

COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR THE FARMER WITH REFERENCE TO LIFE AS WELL AS BUSINESS

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Abstract

The accelerating changes in the surrounding world and also increasing demands from politicians, consumers, their family etc., makes many farmers feel stressed, focus a lot on threats and weaknesses, and so they become rather indistinct in their relations between private life and business.. At the same time, physical work tends to exclude creative work and strategic thinking.

This paper will describe a program, developed for Swedish farmers and other rural businessmen in co-operation between Swedish Farmers Union, (project-owner), and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

Step 1 is done in groups of 8 to 12 farmers, guided by tutors, who have been given a four days training program in coaching a group to grow individually in their personality and self-confidence.

Each farmer does a "SWOT"-analysis focused on opportunities and strengths. After formulating the idea/mission, goals and activities needed to reach the goals for the business, they formulate the same for their own life.

Especially, they focus on their need of competence development, and brings them into a net-based "marketplace for competence".

In step 2 a number of new "blocks" have been developed. One is a "Balanced Scorecard" for farmers and rural entrepreneurs.

The farmers joining the program find themselves more distinct in relation to the surrounding world and in the relation between life and business. The discussions about life idea and life quality have been much appreciated.

The possibility for strategic thinking and the close connection between strategy and daily work, the focusing on "opportunities and strengths" and the balancing process in the "Balanced Scorecard" are some of the most valuable aspects.

General background

In 1997 the Swedish Farmers Union, LRF, decided to start a competence development program for Swedish farmers. This was one of in total four parts in a strategic development program with the aim to create conditions for increased incomes for the farmers.

During the year 1998, two regional prestudies were carried out. The process ended with the concept "The Farmer as Entrepreneur".

The purposes of the concept were to:

- give inspiration for new thinking
- give energy to apparent and realized dreams
- give concrete ideas and impulses
- give better selfconfidence
- start processes leading to personal and business development

The aim of this paper is to describe a program, developed and ongoing for Swedish farmers and other rural businessmen. The focus will be on the pedagogic basis, the content in the first and second steps, the tutor training and finally on the evaluation so far. The marketing and distribution process as well as the organisation of the project will not be mentioned. The project is a co-operation between the Swedish Farmers Union, LRF, who is the project-owner, and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU. The project is co-financed to equally by the LRF, EU (European Union) and the participating farmers.

Pedagogic basis.

To be able to achieve the objectives of the concept, one of the early decisions was to make it participant oriented. The pedagogic method chosen was "Problem based learning".

The method includes:

Firstly that the process must start "where the participant is situated just now".

Discussions and tests with farmers, scientists, future-researchers and others, gave as result areas/questions of high relevance for the farmers present interests and future prospects.

Secondly, the "Problem based learning" focuses on how to deliver the forces that are dormant inside everybody. This challenge was discussed with pedagogic consultants and experts and ended with a strategy as to how to organise the material, the courses, and last but not least, how to choose and train the tutors.

Thirdly the assumption is that: "knowledge = information x working through". This statement was handled in the concept by always starting with asking about the participants' expectations and experiences. This was followed by giving theoretical inputs (if available), discussions about ideas and opportunities and then individual work, through answering the questions oneself.

Content: important questions

The areas of most interest today and for the immediate future were:

- Which are the trends and tendencies of importance in the surrounding world? What are the opportunities and threats?
- Which are the strengths and weaknesses; on my farm and for me and my life?
- Which are the possible development alternatives?
- What are my:
 - business missions/ideas?
 - life missions/ideas?
- Where do I want to be in 3-5 years time (long term goals) and in 3-12 months (short term goals) respectively, with respect to my:
 - business?

- life?
- What are the activities needed to be done to reach the goals in both business and life areas? Especially, there is focus on the need for competence development.
- Who is responsible, and when should each activity be realized (action plan)?

Participant material was composed, and put in a cover with seven flaps, one for each area. Each flap begins with the main question and in some cases with help questions, forms for the farmers' own answers and supporting material. One important objective of the material is to offer a structure to which the participant always can return to when he/she "has been out in the mud with the boots". The structure is shown in figures 1 and 2.

The participant material was tested by 300 farmers, evaluated and further developed.

Tutor training

The 270 tutors were chosen among consultants, advisers and teachers with primarily an economic background. People who from the beginning enjoyed the participants confidence, who had the ability to listen and who were supposed to be able to change their behavior: "from being the sage on the stage to being the coach on the floor", were the most important selection criterias .

The tutors' role should not be to give advice, but to coach the group in asking the important questions and to make them give their own answers. So, each individual farmer works with his/her own situation with support from the tutor and the other participants in the group.

