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# Farmer to Farmer

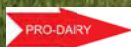
## Discussion Groups

A Facilitator's Guide

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# Introduction

Farmers learn from other farmers that they respect. Farmers cite other farmers as a valued source of information when making decisions. Farmer to farmer discussion groups consist of farmers who meet regularly to discuss and exchange ideas concerning their farms. The power of these groups is that they are self-directed and rely on the shared knowledge of the farmers within the group. Discussing the pros and cons of an idea or practice enables group members to share ideas, offer advice, and formulate opinions about whether a practice will work on their own farms.



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# Table of Contents

4	Why Form Discussion Groups
5	Establishing a Farmer to Farmer Discussion Group
9	Facilitating Discussion Groups
13	Activities
16	Dealing with Challenging People
18	Group Development Process
22	Summary

## Why Form Discussion Groups?



## Establishing a Farmer to Farmer Discussion Group



4

Farmers trust the experience and knowledge of other farmers who are in situations similar to their own. Their desire to meet and talk with each other has spurred the formation of various groups that range from formal cooperatives to informal gatherings of neighbors once a week for breakfast. Some groups have formed around specific issues (e.g., nutrient management), production practices (e.g., organic agriculture), marketing (e.g., buying groups), empowerment (e.g., input to policy and research agendas), and education.

For example, a group of dairy farmers was interested in learning more about nutrient management. At several meetings, members explained how they were handling nutrients on their farms. To get a better understanding of this complex issue they invited industry and university experts to join the group and share their knowledge. They visited farms that were implementing innovative practices.

Group members tried different practices on their own farms and told the group how these practices were working out. Eventually, the group participated in a university field study, helped form a local community work group on nutrient management, and secured funding for an on-farm demonstration project. Clearly, a farmer discussion group can have a substantial impact.

When we asked farmers why they belong to a discussion group their first response was, “exchange of ideas.” A close second was social interaction, which is often unplanned but can be a rewarding aspect of being part of a group. Discussion groups provide a means for farmers to form professional relationships with each other. As these relationships strengthen the dialogue within the group becomes more personal and meaningful.

Other reasons farmers gave for joining a leaning group included:

- **Interacting with farmers they respect.**
- **Keeping up with the latest information or technology.**
- **Keeping abreast of industry trends.**
- **Learning more about a specific technology (e.g., grazing).**

5

Discussion groups are most effective when they have a targeted membership such as organic farmers, young dairy farmers, or grazers. If members’ philosophies are too diverse, the practical exchange of ideas will be greatly hindered. Farmers will quickly become disenchanted with the group because of the lack of application to their own situations. That is not to say that a discussion group will not explore different ideas. A very real benefit of discussion groups is the opportunity to try out new concepts in a constructive, supportive environment.

### Finding Members

**Word of Mouth.** Finding an individual who has a strong interest in starting a group is a good first step. This person may know of other farmers who have a similar interest. Some discussion groups have relied heavily on farmers recruiting other farmers to join the group. Other groups have used an agriservice person such as an extension educator or veterinarian to identify and contact potential group members. In both cases farmers usually say they attended their first group meeting because they were asked personally. Visiting the farm and speaking face to face with the farmer is time consuming but can be worth the effort, especially if the person making the contact does not know the farmer well and is acting on a referral. Direct contact offers the opportunity to explain what a discussion group is and how it differs from other educational programs.

### Mailings – email or snail mail

Because direct contact isn’t always possible, some groups are formed by sending meeting notices to targeted lists of potential members. A general open invitation can also be used. This works best when the group has a very clear audience in mind, such as pasture users. The meeting notice is sent to all farmers in the community but makes it clear that the group is meant for farmers using certain practices. Both kinds of invitations should briefly explain what a discussion group is and the basic philosophy of that particular group. Farmers can then come to the first meeting prepared to share ideas and ask questions and not expect a lecture. Many farmers surveyed said that they attended the first meeting because they knew they would have an opportunity to meet and talk with other farmers they respect.

### The First Meeting

**Acting Facilitator.** The person who formed the group will usually facilitate the first meeting. Later the group can choose a permanent facilitator. The acting facilitator should read the section on the facilitator’s role (see page 9).

**Meeting Location and Time.** The acting facilitator usually decides on the time and arranges the location for the first meeting. The meeting should be held at a time that works well for farmers such as between milkings or after chores. A central, convenient location is preferable. Serving a meal helps set the stage for people to talk informally and feel comfortable speaking within the group.

