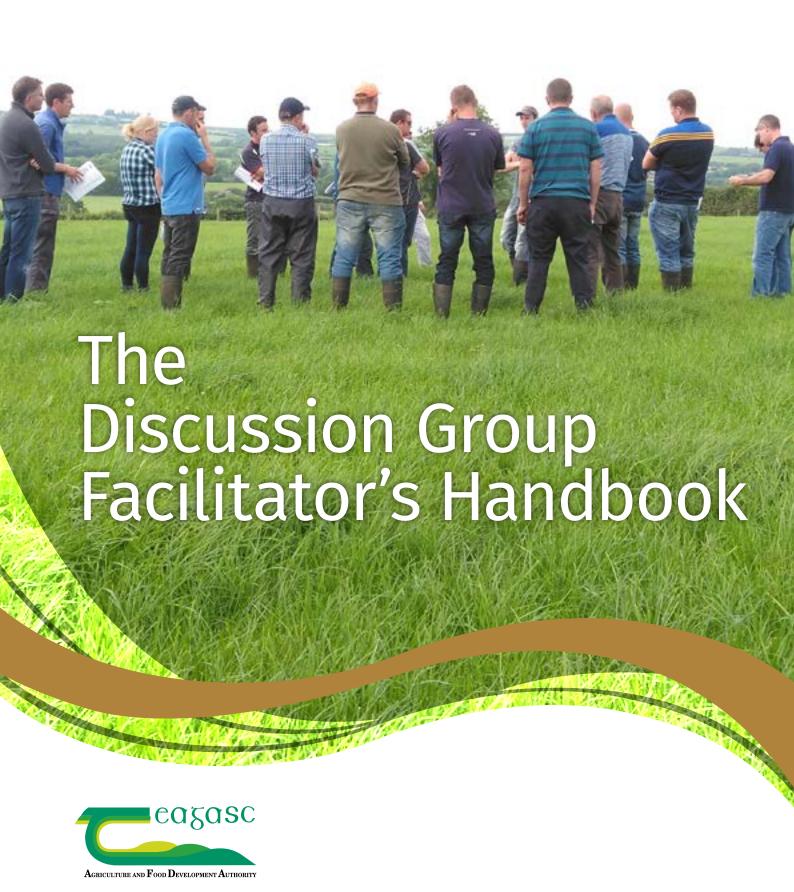
Animal Grassland Research & Innovation Programme



Ack	knowledgements	03
1.	Introduction	05
2.	Facilitation Overview	07
	i. What is Facilitation ii. Role of the Advisor in Facilitating the Discussion Group iii. Characteristics of the Ideal Facilitator iv. Core Skills	7 8 9 1
3.	Understanding Group Dynamics	16
	i. Stages of Group Development ii. Participation	17 20
4.	Handling Common Problems	22
	i. Difficult Group Situations ii. Difficult Individual Behaviours	22 25
5.	Group Establishment	30
	i. Group Objectives – Developing a Mission Statement ii. Establishing Group Norms iii. Group Infrastructure & Organisation	30 31 33
6.	Meeting Preparation	37
	i. The Pre-Visit ii. The Host Farm Summary Sheet iii. Approach to the Pre-Visit iv. Deciding what to Discuss v. Considerations for Session Preparation vi. Session Preparation Worksheet	37 38 47 47 47
7.	The Discussion Group Meeting	53
	i. Designing the Day ii. Venue on the Farm iii. Resources iv. Facilitating the Indoor Session v. Facilitating in the Field vi. Summarising group Recommendations and Actions vii. The Action Plan	53 55 56 60 69 7
8.	Post-Meeting: Reflection	73
9.	Appendices	78
	i. Sankey's Ideas for Working with Groups: Facilitation & Participation Techniques ii. Session Preparation Worksheet iii. Facilitator Cue Card viii. IAF Facilitator Competencies ii. Facilitator Competency Framework	78 82 83 84 90

Although the author and Teagasc have made reasonable efforts to ensure that the information in this book was correct at time of going to press, the author and Teagasc do not assume and hereby disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause. Reasonable efforts have also been made to ensure the reliability of websites listed in this publication but inclusion of these cannot be taken as an endorsement of these sites.

