DEVELOPING FARMER FOCUS GROUPS AS A KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER MECHANISM: A PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The use of farmer focus groups is discussed as a mechanism for effective knowledge transfer activity, and the functionality of the focus farm contrasted with that of the demonstration farm. Key qualities of focus farmers and the essential characteristics of focus groups are summarised, as portrayed by four different stakeholder groups. Benchmarking, as a means of identifying and sharing good practice within the groups is also highlighted within the knowledge transfer mechanism.

Key Words: Farmer Focus Group, Demonstration Farm, Benchmarking

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the experiences to date in the use of "Farmer Focus Groups" as a mechanism for knowledge transfer activity with grassland and livestock farmers in Cornwall, England. The term farmer focus groups is distinctly different to the usual context of research "focus groups". In the context of knowledge transfer activity it is intended to refer to a group of farmers or farmer managers engaged collectiviely in a process of harvesting and sharing information, where the group activity is focussed clearly on a specific topic and pre defined objectives. Farmer focus groups were established as a key communications network for the delivery of a multifunctional project branded as "The Grassland Challenge", targeting potential entrepreneurial farming business within Cornwall over a three year project duration commencing summer 2004. In contrast to the formal qualification frameworks traditionally offered as College based provision, the knowledge transfer mechanism offers no accreditation of the learning activity other than to acknowledge attendance. Key stakeholders in the project are five local Cornish Grassland Societies, Duchy College, IGER (Institute of Grassland and Environment Research), participating farmers and commercial sponsors.

The project is primarily focused on a range of Technology Transfer activities, supported by the provision of a broad Benchmarking activity giving consideration to a range of business, technical, environmental and customer related issues. It is supplemented by a formal evaluation of the impact of the activities and knowledge management on business performance and sustainability. Benchmarking provides the opportunity to monitor progress and encour-

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age development through interaction with peer group members. It provides of an activity that extends beyond the limitations of solely financial or technical comparative analysis to consider the broader issues of business, personal and management development. To encourage this approach common standards for the allocation of costs on mixed Cornish units have been developed so as to facilitate the evolution of a comprehensive database of local performance indicators. Financial performance is an integral part of the activity with the development of "Unit Costs of Production" as a costings methodology across all ruminant livestock sectors of the industry (dairy, beef, and sheep).

Knowledge transfer activity is concentrated on the formation and interaction of ten farmer focus groups, each with a unique common theme, focussed on the farming unit of one of the group members, referred to as the "focus farmer" and the "focus farm". In their formative stages most groups focus on technical issues. The technical nature of the initial knowledge transfer activity is seen as a means of engagement with potential participants, while the introduction of the benchmarking activity serves as a transition toward the consideration of financial performance, sustainability and longer term business strategy, and aims to provide an awareness of financial performance and the manner in which it relates to the achievement of personal and business objectives.

The key aims of "The Grassland Challenge" were identified as:

- To improve the economic, environmental and social sustainability of participating farmers
- To facilitate the transfer of technology and management tools to farmers with a view to improving competitiveness

Project concepts were developed following a number of years of experience of delivery to farmer discussion groups across the South West of England, coupled with the research and developmental activity of staff through a variety of other avenues, including Byles, (2001). This work resulted in an increasing awareness of the key functional requirements of successful delivery to entrepreneurial farmer groups in various sectors of the industry across the world.

The key requirements have previously been identified by other authors. O'Keeffe and Fletcher (1998) report on the experiences of extension work in the Australian wool sector in that a number of producers are not initially aware of "profit drivers" under their own control and that, in a number of successful extension programmes, the focus is on "group activities as a mechanism for tackling practical implementation problems".