## Goals

A group must determine its goals at one of the first meetings to help define its overall direction. The group needs to answer the questions, “What do we want to accomplish?” and “What is our purpose?” The goals will serve as guidelines for discussions and activities. If possible, the group should arrive at its goal using consensus decision making (see Decision-Making Methods).

## Ground Rules

Ground rules serve as guidelines for the conduct of group members. They should be established by the whole group. At the first meeting, the acting facilitator can suggest the following common rules to get the discussion started:

**Confidentiality.** Open discussion is important to a vibrant discussion group. People need to feel confident that what is shared in the group will not be discussed elsewhere without their permission. This is especially important in discussions regarding finances, family or other personal issues.

**Respect.** Everyone has the right to express his or her ideas without fear of insult or sarcasm. Each person is accepted and given due respect.

**Sharing of ideas.** All group members have the right to share ideas and concerns. Every member has something worthwhile to contribute.

**Responsibility.** Regular attendance and active participation are necessary. If a person chooses to leave the group, he or she should let the group know.



## Decision-Making Methods

A group must also decide how its decision will be made. Because farmer discussion groups emphasize exchange of ideas and shared learning, there is the danger that decisions will be made by default or by the facilitator.

Using the *majority rule* method, a vote is taken and a decision is made based on its outcome. This method is useful with large groups or when timeliness is important. Small groups may use this method for relatively unimportant decisions that are not crucial to members. The disadvantage of this method is that it tends to create winners and losers. It is easy for people in the minority to become disenchanted, which can limit their feeling of commitment to the group and to the decisions being made.

The *consensus* method is most practical with small groups. Consensus involves skillful facilitation of the discussion about the issues involved until the group can agree. The strength of this method is the quality of the decision and the commitment of the group to the decision. This can take time and energy but the outcomes are worth the effort. A pitfall is the tendency to make compromises just to move the decision along. The result can be reduced level of interest and dedication to the group.



## Closed versus Open Membership

A group must decide whether to have a closed or open membership.

**A closed membership group** has a specific set of people as members and does not open its meetings to the general farm community. Such groups usually determine their membership at their first few meetings. Once the group agrees on its goals and structure, new members are not solicited to join.

Relationships between group members, which develop over time, foster the open exchange of ideas. Closed membership allows people to get to know each other and form strong relationships. In addition, group dynamics stay fairly consistent, which can help make the group more cohesive and committed and thus apt to discuss sensitive topics or share personal information.

The disadvantage of closed groups is that the set membership limits the number of ideas and perspectives presented. A closed group can become stale without new farmers to offer fresh ideas and experiences. In addition, other farmers in the community may view it as elitist or cliquish.

**Open membership groups** allow anyone who is interested to attend their meetings, even though they may be targeted to farmers with a particular concern. New members can join at any time and participate fully in the group’s activities and discussions. The first few meetings are used to determine the group’s goal and structure, which may need to be revamped more often because dynamics change with new members. Open membership groups tend to be larger than closed groups and often adopt a more formal structure. The formal structure helps new members understand more quickly how the group operates. As new farmers join, their fresh ideas and experiences enrich the discussion. Members have an opportunity to meet and hear the ideas of a more varied group of people.

Disadvantages of open membership groups are that their large size and changing dynamics make it less cohesive than closed groups. As membership changes, the goals and underlying philosophy may also change. Initial members may become disenchanted and leave the group. Members are less likely to form strong personal relationships.

## Informal Versus Formal Structure

An *informal* structure works with groups of about ten people or fewer. A small group can operate effectively with only a skilled facilitator and coordinator. Group members can discuss topics in a conversational manner without the constraints of rules of order.

Common social rules usually enable small groups to run smoothly. A facilitator keeps the discussion on target, balances personalities, manages conflict, and summarizes the discussion. A coordinator handles meeting arrangements and group details. (These roles are described more fully below.)

A *formal* structure tends to be effective in larger groups. The following are common group officers:

**President.** The president chairs the meetings, follows the agenda, and keeps the group to its appointed task. In some cases the president may facilitate the meeting. In other cases, another person takes this responsibility. If the president fills the facilitator's role he or she should develop the necessary skills (See Facilitating Discussion Groups). The president may also be responsible for representing and promoting the group.

**Secretary.** The secretary keeps a written record of the group's meetings and activities. Recording minutes is usually reserved for the business portion of the meeting and not the discussion. Sometimes the secretary provides a written synopsis of the discussion. The secretary maintains a list of group members that is used to mail out meeting notices, which contain the time, date, location, topic of discussion, guests, and any other pertinent information. The secretary handles all group correspondence and mails the newsletter, if there is one. Groups that have a newsletter might consider appointing an editor to compile and format it.