Acknowledgements

This handbook was developed by

Conor Holohan

Teagasc/UCD Walsh Fellow

With the guidance of George Ramsbottom¹ and Prof Jim Kinsella²

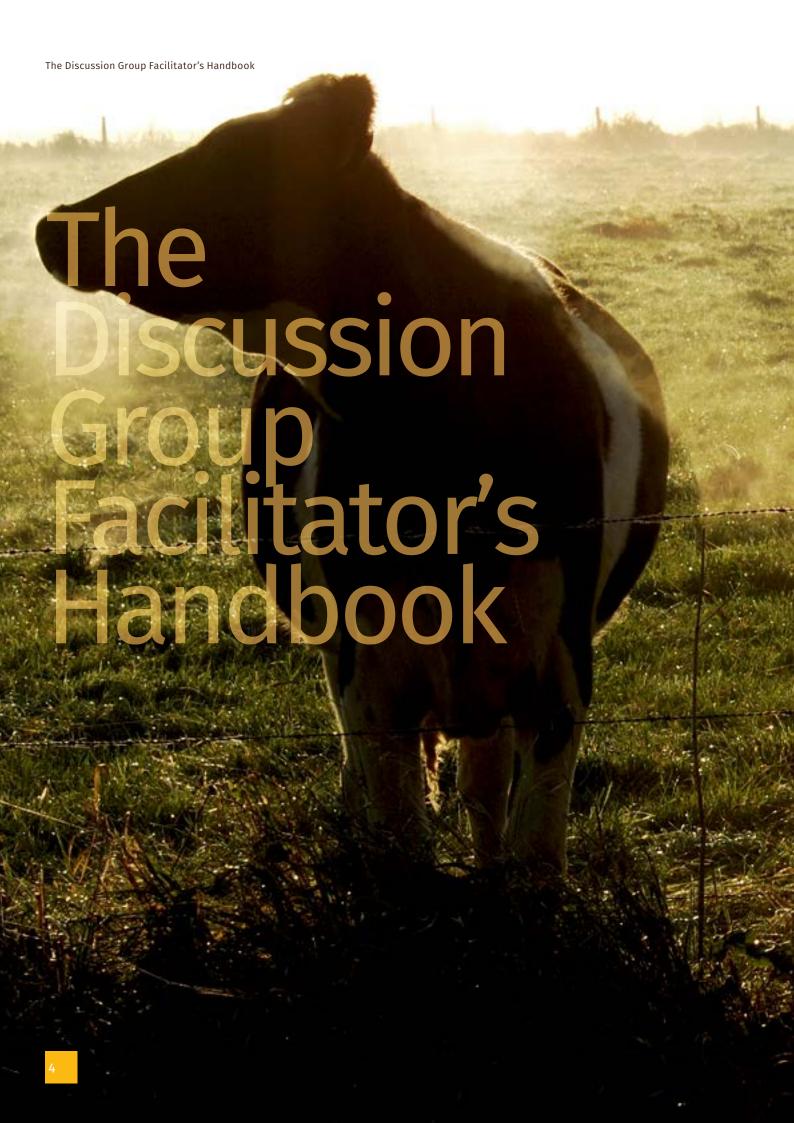
The handbook was created as part of the Master's in Agricultural Innovation and Support study entitled 'Best practice experience in farmer discussion groups – Development of an advisor handbook', which was funded through the Teagasc Walsh Fellowship Programme.

It was developed using a participatory approach which involved continued consultation with advisors, specialists and facilitation experts both in Ireland and New Zealand.

The author wishes to thank George Ramsbottom, Christy Watson, Michael Daly, Sandra Hayes, Jim Moyles, Mark Coyne, Paul Fox, Martin Mulkerrins, Richard O'Brien, Pat Moylan, Tom Turley, Pat Clarke, Shay Phelan, and Martina Gormley of Teagasc; Prof Jim Kinsella and Dr. Tomás Russell of University College Dublin; Abby Scott, Simon Sankey, James Muwunganirwa, and Andrew Reid of DairyNZ; Trevor Cooke of Totally Vets; and Prof Paul Kenyon and Dr. Dave Gray of Massey University for their guidance and contribution in developing this handbook. A special acknowledgement also goes to the staff of Teagasc Tullamore for their help and support throughout the study.

¹ Dairy Specialist, Teagasc, Oakpark, Co. Carlow

² School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin



01 Introduction

As the face of agriculture is evolving, so too is the role of the advisor and the approach applied to the delivery of agricultural extension.

Participatory methods are now recognised as one of the best ways to promote knowledge uptake and practice change among farmers. The approach builds on the knowledge within a group of farmers and encourages peer-to-peer learning. Farmer discussion groups are proven to be an effective method of increasing farmer learning and farm profitability.

The result of this is that we now have an unprecedented number of farmer discussion groups, and the challenge for you, the advisor, is to effectively facilitate them. Given the challenges of the role and the extent to which facilitation influences group success, it became apparent that there is a need for a resource to prepare and develop advisors' competencies in group facilitation. Thus the 'Teagasc Discussion Group Facilitator's Handbook' was commissioned.