Cuming (2000) states that, in the context of "Bestwool 2010" (Australia), group coordinators are essential in determining the effectiveness of a group. Their overriding role is to challenge the group, generating a team approach to learning and problem solving. It is suggested that there are three key functions: assistance in determining priorities; coordinating and facilitating group activities to meet priorities; and supporting adoption of new technologies where appropriate. Furthermore, it is suggested that to be effective the extension packages must be specifically targeted to fulfil the motivations and aspirations of participants, and that an evolutionary transition from an occupation, "way of life", focus to a business focus is observed where groups and individuals develop effective business strategies. The group facilitator once again has a key role to play in fostering and promoting this transition. Cuming (2000) also states that the groups need access to the professional support to undertake effective learning, challenge performance improvement, and adopt new practices. Warren (2000) highlights the importance of group leaders, and where they are farmers, also references the "pressure" that they experience as working farmers and family members given the workload involved.

Beattie (1999), as part of the long running South West Victorian Monitor Farm Project,

expresses recorded farm costings as beef,lamb or wool "profit per kilogram",as well as quoting the more traditionally accepted criteria such as Gross Margins and Gross Farm Income. It is suggested that as an alternative to gross margins, the unit cost of production has value in accounting for all costs involved through apportioning overhead costs to the individual enterprise. The methodology is said to assist more readily in identifying the characteristics of "better performing" farms.

John and Bird (2000) demonstrate the use of a full "unit cost of production" costings methodology for the dairy sector and highlight a reduction in production costs of 8.5 pence per litre over a recent 3 year period. It is stated that "building the confidence to graze [grass effectively] has primarily come from having contact (through discussion groups and international tours) with positive farmers trying to achieve similar results".

Saul (2000) refers to the three pillars of sustainability – Social, Economic and Environmental, suggesting that to develop sustainable agricultural systems, researchers, extension agents (facilitators) and farmers must work together to understand more fully the relationship between these three pillars.

Byles, Le Grice, and Barriball (2000) highlight the impact of group discussion activity as a method of achieving profit from technical and business management improvement. The role of benchmarking for technical and financial improvement is also highlighted, and the methodology of using benchmarking as a development tool with farmer groups is subsequently summarised by Barriball and Byles (2003), with particular emphasis on the process of identifying and learning from best practices in other businesses, and understanding the processes by which these are achieved.

The key reasons for benchmarking as a functional activity are expressed in table one, and drawn from Shadbolt (2000) and Camp (1989).

Table1: Key reasons for benchmarking and the value added to the business as a consequence (adapted Shadbolt (2000) and Camp (1989)).

Key Reasons for Benchmarking	Value added to the business as a consequence of Benchmarking
1.Defining customer requirements	Market reality; High conformance
2.Establishing effective goals and objectives	Proactive management approach; Credible decision making processes
3.Developing true measures of productivity	Solving real problems; Understanding outputs and their relationship to achievement of objectives
4.Becoming competitive	Understanding of competition; Proven new ideas introduced; High commitment
5.Industry best practice	Proactive search for change; Decisions based on options; Superior performance and progression

Five key management activities are presented in the table with the value added to the business as a consequence of engagement in the benchmarking activity. This clearly demonstrates the potential benefits that may be transferred to beneficiaries of knowledge transfer activity as a consequence of the inclusion of the benchmarking function into the knowledge transfer delivery.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ACTIVITY

Within "The Grassland Challenge" the key delivery mechanisms for knowledge transfer are:

1. Facilitated Farmer Focus Groups, functioning around a designated Focus Farm
2. Demonstration Farm activity to provide exposure to new technologies and higher risk activity not yet fully accepted by the farming population.
3. Benchmarking financial, environmental and social performance, with the strength of emphasis on financial aspects.
4. Communication strategies through conference, workshops, technical newsletters and website activity.

A distinction is drawn between the functionality of the "Focus Farm" and that of the "Demonstration Farm", these being highlighted in Table 2.