**Treasurer.** The treasurer collects membership dues and records and reports on the group's financial affairs. Many groups have no membership dues and divide any expenses among the members. As groups grow, dues become more practical to support activities such as inviting a guest who will incur travel expenses or buying supplies for a demonstration. Some groups have applied for grants for projects such as on-farm research or demonstrations.

**Convener.** The convener telephones group members a day or two before the meeting to remind and encourage them to attend. He or she also can get a feel for how many will be coming to the meeting. The convener reminds members to bring special information to the meeting, if necessary.

**Coordinator.** The coordinator serves as the liaison between industry and university people, invites outside specialists to attend meetings, and coordinates other group activities such as farm tours or field trials. The coordinator may also help form the group by contacting potential farmers. He or she is often not a farmer but an extension educator, veterinarian, or other agribusiness person.

The above roles can be combined and altered to fit a group's needs. For example, the secretary is often also the treasurer and the president may also be the convener.

**Facilitator.** This role is described in the next section.

# Facilitating Discussion Groups

An effective facilitator is vital to the success of a discussion group. Farmers attend discussion groups to gather new ideas and will become frustrated with a haphazard, directionless discussion.

In contrast, a skillfully facilitated discussion will foster enthusiasm and energy. It is not unusual for farmers to walk away from a well-run meeting feeling enthused and motivated. A group that is operating effectively allows for ideas to be expressed openly. All members' contributions are treated with respect and consideration. Healthy debate is acceptable; members act as a sounding board for new ideas.

The facilitator is responsible for balancing the personalities of the people in the group. Some people are comfortable speaking up, others are not, but all members need the opportunity to voice their opinions and contribute to the discussion.

If the conversation drifts from the main topic the facilitator must get it back on track smoothly. He or she brings out important points and prevents the meeting from stalling or becoming redundant.

The facilitator performs the following tasks:

## Setting the Agenda

Because discussion groups are self-directed, they set their own agenda for meetings. At the end of each meeting the facilitator can ask the group what they would like to discuss at the next meeting. Some groups hold a separate planning meeting to set the agenda for upcoming meetings. Once the agenda is set, the facilitator makes the appropriate arrangements.



## Contacting Guests

Groups often invite guests whom they feel will add insight to a topic of interest. This can be anyone from a university professor to a local legislator. Guests who have not participated in a discussion group will likely need background and instruction on what a discussion group is and how it operates. This is especially true if the guest usually gives lecture or workshop presentations. Because these groups are discussion oriented and emphasize group interaction, presentations should be short and informal and done in a conversational manner. This invites the group to ask questions and give input. Long presentations will take time away from the group exchange of ideas.

Usually it is best to avoid PowerPoint presentations unless they are necessary to get a point across. (Slides are useful, for example, when presenting economic or other numerical data.) In addition, the speaker is not expected to answer all the questions that will arise. Instead, he or she should assume the role of resource person who is contributing to the discussion.

## Making Meeting Arrangements

The facilitator should make arrangements far enough in advance for meeting notices or invitations to be sent out in a timely manner. He or she should arrive at the meeting site early to check on arrangements. If the meeting is to be held on a farm, the farm must meet the objectives of the topic for discussion. If the group meets at a restaurant, the table should be arranged appropriately; the servers should know when to take orders and to bring the food. The size of the group and the meeting topic will determine the best table arrangement. A round table is ideal for a group of ten or less. It puts everyone on equal footing with no obvious leader. For larger groups a horseshoe configuration allows everyone to see each other.



This shape also works well when a brief presentation will be given. Avoid classroom-style setups or other arrangements that inhibit discussion.

## Facilitating the Meeting

Before the meeting starts, the facilitator should greet the speaker (if any) and introduce him or her to the individual group members as they arrive. If the members have an opportunity to talk informally before the actual meeting they will be more at ease speaking up during the discussion. Most often, guests enjoy relaxed conversation before a meeting because it gives them a chance to connect with the group.

After all group members have arrived, the facilitator makes the transition from the informal gathering to the actual meeting. The guest (if any) is welcomed and introduced to the group as a whole. The facilitator introduces the topic that will be discussed; he or she can provide an outline of the meeting so that guests and members can envision how things will transpire.

## Adult Learning: What Every Facilitator Should Know

The discussion group concept is based on the basic tenets of adult learning as defined by educational researcher Malcolm Knowles.