There are numerous books available on group facilitation with a world of information and although some offer solid guidance, many are complicated and largely theoretically based. This handbook is unique in that it focuses in particular on the facilitation of farmer discussion groups and aims to deliver practical guidance in a user-friendly format. It has been developed as a result of research in the area and from the direct input of Teagasc advisors and specialists to provide you with a valuable resource that has the potential to help you improve how you organise and facilitate your discussion groups.

Contents and Organisation:

In this handbook you will discover what facilitation is and what you as a discussion group facilitator need to do. Throughout the handbook you will find a selection of resources – guides, worksheets and templates designed for facilitators of all levels of experience.

Facilitating groups is never totally easy, however it is hoped that by bringing clarity to the task of facilitation and providing resources for immediate use, this handbook will improve how you practice facilitation, increase the success of your groups and make your job a more enjoyable one.

Using this Handbook:

As well as detailing the process involved in preparing for and running the discussion group event, this handbook will equip you with knowledge, skills, and numerous techniques that can help to become a better facilitator.

Experts on facilitation are in agreement that you can have all the facilitation skills and techniques in the world but they're useless unless you know how and when to use them. As is mentioned later in the handbook, 'reflective practice' is above all else the key to becoming a better facilitator. Great football and hurling teams, boxers, jockeys, Formula 1 drivers – they all take the time after each match or race to reflect on their performance, be it through feedback from coaches or analysing video footage. The reason for this is that reflecting on one's practice is a fundamental part of continuous learning.

In that regard, facilitating a discussion group is no different – when you are involved you are inclined to get immersed and may not be aware of other things going on around you. A lot happens simultaneously in a group, and the reality is that it's hard to track everything.

In the beginning, focus on one skill at a time, and ask a fellow advisor to co-facilitate with you and watch how you perform – then debrief after the meeting for critical feedback. Other ways to reflect include group feedback and self-evaluation, all of which are covered in Chapter 9.



02 Facilitation Overview

Discussion groups are a platform for farmers to learn and to develop support networks with other like-minded farmers. In particular farmers perceive the following as the main benefits of being in a good discussion group:

- Solving problems
- Support in trying new ideas
- Gaining technical information from others
- Promoting positive attitudes
- New friendships
- · Personal development

The extent to which a group benefits in these ways largely hinges on how good the facilitator is.

This chapter gives you an important overview of some of the fundamentals of facilitation and the skills and characteristics that good facilitators share.

i. What is Facilitation

The origins of facilitation come from the Latin word 'facilis' which means 'the act of making something easier'. Therefore your role as a facilitator is a simple one – to make it easier for a group of farmers to learn and develop. Having said that there are numerous complexities which can impact on how you do so.

Before going any further, it is important to familiarise yourself with the distinctions between facilitation and teaching. Although you may not notice it, we as advisors can often naturally veer towards a teaching style as opposed to a facilitatory approach when working with groups.

Exercise

Take a look at the characteristics of facilitation vs. teaching below and think about your approach to the discussion group(s) you're involved with.

FACILITATION

Starts with knowledge within the group

Issues identified by group

Information flows in a number of directions between the facilitator and individual group members

Facilitator encourages and values different views

Facilitator considered as an equal and develop relationships based on trust and respect

TEACHING

Starts with teacher's own knowledge

Pre-established teaching plan

Information flows in one direction from teacher to student

Teacher seeks the right answer

Teacher has formal relationship with students based on their status as a teacher

ii. Role of the Advisor in Facilitating the Discussion Group Groups can all too often turn into a lecture. It is up to you, the facilitator, to resist the temptation to teach the group and instead try to draw out the knowledge from within the group using your facilitation skills.

Having said this, there may still be a need to provide some form of technical knowledge to the group whether it's to introduce a new technology or to clarify a point of debate (only after discussion and if you are certain that the group don't know or there is a risk they will leave the

meeting misinformed). Ensure that you regularly remind the group of the real purpose of a discussion group and try to keep your technical input to a minimum where possible.

Doing so will remove some of the group's dependence on you for continuous input and relieve some of the pressure from you.

Over the course of the discussion group meeting, a good facilitator should talk no more than 30% of the time.

"I know I'm facilitating a good meeting when I can feel my top lip with my bottom lip."

Psychologist F. Michler Bishop

TOP TIP:

Silence can be awkward for both you and the group. However it is very powerful. If you find yourself posing simple questions to the group only to be met with silence, try and hold on for at least 30 seconds next time. Someone will more than likely give in to the situation and respond.

iii. Characteristics of the Ideal Facilitator

The personal traits of an effective facilitator are as follows (Justice and Jamieson, 2012):

→ Steadiness (calm and centred)

→ Confidence

→ Assertiveness

→ Openness

→ Flexibility

 \rightarrow Humility

→ Optimism

→ Self-Awareness

→ Attentiveness

→ Open-minded

→ Being Genuine

→ Enthusiasm

→ Humour

→ Respect

Possessing the required knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics of a successful facilitator is not easy, however do not be disheartened. Fully competent professional facilitators are continually working on all of these areas, and even the best facilitator knows that there is always room for improvement. For that reason this handbook is applicable to both new and experienced facilitators.