The training program was given as a three plus one days course. It was executed in a manner that should be as similar to the real course situation as possible. A special tutor manual was developed. The time was spent on facts and theories in the main question areas mentioned above, especially in future trends and tendencies, life quality and the overall structure. For this part we used about 1/5 of the time. About 2/5 of time was spent on pedagogical tools, examples and training, such as how to coach a group, team building, how to lead a discussion, how to be a good listener in a dialogue and so on. The remaining time was used for discussions, exercises in the role as tutor, especially in avoiding giving the answers, but rather to help farmers to formulate their own answers instead. Finally each tutor designed their own individual "driving-scheme" for the course.

The courses

8-12 farmers were included in each course, which was guided by a tutor. The aim was to have mixed groups that is mixed with respect to enterprises, size, geographical area etc, and also to get rural businessmen from outside agriculture into the groups. The course ranged over 20 hours, divided into five, six or seven meetings. Most of the participants spent several hours doing homework. The course ended up with a one hour dialogue between the tutor and each individual participant. The participant was given the opportunity to bring up questions and thoughts, and also to give an evaluation of the course. As a rounding off, the participants demand for competence development were brought into a net-based ”marketplace for competence in farming”,

www.kompass.lrf.se.

An assortment of the main needs and demands from about 4 000 farmers who have completed Step 1, gives the following list (without any order of priority):

- Economy, bench marking, management
- Marketing
- Personal and social development
- Organic farming, environment, added values
- IT, computer support

Evaluation and main results

The farmers joining the program (by now about 8000) find themselves more distinct in relation to the surrounding world and in the relation between life and business. The discussions and thinking about lifeidea and lifequality have been much appreciated. The possibility for operational thinking about the future, the focusing on ”opportunities and strengths” and the market discussions were the most valuable results for the participants. How the project has influenced the farmers’ incomes is not easy to evaluate. The participants’ feelings are that they have better opportunities to handle the business after the course than previously.

Most of the tutors are very satisfied with the training and have been successful in the courses. Some of them didn’t accept the challenge, as they found it too risky and unsafe to leave their normal role for the coach role and they did not start any course.

An interesting result to notice is that after Step1 farmers want the "coaching type of person" as adviser or consultant!

Step 2

The procedure in Step 2 follows the listed needs. If there was any activity available on the netbased marketplace, the farmer could immediately make a registration. If not, his/her demands together with others with the same demands are put on a waiting list, which is available for the suppliers of competence development. In the co-operation between LRF and SLU, four activities in Step 2 have been developed: "Offensive economic management", "Your own personal leadership", "Environment and quality management" and "Balanced Scorecard as a tool for management".

Those activities were developed as there was no material with the relevant content and/or with the desired participant-oriented pedagogic manner available on the market. In this paper the "Balanced Scorecard" will be given a short presentation.

Balanced Scorecard as a tool for farmers

Kaplan and Norton found in the early 90-ies that "in the traditional management systems the ability to link a company's long term strategies to the short term activities is missing". Their conclusion was that the economic and financial perspective, which even in a historical perspective is given too much attention. They constructed a model that gives a balance between different perspectives with importance for successful management of a company. The perspectives were: financial/economic (yesterday!), external attractiveness such as customer (today), internal effectiveness in process/production (today), development/renewing (future).

In the Balanced Scorecard, the different perspectives are balanced and linked together and so are the the visions, strategies , business mission, goals, success indicators and daily activities. And all is on one card or page that you can carry in your pocket!

Is this useful not only for big companies but also for farm enterprises? The tool has been improved and adapted to farmers and rural entrepreneurs by testing in three groups. You can find the principle model in figure 3. (In the presentation there will be a farm example).

What's new compared to Kaplan and Nortons model? Firstly, our model contains an extra level with both business and life mission, which is of special interest in small scale companies. Secondly, as a consequence, one perspective is added: "life". The designation of the perspectives and also the "rows" in the card have been changed.

Evaluation from the test groups

The farmers and rural entrepreneurs who joined the test courses gave the following comments:

- New thinking, I have the possibility and time to think
- Deeper insights in my future thinking
- Have got my thoughts formulated, balanced and written down as I want them
- A good tool, good to have it written down and summarised on one paper
- Have got time to think about my business and my life
- A good tool to get insight in oneself and consider about what to prioritize
- Extra "kick" when you go deeper into something that normally runs away
- Important to think about and discuss these things with colleagues
- Helps give a more clear and better management and priority. You see how things are linked together
- A ripening process for a more structured life
- We needed a little bit more time
- There was need for more instructions for filling the squares
- There is need of follow up meetings to keep it up to date

References

Kaplan, R.S. & Norton, D.P., 1992, "The Balanced Scorecard – Measures that Drive Performance", Harvard Business Review, Jan – Feb.

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Biographical sketch

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