Adult learning concepts include:

**The need to know:** Adult learners need to know how they will benefit from what they learn. The facilitator must help adults become aware of their reasons for learning.

**The learner's self-concept:** Adults see themselves as responsible for their own lives and need to view themselves as self-directed.

**The role of the learner's experience:** Varied experiences lead to individual preferences for learning and provide additional resources for learning.

**Readiness to learn:** Learners become ready to learn whatever will help them in real-life situations.

**Motivation:** Learners are motivated by internal drives that urge them to improve themselves.

## Listening Skills

Active listening is a vital skill for a facilitator. It involves hearing, understanding, and relating the understanding through verbal and nonverbal feedback. Suggestions for improving listening skills are to:

- Hear what is being said. Focus your attention.
- Pay attention not only to the meaning of the words but to the body language and vocal inflections of the speaker.
- Maintain attentive body posture and facial expressions such as eye contact, smiling and nodding to show interest. Ask open-ended questions to encourage the speaker to give more information.
- Reflect understanding and interest by paraphrasing what has been said or by asking clarifying questions.
- Empathize with the speaker.

## Group Dynamics

All groups begin as three or more people interacting to achieve a goal. As new people join, the number of possible interactions increases, making the group more complex. Regardless of their size or the scope of their goals, groups tend to go through similar phases. Group theorists and practitioners have noted a natural ebb and flow in most groups. One of the most common and easily applied models of group behavior (Tuckman and Jensen 1977) divides it into the phases of forming, storming, norming, performing and transforming (originally adjourning). Each phase has both positive and negative characteristics. The phases serve to cement and challenge the group's relationships and cohesiveness.

By being aware of these phases, group members can manage them to meet their goals more effectively.

**Forming.** The first meeting of a farmer discussion group is usually exciting. As farmers gather, they will talk about crops, livestock, and local events. If they know each other, they will discuss how things are going on their farm and how their families are doing. Mixed in with the excitement is a feeling of apprehension. People will wonder if their expectations of the group will be met. Some may be concerned that the individual goals will differ too greatly. Others may wonder how people will get along and whether there is potential for conflict. An effective facilitator will build on the excitement and address some of the apprehension.

During the forming stage, the facilitator should give people the opportunity to get acquainted in a nonthreatening atmosphere. Introductory activities can smooth the way for people to meet and

share some basic information about themselves. This is especially important for making shy people comfortable. This getting-acquainted period should take place before most other group tasks are undertaken. As group members become more comfortable the facilitator should guide them through the other tasks of the forming stage.

Either the facilitator or a group member should explain why the group is being formed and address members' expectations. It is during this stage that the group will discuss goals, organization, ground rules, and decision making methods (see page 6).

**Storming.** After the initial excitement wanes, conflict and tension will arise. Suddenly the honeymoon is over. If group members are unaware that this is a common occurrence it can cause high levels of anxiety and worry. Members may question the value of the group or its goals. The facilitator should reassure the group that conflict is normal and can be beneficial. Differences can be used to enhance the group and add dimension to the relationship among members. Conflict management skills play a crucial role in ensuring that conflict has a positive impact. A common and effective group problem solving model has the following steps:

- Acknowledge the problem.
- Identify the needs of the members.
- Discuss a range of possible solutions.
- Choose the most promising alternative and evaluate it.
- Act on the chosen solution.
- Evaluate the outcome of your choice.

If the results are not satisfactory, start again.



**Norming.** It is at this point that people really become a group. Goals and expectations have been decided. Norms that reflect the group's values and goals have been defined. People in the group have informally or formally agreed on what behavior is acceptable and unacceptable. Relationships and friendships have become stronger.

A drawback to the cohesiveness of the norming phase is the potential for "group-think." Groupthink occurs when cooperation in a cohesive group overrides realistic appraisal of alternative actions (Janis 1982). If the pressure to get along is too strong, members may sacrifice critical thinking. Groupthink can be counteracted by developing the norms of airing all doubts and exploring all alternatives by playing devil's advocate.

**Performing.** This phase is characterized by action toward the group's goals. At this point, discussion group share ideas, follow up planned activities, and learn from each other while discussing topics chosen by the group. Being in a group that is at the performing stage is educational and exciting.

**Transforming.** Groups are complex and constantly changing. It is not unusual for a group to revert to an earlier stage. Or it may become stagnant and less vital. When this happens the group should decide to disband or regroup. If there has been a major change in membership it will be necessary to reexamine the group's goals so that they will be relevant to the new members. There comes a time when the old routine is no longer effective and it is time to try something new. In any case it is better to address these situations head on instead of avoiding them. Avoiding the issues will lead the group to disband before it is necessary.



