Building rural capability through collaboration of Maori farm businesses

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Abstract

Focused group projects engaging owners and managers of Maori farm businesses were initiated on the East Coast of New Zealand. The objective was to improve productivity and profitability on-farm through enhanced capability building and collaboration. Five group projects were evaluated. Critical success factors of learning groups were identified. Leadership, communication, organisation and commitment were required from project participants and facilitators. Collaborative and interactive processes built the knowledge and confidence of farm managers. Building trust was critical. Participation of mentor farmers reinforced learning in the group. Social network building was also important. We conclude that interactive group projects are a powerful way of building confidence of farm managers to communicate issues and make clearer, more strategically aligned decisions and actions. Collaborative farm initiatives foster ownership of issues, develop farmer support networks and ultimately the confidence to change.

Keywords: experiential learning, farmer group, trust.

Introduction

Formal learning is not suitable for many farmers. Consequently, monitor farms and focus groups have flourished in New Zealand agriculture since the 1990s. It is learning by doing or via experience in these groups that validates new ideas, and stimulates rethinking of existing practices and concepts. This contrasts with classroom learning styles which are distanced from the farm both in context and location (Beaudin & Quick 1995).

Experience is an essential component of learning (Beaudin & Quick 1995). For this reason, the experiential learning model/cycle provides valuable insights into the processes required for successful integration of learning from experience (Boud & Walker 1992; Joplin 1981; Kolb 1984). This model forms the basis of many farmer learning programs on New Zealand farms, and has helped explain the learning process involved (Paine 1995; Sheath 1999; Sherson *et al.* 2002).

The learning cycle begins by identifying an issue. Experiences, knowledge and any other relevant information available is assessed and reflected on. This then allows the learner to make generalisations, and develop an action plan. Monitoring decisions and actions undertaken provides further information for ongoing reflection, learnings and subsequently the next actions that need to be undertaken in an ongoing cycle of development (see for example Roberts (2006)).

In this paper an evaluation of several farmer group projects undertaken on the East Coast of New Zealand is reflected on. These projects groups were based on the learning cycle outlined above. Some lessons from these groups that highlight the support required to enhance participants' experiential learning is identified and discussed.

Methods

From 2007 to 2009/10, the Tairawhiti Land Development Trust helped support the establishment of five farmer group projects. Projects differed in group size, composition, goals, facilitation styles, tools used and group management. All participants farmed Maori owned land within Incorporations or Trusts, and all wanted to improve key aspects of their businesses productivity. Projects ranged in size from three to eight farms. All projects included farm managers and farm workers and were run by experienced facilitators. Three projects included mentor farmers and farm governance representatives in their constituency, and all but one project appointed a group chairperson to maintain order and address any issues arising. All projects required farmers to share their previous experiences and on-farm information. Considerable commitment was required from project participants to undertake new or increased levels of data collection (e.g. stock weights and pasture measurement).

Social and process oriented outcomes were evaluated over 3 years. The evaluation focused on the usefulness of experiential learning and supporting processes, rather than on specific hard farm data which projects were already designed to collect. This approach relied on gathering and documenting the experiences of farmers within projects. Specific details of the projects, and information from farmers, cannot be provided.

However, as a result of this study, researchers reflected on and report here the key insights gained from the evaluation of these farmer group learning projects.

Results and discussion

A good foundation: project setup

The evaluation of the farmer group projects highlighted several key factors when setting up a group. These factors are outlined in Box 1.

These findings reflect other research undertaken with New Zealand farmer learning groups (Sheath 1999). Most importantly, these factors rely on the need for participants to be able to see potential benefits of involvement so that they commit to group activities (e.g. attendance and data collection) and thus attain the full benefit of being part of the group. The evaluation of these projects also highlighted the need for support at all levels, including having basic ground rules designed by the participants themselves, identifying expectations for themselves and each other. Establishing clear roles as well as objectives for the group to achieve also aids in clarifying these expectations at an early stage of project development (Roberts 2000). Ingram (2010) agrees that unless processes are in place that allowed farmers to trust in both the process and activities to be undertaken there is greater reluctance to engage in learning. A sense of exposure can result in groups where trust has not developed, resulting in ineffective group dynamics (Franz *et al.* 2010a; Kilpatrick *et al.* 2003; Roberts 2000). For example, a farmer may not want to admit that their stock weights are lower than desired, and not provide the accurate information required for effective group reflection and recommendation.

Box 1 Key factors in farmer group setup

a) Setting clear, measurable goals for projects that were accepted by participants. These should challenge current farm aspirations.
b) Getting group buy-in before the project begins – early commitment and clear expectations of participants and facilitators was essential.
c) Establishing participants' roles and the expectations of them e.g. attendance, providing farm information.
d) Establishing participant selection criteria – ensure participants really wanted to participate.
e) Developing commitment, leadership and communication with facilitators was crucial.
f) Establishing leadership was important – appointing a chairman was a good option to maintain order.
g) Including outside expertise – local farm mentors, outside speakers.
h) Establishing ground rules for groups was necessary, in particular a process for identifying unacceptable behaviour and consequences for this.
i) Allowing sufficient project duration to build relationships, trust and see change within farm systems – at least three years.

