the community as a source of knowledge that was gained from their involvement and practical experience in growing trees (P2). In distinguishing mentors from experts there was no suggestion that they were inferior. In fact the mentors recognised that they played an important role in validating (or dismissing) expert information provided in information sheets or presented at seminars and field days (P2).

'All land managers that I have been in contact with as part of the program have commented on the unique nature and innovative approach. They also appreciate that the mentor is not an 'expert' coming to tell them what they should be doing, but is someone they usually know and respect as having local experience in tree growing'. (P2)

What mentors brought to the program was their experience as a local tree grower, their involvement in regional tree growing information networks and their commitment to their region (P1). In fact, it was the similarities between the PGM and the clients that was their strength, rather than their superior knowledge:

'Mentoring is the equivalent of like-minded people getting together to discuss possibilities' (P1)

'A mentor acts as a sounding board enabling people to learn from others mistakes rather than reinventing the wheel' (P1)

'Someone who takes a 'neighbourly' approach to giving advice rather than coming across as an expert' (P1)

The participants identified the possible characteristics of an effective Peer Group Mentor as someone:

- who was recognised as an experienced grower and willing to share their knowledge and experiences with others (P1, P2, P3)
- with a desire to help and support other landholders achieve success in their projects (P1)
- with an appreciation that what is appropriate for one landholder might not suit another and that people differ in the type of support and mentoring they need (P1, P 2)
- committed to the (group) and their region, to regional development and who has a good understanding of their locality (P1,P2, P3)
- with skills in communication and interpretation so that they can read both the people and the physical, social and economic landscape in which they work (P1, P2)
- with the ability to seek out information and expertise appropriate to the situation, or at least the ability to direct landholders to others who may be able to help (P1)
- with an enthusiasm for new ideas but a willingness to emphasise the risks associated with new ventures (P1, P2)
- involved in relevant associations and groups which enable them to access technical and professional information appropriate to the situation. They should be able to direct the landowner to appropriate information sources (P2)
- respectful of confidentiality relating to the landowner's property, social or financial situation.(P2)

It was felt that, although mentors did not require an official qualification, they should be selected on the basis of the credibility they hold within their community as practitioners (P2). They should also have participated in the PGM training sessions, particularly those which discussed the role of a mentor and their responsibilities (P1, P2).

What peer group mentors actually do

The critical starting point was for the mentors to meet on the landholder(s) property with a view to understanding their interests, needs and aspirations and providing them with a realistic picture of what could be done (P1). Other activities identified as being appropriate for mentors included: hosting a tour of the mentor's own property; taking the client to another farm or

forest that they thought was relevant to their needs or interests; preparing tree orders or facilitating contractors; fielding phone calls from landholders; working directly with the landholder on the project (setting out fence lines, planting, pruning etc); doing some follow up research on behalf of the landholder; assisting with funding applications or arranging meetings with industry, government and/or other potential partners; establishing or conducting ongoing monitoring (photo points, growth measurements etc); organising landholders to attend group activities or organising and presenting at local farm walks, seminars or other group activities.

One of the sandalwood mentors said that they had found it useful to invite recipients to visit their own property first, particularly when they knew the client was new to growing sandalwood. This provided them with the opportunity to demonstrate their own experience and illustrate management options. Interestingly, they added that people are more likely to listen when you show them your own mistakes.

#### *The language PGMs use*

When discussing their role as a mentor it became apparent that there was a 'language' associated with mentoring that helped mentors, and the client, clearly distinguish the role of the mentor from one of an expert or industry advocate. The discussion about language was useful in allaying the fears of some mentors that they were being asked to give advice and that they might be liable (legally or ethically) for having done so. For example, rather than providing specific advice mentors would suggest and guide farmers by saying something like: 'I think...', 'This is what I do but others do this', or 'You could try it this way...'.

Language is also important in demonstrating that the mentor is listening to the client's interests, appreciates where they are coming from and is there to help them decide on a solution that best suits them: 'Yes, that seems to be a big issue for you, given that it is possible, how do you think you could go about preparing for it?' (P1)

Whilst generally enthusiastic about the prospects for trees and the products they themselves were hoping to produce, the mentors felt it was important to be clear about the risks and uncertainty inherent in most agroforestry options. As landholders themselves, they recognised that farmers could be sceptical of new practices and that highlighting the inherent risks or negatives helped distinguish mentors from industry advocates.

#### *Administration of a PGM service*

Each of the PGM projects is managed locally by a coordinator (individual or team). The coordinator allocates mentors to clients, is aware of the amount of time and the type of activities being undertaken and processes claims for time and mileage. Whilst PGMs are generally encouraged to seek out potential clients it was generally felt that the mentor should first advise the coordinator of their intentions, methods and activities to ensure their fit with the expectations of the project.

The groups had, or prepared, PGM kits for mentors that provide written information on the roles and responsibility of mentors, forms to be completed in order to receive payment and other useful information the mentors thought might be useful including:

- detailed maps of the region including where possible, soils, rainfall or other site limiting factors
- a package of fact sheets
- a database of skills amongst the mentors and supporters
- a range of locally relevant case studies
- visual information and images to help interpret people's vision
- access to properties that are good examples and provide visions of what is possible
- a list of useful contacts, nurseries, contractors etc.

Given the diversity of experience and range of views amongst the mentors themselves it was suggested that each group have a package of general fact sheets on key aspects such as tree establishment and management. Using the fact sheets the mentor could then suggest how the landholder might vary from the standard or generic practices given their particular situation or interests.