Table2: A comparison of the functionality of Focus Farms and Demonstration Farms

Focus Farm Activity	Demonstration Farm Activity
A commercial farming entity that is used within the technology transfer process as a focal point for the development or "focus group" activity.	A "Demonstration Farm" is considered to be a unit where demonstration of technology may take place, and be developed. Risk is underwritten by the project budget.
The responsibility for decision making will rest with the individual "focus farmer".	Technologies demonstrated would be at the instigation of the project team and farmers' suggestion. Demonstration activity will often be the precursor to the uptake of technologies on commercial farming units. Feedback actively sought from participating farmers.
The level of monitoring, recording, and auditing of progress on the focus farms is anticipated to be more detailed than that of a commercial entity, with support from Project Extension Officers.	Demonstration activity would be undertaken on field scale, or large plot, trial basis with a level of management interference from subject specialists. This level of management interference distinguishes the demonstration from original scientific research work.
Support will be available from Technical and Management Extension Officers.	Techniques applied may be refined and developed further with a view to improvement so as to become more applicable to the localised soil type and climatic condition.
Through ongoing monitoring the financial implications of the uptake of new technologies will be reviewed.	Ongoing monitoring of financial implications of technologies under demonstration.
Through the collation of data from the various focus farms a database of information will also be developed to facilitate circulation through newsletters and website to other project beneficiaries.	The demonstration activity can also form the basis for communication through open day farm visits, with exposure to a wider farming audience beyond that of the focus groups.
Focus Farms would be spread geographically around the County	In some cases such technology may in fact prove to be unsuitable for the local industry

Table 3: Key Characteristics of Focus Farms and Farmers as defined in "The Grassland Challenge" Knowledge Transfer activity.

Group characteristics	Focus Farm(er) characteristics
1. Identified group with a common theme or purpose.	1. Respected by peers.
2. Needs Analysis identified for the group and individuals within.	2. Positive attitude and proactive approach to decision making and day to day management.
3. Group ownership of the agenda and objectives – a maximum of 3 key defined and measurable objectives for each group	3. "Buy in" to the key group objectives.
4. A commitment to social support with the Focus group	4. Receptive to input and expert information from outside the business, prepared to innovate and find new solutions.
5. Participate in Benchmarking Activity	5. Commitment from the Focus Farmer to participate in the process of benchmarking.
6. Accepted "ground rules" agreed and contracted by group members	6. Regular monitoring of stated performance indicators by the participant farmer.
7. Confidentiality.	7. Receptive to coaching and mentoring.
8. A code of active listening and respect, challenging practices, not personally toward individuals.	8. Facilities suitable for hosting.
9. An understanding that access to others' performance information is only possible once own information is forwarded to group facilitator.	9. Strong links across the industry.
10. Anonymity of performance information if used outside the group framework. Use of such information requires group consent.	10. Seen to apply codes of good practice and legislative requirements cross compliance and other directives, including high standards of health and safety and animal welfare.

These key characteristics have been defined following the experiences of a decade of knowledge transfer actvity to farmer groups, coupled with the findings of others, Byles (2003), Camp (1989), Cuming (2000), O'Keefe and Fletcher (1998), Saul (2000), and Warren (2000). The characteristics are designed to create an atmosphere of trust and openness in which farmer focus group members are encouraged to participate, share good practice and positively find solutions to the challenges facing their business. In parallel to this the the role of the facilitator is to manage the input and activities of the farmer focus group on achieving it's stated priorities and objectives. Further the propsed structure encourages "personal security", while also endeavouring to attract participation from those workers and owner managers that may historically have been disinclined to participate in professional development or knowledge transfer actvity. Ultimately, through this and the encouragement to measure and monitor performance,

it is anticipated that the participating farmer focus group members will improve competitiveness, enhance financial, environmental and social sustainability, and enhance the likelihood of achieving their long term strategic objectives.

EXPERIENCES TO DATE

Indicative response from four stakeholder groups, namely focus farmers, focus group members, project team, and financial stakeholders (including funders and corporate sponsors) were sought. A summary of these is provided in Table 4.