Leadership and facilitation are also essential components of learning projects. Projects that appoint a chairperson find it easier to keep order in the group, as this also provides avenues for addressing any arising issues. Project facilitators need to show leadership and commitment (Beaudin & Quick 1995; Franz et al. 2010b; Riddell 2001). This builds the respect of participants, as does the inclusion of other expertise such as mentor farmers. In these projects, the inclusion of mentors who were respected members of the local farming community enhanced the group's ability and confidence to challenge and expand their reflections on the information provided and actions undertaken. Credible leadership and information sources are important project components if change is to happen within these groups (Kilpatrick *et al.* 2003).

Operationalising: making it work

The evaluation of the farmer group projects highlighted several key factors when operationalising group projects. These factors are outlined in Box 2.

The learning cycle is a key part of operationalising. Participants should be travelling through the learning cycle, establishing the need for change, utilising new and existing information to make decisions and undertake actions, monitoring as a feedback mechanism to inform further decisions and actions and then further supporting this with ongoing measuring and monitoring (Riddell 2001).

Feedback mechanisms to the group are essential. At each meeting, progress on recommendations made at the previous meeting should be reported as well as results of monitoring towards target achievements. This ensures key messages and previous learnings are refreshed regularly. Participants also adopt greater ownership and commitment to engage in recommendations if they have a responsibility to report back. This also ensures the process from recommendations, decision making

Box 2 Key factors in farmer project group operation

a) Focusing on priority change topic(s) for the group and individuals.
b) Providing clear recommendations and feedback at every session to review progress. Transparency in decision making processes is important.
c) Reinforcing key messaging to participants.
d) Encouraging participants to engage in the process – this provided individual confidence and ownership in change.
e) Integrating the learning needs of different people – using different group processes to engage with members effectively.
f) Providing one-on-one assistance if required – (especially where technology learning is included).
g) Providing social interaction time – essential for personal development and building trust in groups.

and actions undertaken are made transparent to those participating. Revisiting objectives and key lessons from earlier sessions also reinforces the key messages of change that group members need to take on board to achieve the desired impacts.

Farmers value learning from other farmers (Franz *et al.* 2010a), highlighting the value of mentor farmers in project groups. All farmers participating have important contributions to make. For this potential to be realised often confidence must be built within and between individuals in the group. Managing the varying knowledge and skill levels within a group and supporting different learning styles within the group helps participants build confidence and trust in their interactions and learning (Sherson *et al.* 2002). By providing extra assistance to overcome barriers to increased monitoring (biophysical, perceptions, skill levels, technology adoption, equipment availability etc) confidence is again built while ensuring that the essential information is available for learning cycle inputs, aiding timely decision making.

One key message to emerge from the evaluation was that one-on-one time with facilitators enhanced skills around computer usage and information interpretation. This built participants' experience and ability to engage in group discussions and learning. This helps creates a more positive attitude to activities such as collecting more measurements and information on-farm (Paine 1995).

The evaluation of these projects revealed group composition as being an important dynamic. In this particular case, as Maori owned the farms, most projects invited farm governance people to attend meetings. Governance presence is valuable from the perspective of increasing knowledge of their farms and understanding practical farm and manager requirements. However, issues may arise for project management. There may be tensions or trust issues between farm management and farm trustees. This is not unique to Maori Trusts and Incorporations, but also an issue on farms with succession occurring between generations, family trusts and corporate farming models for example. It was evident from the projects evaluated that both managers and trustees learnt from each other on farm days, enabling joint understanding and enhanced support for decision making on the farm. However the roles of the two differ: managers need to be able to run farms and governance bodies need to view the farm business strategically. In this respect, to achieve the most from the learning process/cycle, it can often be useful to break managers and trustees into separate groups to discuss issues at their respective levels then bring the feedback back to the group forum for wider discussion. In this way, all perspectives get an equal chance to express views and pose questions that contribute to the learning cycle and achieving positive outcomes for the farm businesses involved.

Building social dynamics between project participants enables group members to bond and build trust. "Getting to know each other" develops relationships sufficiently so that any challenges and constructive criticisms received by group members can be used positively within the learning process (Kilpatrick & Bell 2000). Social components of meetings such as lunch breaks and after meeting events should be incorporated as essential informal networking and relationship building components of projects.

Conclusion

Participants in farmer learning group projects need to build confidence in the group and the process undertaken. They need to be engaged in a meaningful way, and in a way that supports the efforts they are making to attain both their own and the project's desired goals. The learning cycle has proven successful in the past and reinforces the need for building support and capability enabling farmers to be best placed to utilise the information generated and lessons learnt through iterations of learning cycles. From an evaluation of several farmer group projects on the East Coast of New Zealand it became clear that addressing the factors identified for project setup and operationalisation (Box 1 & 2) were essential to providing a foundation for participants to engage in the learning process.

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