

Local Delivery for Statewide Impact: Lessons from a Grower Group Alliance

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Abstract

The Grower Group Alliance (GGA) is a grower-driven initiative which aims to add value to the activities of regionally focused grower groups in Western Australia (WA). The project began in 2002 and now consists of a network of 16 grower groups, 6 research institutions and over 15 agribusiness companies which reaches over 2400 growers throughout the Western Australian grain growing region.

In this paper, the key factors contributing to the success of the GGA project over the past three years are examined. The single most important success factor of the project is that it began and has remained a grower group driven initiative. This gives the project a clear purpose in all its daily and strategic operations. As a result, groups in the GGA network have achieved far greater outcomes working together than operating independently.

Key Words

Network, interaction, communication, participation, collaboration, capacity.

Introduction

Over the last ten years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of grower-led groups across Australia engaging in research and extension. The most successful groups were those that took responsibility for planning, implementing and monitoring their own activities. Growers wanted to have more control over the information they needed and the way it was delivered. There was a move away from linear 'top-down' approaches from scientists to farmers, towards extension methodologies that emphasised information flows, adult learning principles and participation by stakeholders (Marsh & Pannell, 2000).

In 2002, a number of locally focused groups received funding from the Grains Research & Development Corporation (GRDC) to form the Grower Group Alliance. The aim of the Alliance is to enable growers to access the latest information and research which will allow them to make the best possible decisions for their farming businesses. It provides opportunities for collaborative projects between grower groups across the state. By working together, it allows the groups to maintain their local focus, yet also operate with a 'critical mass' to take action on a range of issues which they would not have been able to do individually.

Results

In this section, lessons learnt from the past 3 years of operation of the Grower Group Alliance are outlined.

A grower group driven project: The successful initiation of the GGA project is one of the few examples in WA where funding from the GRDC was awarded directly to a grower group. Prior to this, funds were generally awarded to state agencies who then worked with grower group collaborators to complete project milestones. By receiving their own budget, the groups became responsible for addressing their own issues. Together, they use a participative and inclusive delivery mechanism that allows each grower group to have input into the project aims and activities, and then deliver the outcomes to group members.

To manage the GGA project, a Reference Group has been established, consisting of representatives from all the project stakeholders. This group meets twice a year and the grower group majority is able to recommend and direct the project activities to ensure the project remains relevant to its grower client base. In addition, the grower group executive officers are a vital link in the operation of the project. They provide the GGA coordinator with updates of grower group activities occurring in their region, communicate the results of their group's trial and demonstration programs and pass on requests from grower members for new information or opportunities.

Grower groups designed purpose: At the beginning of the GGA project, a clear and agreed purpose was created through consultation with representatives from all grower group stakeholders. Like many grower groups, GGA members had an active input into the strategic and operational direction of the project. Having clearly defined problems that are understood by the membership contributes to the success of farmer-driven groups (Campbell, 1992).

The power of networking: The GGA consciously creates space for two-way interaction rather than just "pumping more down the pipes". It does this in a variety of ways, but principally by encouraging networking to occur between GGA members. Networks are strengthened through visits by the project officer to all fifteen GGA member grower groups at least twice each year. Staff and grower representatives from the groups meet once a year in person at the GGA Forum. In addition, grower groups visit each other on bus tours during Spring to share ideas and experiences between groups. A tangible result from GGA groups working together are two successful study tours to interstate and overseas destinations with participants drawn from several different grower groups.

The Grower Group Alliance project was created to improve the communication between farmers, researchers and industry. According to Colliver (2000), one thing that will produce faster evolution of sustainable farming systems is a better flow of ideas and information. Responsiveness to this communication is determined by being able to 'match' the available information with what members of the network want. This requires "an understanding of how different communities interact and communicate" (Andrew et al, 2005). The GGA coordinator works to gather information on the needs and interests of the different groups to improve the process of understanding. In doing so, the coordinator could be described as a 'knowledge broker'. The coordinator acts to ensure that a network is created that maintains itself without the coordinator being its hub.

Start small and tangible: In the beginning, the project concentrated on providing benefits at the local level with production of small and tangible outputs (Table 2).

Table 2: Examples of tangible benefits produced in the initial stages of the project.

Exchange of grower group contact details	Coordination of a calendar of events
Annual grower forum	Exchange of trial result books between groups
Exchange of grower group newsletters	Travelling grower workshops
Production of field day booklet covers	Training for executive officers

These were small things which made a big difference. Once groups began receiving information about each other, they realised that they were not in competition, and by working together, they could achieve a lot more. Small benefits increased group confidence to share ideas with other groups. For the project officer, gaining some early 'runs on the board' was important to reassure project partners that the Alliance was a feasible prospect.

Partnerships for research and extension: A key characteristic of successful grower-driven groups is their ability to build constructive partnerships (Campbell, 1992). Core grower group members of the GGA are extremely successful in attracting public and private-sector researchers, economists and extension agents to help address their local issues. The role of the GGA is to actively add value to these partnerships by linking groups to people with the required expertise. The partnerships formed allow groups to progress their locally driven research and development programs and are essential for growers to deal with the increasing complexity of farming systems in WA. They allow growers become “active generators of new knowledge applicable to their local context” Andrew et al (2005).

Conclusion

After three years of operation, the single most important success factor of the Grower Group Alliance project is that it began and has remained a grower group driven initiative. The three key learnings from this project are 1) A clear purpose is paramount for the successful development of partnerships between grower groups and industry; 2) The creation of space for two-way interaction allows personal networks to expand and sustainable partnerships to develop; and 3) Starting small and tangible connected the grand vision to the local level of the member grower groups and made it inclusive.

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