The mentors value highly the technical training days and 'get-togethers'. Having established the initial group of mentors through direct invitation to those who were thought to have the interest and skills, they felt that it was important to maintain the integrity of their group.

There have been discussions within all groups about how much time and support the mentor might be expected to provide to each client. In all cases there was an expectation that the mentor at their discretion, would initially spend up to 3 hours with the client With the support of

the project coordinator, this could be increased if there was the expectation of value for the group or a specific need. Having received an initial visit the client would be able to access the mentor on the phone with the understanding that calls would be limited to a reasonable length.

#### *How mentors help hosts, sponsors and researchers*

Regional landholder groups, such as the Otway Agroforestry Network and the Australian Sandalwood Network rely on the enthusiasm of their leadership group to attract new members and fill voluntary leadership roles to maintain the continued support of their membership. The PGM model seems to be contributing to these needs. The success of the Otway Agroforestry Network (more than 300 members) is partly attributed to the work of the 20 PGMs who provide a relevant local face for the group.

An experienced sandalwood grower expressed concern that there was an expectation amongst new growers that growing sandalwood simply required a one off investment. It was suggested that the PGM program had a role in demonstrating the need for ongoing management and the importance of staying informed. In this way the PGM might help maintain memberships. The sandalwood growers also highlighted the fact that their membership and expertise was spread over an enormous area of the Western Australian wheat belt. As a result, many members, including those committed to the group, were unable to regularly attend events and felt isolated. The PGM service was seen as a means of breaking down the distances and building personal relationships within the group that would serve to encourage and maintain membership.

In each region there are highly regarded experts who have publicly stated that they see the PGM service as a way of reaching more farmers and thereby improving the quality of agroforestry management. They also acknowledge that being able to direct 'novice' enquiries to PGMs was a means of reducing the demands on their own time. There was also the potential for PGMs to undertake an initial visit and provide feedback to the experts, helping them determine if they were required.

#### *What's in it for the mentors*

The rate of pay and the cost of mileage were negotiated within each group. Payment for time varies from \$30 to \$40 per hour with the mileage rate being based around local government or tax office rates (between about 50c and 70c per kilometre). Interestingly, all projects have found that there are some mentors that are reluctant to submit invoices or are slow to complete their paperwork. More than one landholder has expressed their uneasiness in charging for their time when they are *enjoying themselves* and not actually doing *physical work*.

Many highlighted the satisfaction and positive feeling resulting from being recognised as having a contribution to make, being rewarded for the informal work they felt they were already doing in their community, having the opportunity to do something practical towards improving the landscape and supporting their community; and having the opportunity to contribute to helping a new industry succeed. They were doing something they believed in and gained satisfaction from being able to help others.

'It's been a great opportunity and a privilege to contribute to rural revegetation, and to stimulate people to consider the positives of tree growing' (P3)

'I believe that it gives each of us more creditability when talking to others about the tree planting idea, as we are identified as having done the hard yards and have done something others would like to but are hesitant without seeing it done first' (P3)

In addition to the payments they received as mentors, the recognition from being involved in the program provided additional benefits such as helping promote their other business activities or act as a stepping stone to getting a more regular job with the group or other organisation. One landholder who had sought to develop their farm as a working demonstration noted that:

'In the past we have used our property for farm visits. To have the support of funding makes it easier to accomplish. People are generally unwilling to pay for it' (P3)

More significant to many were the benefits they received through building their own knowledge, experience and information networks. They got access onto many properties and acknowledged that they themselves learnt from their clients. Many identified that the privileged access the project provided them to so-called 'super mentors' was invaluable. They also acknowledge that the PGM service fuelled their enthusiasm to manage and maintain their own projects. For many,

the prospect of having other farmers visit their farms was sufficient encouragement to prune their trees, control the weeds or expand their plantings.

'I have found the program of exceptional value to me personally, as I have limited knowledge and expertise in farm forestry. The concept of getting knowledge to the point that one can discuss issues with peers is a great learning experience' (P3)

Many enjoyed the social aspects of the PGM project which not only included meeting many other landholders but also feeling part of the 'team':

'Interaction with like minded peers is always stimulating. Passing on experience to potential growers is rewarding to both parties' (P3).

'Rewarding to share knowledge and experience with new growers. Plus meeting and exchanging ideas with other group members has been a pleasure' (P3)

#### Challenges and weaknesses of the PGM model

In addition to the obvious challenge of accessing and maintaining ongoing funding and organisation support for the project, those involved in the pilot projects did identify other issues:

- Many of those identified as potential mentors are already very busy. Although they would like to help and support the concept they are worried that they will be unable to commit the time required to do the job justice.
- Within each group of mentors there was clearly a range of views about the best practices or species and the appropriateness of different methods. This had the potential to create confusion amongst clients and conflicts amongst the team.
- The mentors themselves acknowledge that there was a risk of 'misguided enthusiasm' and a real concern about mentors 'pushing their own agenda or vision onto others'.
- In Western Australia the area being 'serviced' by the two projects was very much larger than that in the Otway's. This raised concerns about the costs and time required and the value of mentors working in areas outside their past experience.
- Where the mentors are expected to provide ongoing support there has been some uncertainty about how long to wait before following up with a visit whilst not wanting to pester the client.

'There is a lot of power in a group like this that has the passion and expertise' (P1)

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