## Activities

In addition to discussion meetings, many farmer discussion groups participate in other activities such as farm tours, on-farm demonstrations, and field research trials.

### Production record review and critique

Production records can be a valuable tool for discussion groups. This activity can be approached several different ways depending on how the group feels about sharing their own farm data. If the group prefers not to share individual farm data with the group industry benchmark data can be used. Individual farms then compare their own information with the benchmarks. If the group is comfortable sharing their data within the group they can cross compare their information and discuss the management practices associated with the data. Records for specific production areas can be shared and discussed. In the case of a farm tour one farmer in the group can share their data as a topic for the whole group to discuss.

### Financial record review and critique

The same practices for production records review and critique hold true for reviewing financial records. Sharing financial data requires more trust and openness than sharing production data. Again, industry benchmarks can be used and individual farms can compare their numbers to the benchmarks without sharing that information with the group. Case studies can be used to ease concerns over sharing specific financial data. If the group is comfortable with sharing financial data it can generate excellent discussion on the factors and management practices effecting financial performance.

### Whole Farm Analysis

The discussion group visits a group member's farm to analyze the entire operation and suggest where changes and improvements can be made. This activity takes a considerable amount of trust and respect among group members. This activity can be especially valuable when a farmer is planning a major change or investment on the farm. The group can share its collective wisdom and serve as informal consultants for the farm.

## Farm Tours

Many groups use farm tours as their primary activity. Group discussions are held on the farm and center on the practices seen there. The following format is effective for farm tours.

**Pre-meeting Planning.** The coordinator or facilitator visits the host farm to gather information to be used by the group. The information gathered depends on the objective of the tour, which will have been determined by the group. For instance, if the group is interested in discussing nutrition the ration analysis and feeding strategy are made available to the group, ahead of time if possible, so members can become familiar with the farm.

**Meeting.** The group gathers and the host gives an overview of the farm or a technical presentation, if appropriate. The group then walks around the farm led by the host and the facilitator. Care should be taken that the group does not break off into small discussions that distract from the larger discussion. As the group moves about the farm, side discussions are acceptable but should stop when the group gathers at a particular spot.

## On-Farm Demonstrations

On-farm demonstrations give farmers an opportunity to implement and evaluate farm practices and technologies in a practical situation. The host farm finances the cost of establishing and managing the demonstration. Group meetings can be used as an opportunity to view the demonstration and discuss it. On-farm demonstrations are not research trials, but may provide good anecdotal information.

## Field Research Trials

The establishment of farm trials enhances participatory research between farmers and researchers. Trials run on group members' farms permit farmers to put more credence in the results. Researchers learn from the practical experience and knowledge of the farmers. Dissemination of the trial results is aided by the participation of the farmers in the discussion group.

## Typical Dairy Profit Discussion Group

A typical Dairy Profit Discussion Groups consist of dairy farmers or farm employees that gather on a regular basis to discuss topics that are pertinent to them. The groups are formed around some shared commonality such as herd size; stage of career i.e. young farmers, herdmanagers, calf raisers, and the list goes on and on. A facilitator manages the group meetings and does the administrative work necessary for the group to function. Most often a university agricultural extension educator or an agriservice professional serves as the facilitator. Some groups have a combination of both, for instance an extension educator and a dairy cattle nutritionist may co-facilitate a group.

The facilitators will develop a list of potential group members. They'll call or visit the farmer or farm employee and ask if they would be interested in joining a discussion group. They'll explain that a discussion group emphasizes the knowledge and experience of the group members. The group is self directed and decides what will be discussed. The facilitators will take responsibility for administering and facilitating the group. A common number group size is ten to twelve people.

The first meeting is scheduled at a convenient time and place for the farmers. Almost always a meal is served first. The facilitator starts the meeting off with again describing what a discussion group is and talks about the ground rules for the group such as confidentiality, mutual respect and expectations for participation. If a topic has been chosen for the first meeting the facilitator starts the discussion on that topic. The rest of the meeting usually consists of a dynamic discussion that capitalizes on the knowledge of the group members and their real world experiences.

At the end of the meeting the facilitator asks the group to decide when and where the group would like to meet. For some groups dinner meetings work well, others lunch or breakfast is a better time. The group will then decide on the topic for the next meeting or several meetings. If the group decides to invite a resource person or engage in another activity the facilitator makes those arrangements.

Discussion groups cover a broad spectrum of subjects depending on the interest of the group, everything from nutrition, livestock housing, record keeping, environmental sustainability, marketing, nutrient management, employee management, to public policy issues that effect dairy farming and agriculture.