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While still in the early days of the knowledge transfer activity the responses positively suggest that the aspirations of funders and project teams are being fulfilled, particularly in the realms of engaging with farmers and encouraging the sharing and translation of good practice. The successful formation of a diverse range of farmer focus groups across the geographic region, coupled with recruitment statistics which indicate farmer focus group members to be ahead of expected numbers is also a positive indicator that the format and structure of farmer focus groups as a knowledge transfer mechanism is potentially successful within the farming community of the South West of England. Approaching 150 farmer focus group members across 10 farmer focus groups have to date become engaged with the project activity, and over 50 participants have become involved in the benchmarking activity at some level.

CONCLUSIONS

British agriculture is facing significant change resulting from the European Union's recent amendments to the Common Agricultural Policy the need for improved competiveness and sustainabilty is a prime concern to all those engaged in the industry. The knowledge transfer methodology highlighted by the farmer focus group mechanisms provides an opportunity to engage with farmers and owner managers in a non traditional and non threatening learning environment, using their own farm resource as the vehicle for communication.

Potential exists to extend the use of the delivery mechanism across a broader range of learning actvity and to encompass it also within the traditional qualification based framework offered by academic institutions. The mechanism also provides the opportunity to satisfy a "widening participation" and "lifelong learning" agenda with a personal and professional development methodology that is non threatening to farmer participants. Also, through geographical spread, it overcomes the key barriers of travel distance and time commitments often cited as reasons for non participation by those in remote rural areas.

Management of the farmer focus group, it's actvity and the agenda, or objectives, to which it aspires is a key criteria within the potential success of the mechanism, providing direction, discipline, and maintaining motivation and focus when challenged by group divergences.

Furthermore, as the modern agricultural industry seemingly becomes less labour intensive the farmer focus group provides a potentially crucial role in facilitating social support and communication throughout the isolated farming communities. The interaction provides opportunity for communication, peer support, and the transfer of good practice amongst practitioners, acting also as a catalyst for benchmarking activity, and provides, through the group facilitators, the capacity to "signpost" participants to further sources of personal development activity, support and advice.

Table 4: A summary of opinion on the functionality of Focus Farms as a delivery mechanism for Knowledge Transfer activity.

Focus Farmers	Farmer Focus Group Members	Project Team	Other Financial Stakeholders
Opportunity for farmers in the same circumstances to talk to each other and exchange ideas	Learn from each other and move the businesses forward; share knowledge	Encourage communication between farmers, and the research-knowledge-practice network	Communicate information to point of end use
Accelerate change on own farm	Improve business performance and profitability	Break down barriers to engagement in knowledge transfer and professional development actvity	Improve competitiveness and sustainability of rural farming population
To benchmark real costs of production and understand the process	Benchmark and discuss performance openly	Develop performance intelligence and understanding key performance indicators	Stimulate ownership of future research and knowledge transfer activity
Draw information from the support staff and extension officers	Farmer led actvity rather than lectured to - ownership	Develop group ownership of learning and developmental activity	Add value to original and near market research
Create the motivation to improve performance	To be exposed to new but proven ideas	Identify and share best practice	Add value to the knowledge transfer process
To stand back from daily routines and review their whole farm businesses.	Social support	Retain flexibility and responsiveness, finding proactive solutions to management challenges	Improve market awareness
To develop confidence to adopt new practices through observation and support	See practical solutions being implemented on farm	Provide a mechanism to feed communication from farmer to extension officer to researcher	Maintain communication network

Finally the knowledge transfer mechanism described provides opportunity to reconnect the farmer user to research originator through the role of the intermediary extension officer, functioning on a local level. This provides the opportunity for the communication of need up the

knowledge chain, as well as the communication of knowledge outcomes to the farmer user. In such a framework there is greater scope for research actvity to be directed toward current user need, and greater scope for value added to original scientific work through the facilitation of local near market adaptation and communication frameworks.

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