Although the emphasis is on discussion, the groups can and have done just about any activity that furthers their understanding of a subject. Some examples of activities discussion groups have done are:

- Inviting resource people such as veterinarians, university researchers, other farmers, agriservice professionals, and local community leaders to join the discussion.
- Visiting the farms of group members or farms outside the group that there is an interested in learning more about.
- Several groups have traveled out of state to visit farms.
- In-depth record analysis of production and business data. Both for the farms in the group and industry benchmark data.
- Participating in on-farm demonstrations and research trials.
- Groups have engaged in an in-depth study of organizational management that included reading a book on management that was then discussed during the group meeting.
- Participating in a records and information management training at the local University computer lab.
- Developed a group newsletter.
- Meet with local, state and federal agencies that impact agricultural policy.
- Meet with high school, community and state college professors and staff to discuss the educational needs of agriculture.

The discussion groups continue to meet for as long as the participants find them valuable. Some groups have met for over ten years; other groups have met for a year and then decided to dissolve. Both groups are successful as long as they provide an opportunity for the participants to meet their goals and increase their knowledge of their farms and agriculture as a whole.

## The New Zealand Experience

Dairy farmers in New Zealand have used discussion groups for forty years as a way to share ideas, solve problems, and learn more about farm management.

Group Organization. In New Zealand, most discussion groups meet from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. every four to six weeks. The important thing is to pick a time of day that dodges chore time for most farmers. A common number of farms in a group is thirty, and anywhere from five to sixty people attend meetings.

Sometimes farmers are sent a written notice of the upcoming discussion groups. Meeting times and the host farmer's name are listed for meeting for the next six months. Occasionally, topics are listed on the notices, but more commonly, the host farm identifies the topic closer to the date of the actual meeting.

Two or three days before a meeting, the "farmer convener" telephones group members to remind them of the upcoming meeting. Even when written notices are sent, farmers and consulting officers feel the convener's phone calls are necessary to keep attendance up.

Consulting Officer (CO). Keeping the group on target while encouraging interaction is quite a challenge, so that the ability of the CO is critical to the success of a discussion group. Typically, COs have a college degree equivalent to a bachelor's degree in the United States. Their communication and facilitation skills are outstanding. Additionally, most of them provide technical findings at each discussion group meeting. Therefore, they also have a solid understanding of farm techniques.

Farmer Conveners. Besides the CO, the farmer convener plays an important role in keeping groups motivated. The convener usually serves for one year. New Zealand farms feel it is important for the convener to take the job seriously. A phone call from the convener is a necessary reminder for most farmers to attend the meeting.

The convener also helps the CO identify topics and reports on any agricultural meeting they attend. In some groups, the convener takes an active part in facilitating the discussion.

A Typical Discussion Group Meeting. The CO meets with the host farmer a few days before the meeting to fill out a farm data sheet. By outlining the current herd, pasture, and management situation on the data sheet, the CO has something around which to develop discussion. Advantages and disadvantages of the farm, as well as farm goals, are also listed on the sheet.

At the beginning of the meeting, the host farm usually gives a quick overview of the farm. For example, during breeding season, farmers describe how many cows are cycling and how many have been submitted to A.I. (artificial insemination); they may explain anything they are doing that is different from their neighbors. A quick rundown of milk and pasture production is given at the same time.

Because New Zealand milk production is largely pasture-base, no discussion group is complete without a farm walk. The farm data sheet is used to highlight topics addressed during the walk.

Following the walk, participants gather in the "milkshed" or parlor for bag lunches and a short presentation by the CO. Most COs use dry-erase "white boards" to present research finding about a topic picked by the host farmer. The presentation might focus on a weakness of the farm or a farm goal. Sometimes the farm is curious about how a particular management change might affect his or her farm.

To wrap up the discussion group, a CO will often ask group members to highlight strengths and area of opportunity for the host farm. These items, a summary of the group's ideas, are listed on a large sheet of paper, which is left with the host.



# Dealing with Challenging People



## HOW THEY ACT

## WHY

## WHAT TO DO

<b>1. Monopolize/Talk too much</b>	Believes he or she must be the center of attention; may also be very well informed and anxious to show it, or just naturally curious.	Don't embarrass the person or be sarcastic. Try saying, "I'm getting concerned that time is running out and we need to move on." Let the group take care of as much as possible. Privately say to the person, "When you keep us busy, I can't help others get involved."
<b>2. Highly argumentative</b>	Sees as challenge to reveal fallibility of resources, set self up as intelligent, or to assume leadership role.	Honestly try to find merit in one of his or her points, express agreement, and move on. Use group assistance. "What seems to be happening right now?" Talk to the person privately. Avoid a power struggle.
<b>3. Rambler</b>	Talks about everything except subject. Uses far-fetched analogies; gets lost. May do so for recognition or because believes his or her problems are more important than those of others.	When person stops for breath, thank him or her, refocus attention by restating relevant point, and move on. Ask, "How does what you're saying relate to what we're discussing?" Ask, "Could we go on and come back to this later if there is time?"
<b>4. Personality Clash</b>	Two or more members clash. Could divide group into factions.	Emphasize points of agreement; minimize disagreement points. Focus attention on goal or interests. Cut across with direct question on the topic. Bring a more neutral member into the discussion. Keep personalities as separate as possible.
<b>5. Wrong subject</b>	Not rambling, just off base.	Say, "Sounds like we're getting off track," or "Sounds like a different point." See if group agrees.
<b>6. Obstinate</b>	Won't budge. Hasn't seen your point. Prejudiced.	Often group members will straighten him or her out. Say, "Is this a decision which you can't live with or can accept the group viewpoint for the moment?" Say, "What specifically are your reasons behind your objection?" (Look for facts versus assumptions.)
<b>7. Side conversationalist</b>	Comments may be related to the subject or may be personal. Distracts you and others.	If you're mobile, move near the talkers. Don't embarrass them. Sometimes eye contact will take care of the problem. Say, "Hang on, Bob. We can only keep track of one conversation at a time."
<b>8. Asks for your opinion</b>	Tries to put you on the spot. Tries to have you support one view. May be simply looking for advice.	Avoid solving their problems. Try to get other opinions first; "boomerang" the question back to the group. When you do want to give a direct answer, first try to determine the person's reason for asking.
<b>9. "Yes, but..."</b>	Usually has no intention of accepting new ideas or making commitments.	Can confront: "When you say, 'Yes, but...' it sounds ..." Refer to group: "What is George really saying?" Say, "What if we spent as much time planning for success as we do planning for failure?"
<b>10. Won't talk</b>	Bored, indifferent, feels superior, timid, insecure, has nothing to add.	First determine motivation for behavior. Ask for person's opinion or comment on another's opinion. If "superior," indicate respect for his or her experience. (Don't overdo it.) If timid, compliment sincerely when person does talk.
<b>11. Know-it-all expert</b>	Feels compelled to have own set of facts to prove point(s).	Acknowledge value of new information or same information in a different format. Arrange for all group members to have copies for future discussion.
<b>12. Complainer</b>	Usually has not been in a situation where concerns can be aired.	Keep personalities out of responses. Determine reason for behavior. Acknowledge issues. Ask for answer to initial question.

## The Facilitator Should Avoid:

- *Criticizing others' ideas or values.*
- *Using his or her role to force ideas on the group.*
- *Making decisions for members without asking them for agreement.*
- *Saying too much or getting too involved. (This can distract facilitators from their role and might get the whole group off track.)*

*(Excerpt from Making Group Decisions, University of Vermont Extension System)*



Source: Cooperative Extension, U.S.D.A.

# Group Development Process



GROUP PHASE	KEY PROCESSES	UPS	DOWNES	FACILITATOR BEHAVIOR
<b>Forming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orienting</li> <li>Getting acquainted</li> <li>Setting direction</li> <li>Defining Task</li> <li>Setting goals</li> <li>Taking first steps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting new people</li> <li>Clarity</li> <li>Organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anxiety</li> <li>Confusion</li> <li>Too much too soon</li> <li>Rigidity</li> </ul>	Directing
<b>Storming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reassessing</li> <li>Exploring options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fun</li> <li>Excitement</li> <li>Diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tension</li> <li>Conflict</li> <li>"Bottoming-out"</li> <li>Loss of members</li> </ul>	Coaching
<b>Norming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resolving</li> <li>Evaluating</li> <li>Making decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cohesion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Groupthink (stereotyping, self-censorship, direct pressure)</li> </ul>	Supporting
<b>Performing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implementing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Closure</li> <li>Completion</li> <li>Synergy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Footdragging</li> <li>Social loafing</li> </ul>	Delegating
<b>Transforming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regrouping</li> <li>Disbanding</li> <li>Letting go</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time for new activities</li> <li>Reenergize</li> <li>Satisfaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Holding on</li> <li>Sadness</li> <li>Sense of loss</li> <li>Disappointment</li> </ul>	Variable



## During a meeting, the facilitator's job is to:

**Keep members on the topic.** Let them know when the discussion has drifted: usually they will return quickly to the topic. Periodically restate the topic that is being discussed.

**Summarize what members have said and what has been decided.** In particular, summarize what the less active members have said. Relate what one person says to another's ideas: "It sounds like you're adding to what Jack said." Accept parts of ideas and ask if the person could develop the idea further. Let people know when someone has been cut off and then allow the person to finish what he or she was saying. Be sure to restate a decision after it has been made by the group.

**Let people know that it is appropriate to state feelings.** Summarize feelings as well as content: "Joe, you seem to be frustrated about something."

**State the problem in a constructive way so people can work on it.** This should be done without implying that anyone is at fault. Present the group with problems and questions, not answers.

**Suggest ways to reach conclusions.** Clarify the decision the group needs to reach so people don't waste their time on other subjects. Let members know when it is time to move to the next problem or agenda item. Try to break big problems up into workable pieces and deal with each part separately.



## Dairy Profit Discussion Groups – Business Focus

Discussion groups that are business focused emphasize analyzing and comparing business performance data and management practices. These groups, like all discussion groups, are comprised of farmers that are operating businesses that have some commonality such as similar herd sizes, milk production goals, or feeding practices, and are facing similar challenges.

Business focused discussion groups give dairy farmers the opportunity to test and exchange ideas with people who they respect and share their interests. Specifically, business-focused discussion groups allow producers to:

- Compare actual financial and production performance with similar dairies and to industry benchmarks.
- Discuss the impacts of management practices and changes on business performance measures.
- Hear from others on what they do to generate their performance results.
- Develop a network of producers who serve as sounding boards outside of discussion group meetings.

One such group draws membership from across New York and into neighboring states. The focus of the group is to look at different business, financial and production performance measures and discuss relationships about the different measures. The group then gets into in-depth conversations about what management practices on the different farms lead to the results measured. In order to facilitate the comparison of the group's performance, these farms commit to sharing their farm financial and production data. The group utilizes the Cornell Farm Business Summary and Analysis program to calculate everyone's data in the same manner. The group also utilizes the Cornell Dairy Profit Monitor, to track and

compare monthly and quarterly performance for key operating measures. With the focus on such a high degree of sharing of confidential data, trust and respect among the participants is key. Since the group is spread out across a large region, they are not generally involved with other producers from their local region which encourages the sharing of information.

The group meets twice a year, usually around the end of February and then again in late October. For the February meeting, a central location is picked and farmers arrive for a full day meeting focusing on the previous year's financial performance, with comparisons among the farms by range of data, and by individual farms.

The range of data reports allow the producer to see where they compare to the rest of the group in different categories. The individual farm report allows the producers to see what each of the participating farms was able to obtain for the various measures.

The Fall meeting is hosted by one of the participating farms, meeting from noon to noon with an overnight stay. The focus of this meeting is touring the host farm and looking at different management practices. They also look at the last 3 months of Dairy Profit Monitor data for current operational performance of the farms, and discussion about what management practices were being utilized.

While this is one example of how a business focused profit discussion group operates, there are many different methods that have been implemented successfully. Meeting from 1 to 3 times a year, having farms present their performance data, touring a dairy or other types of tours, and inviting in guest speakers are other approaches that these business focused groups have used.

### Benefits to the participating farmers:

One farmer described the discussions and farm visits as having 11 of the best consultants in the dairy industry all in one place to advise him on his business. This sentiment is consistent with what many farmers say about their experience with discussion groups.

### Discussion groups provide farmers with the opportunity to:

- Discuss and exchange ideas with farmers they respect.
- Draw on the strong knowledge base of their peers.
- Learn from the substantial real world experience of the other farmers.
- Interact with industry professionals and other invited resource people in a manner directed by the farmers.
- Build professional relationships and networks with other farmers.



## Summary

In the past, agriculture as an industry depended on agricultural experts who provided lectures, field trials, and demonstrations. This method was very effective in furthering a technology-based agricultural system. As agriculture has evolved, the educational system that serves it has also evolved. Today fewer educators and other agricultural professionals are serving a more intensified agriculture industry. As fewer dollars are made available for education, innovative approaches are necessary to serve farmers' educational needs effectively. Fortunately, farmer to farmer discussion groups offer a means for farmers to learn from the people they respect the most, namely other farmers. By forming and facilitating learning groups educators and agriculture professionals can continue to serve the agriculture community.



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