The IAF facilitator competency list is included in the appendices section of the handbook as an additional resource for you to identify the specific knowledge, skills and characteristics that you may want to develop.



iv. Core Skills

I. Body Language

It is not only with words and sounds that people communicate. Messages are sent and received through channels other than speech and hearing. Body language is a very important form (if not the most important) of non-verbal communication. Every facilitator must learn how to use it, but also how to see and interpret it. Some people are very expressive in terms of their body language whilst others are not at all. Some body language can be of a negative nature e.g. folded arms whilst other forms are of a positive nature such as, eye contact.

Some of the common types of body language are:

Gestures

There are many forms of gesture which can be used in a positive or negative manner. Generally, a facilitator should be using gestures in a positive manner. The most obvious hand gesture for a facilitator to use is an open handed gesture (palm / palms open) which invites openness or a questioning pose. Equally nodding of the head encourages contribution.

Facial Expression

This form of body language can either have a positive or negative effect, depending on the expression used. It can be definitive or questioning.

Physical Position within the Group

As a facilitator, it is important that you are very aware of this. Generally, it is important that you take a central or prominent position in the group. Discussion groups should operate largely in a U-shape or circular or semi-circular shaped structure. This creates an open environment, but also allows prominence of the facilitator. There are situations however that you, as the facilitator, should step back to the periphery. An example of this is when the chairman is addressing the group.

TOP TIP: 'Step Away from the Board!'

Moving away from the flip board will help group interaction. It's particularly effective if you find yourself being the focus of questioning from the group.

II. Eye Contact

Eye contact is critical in communication and it is also essential in facilitating a discussion group. As a facilitator, it is important that you use it at all times whether questioning, answering, listening, summarising etc. Using eye contact demonstrates conviction rather than doubt, interest rather than disregard.



III. Tone of Voice

The facilitator's tone of voice is a powerful indicator to group members. The tone of voice used will have a large influence on getting the message across or the level of response to questioning. Tone of voice can give conviction or doubt, create activity or passiveness.

IV. Verbal

Obviously, spoken words are a form of communication. However, in relation to discussion groups, the language used with the group has a huge influence on your effectiveness. The language a facilitator uses should enable others to understand easily. People can feel very uncomfortable if they don't understand the language used.



V. Listening

This is one of the most important skills of a facilitator and one of the hardest to learn. When people perceive their ideas, feelings or experiences (or all three) are valued by the group and the facilitator, they contribute more, and this leads to a shared sense of the group acting together.

Active listening is the key to effective communication and a core skill for facilitators. Active listening is more than simply listening to someone. It is absorbing what is being said and letting the speaker know that they are being heard. It is about ensuring that the speaker feels "listened to". When people are listened to, they feel involved and as a result, are more open and participative. Below are the 7 key skills involved in active listening.

Ask yourself how often do you use all seven of these when facilitating your group(s)?



The verbal form of active listening involves many skills. Some of these are outlined below:

- → Summarising drawing together the key points a speaker said. It may help to ask this in the form of a question e.g. 'So, the three things you are saying are 1...2....3...'
- → Clarifying checking what is said is understood. Again a question may be used to check here. (Questions help repeat the message as well)
- → Reflecting this helps picking up on key points of the speaker and demonstrates understanding e.g. 'It sounds like.........'
- → Paraphrasing this is repeating back to the speaker what was said using your own words
- → Silence this is very useful but very hard for an inexperienced facilitator to grasp. Allowing time after a speaker has said something can act as encouragement for the speaker to continue or allow absorption of what was said. It can also allow another speaker make a contribution. It can be a very powerful tool for the facilitator if used correctly
- → Linking this can help the facilitator encourage the speaker to continue and also demonstrate interest e.g. "And then...."

VI. Questioning

There are certain skills that can help a facilitator to conduct a more effective meeting:

- → Firstly he/she must be a good listener
- → Next he/she must become skilled in the art of asking the right questions, in the right way and at the right time

Asking questions instead of answering can be a powerful facilitation tool.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS			
Open	Closed		
Who	Do you		
What	Could you		
When	Are you		
Where	Would you		
Why	Would you		

PROBING ³
Explain further
Put that another way
Tell me more about that
But why, how, where, when etc
Anything else that

PARAPHRASING ⁴
In other words
What you're saying is that
What you're telling me is

Types of questions:

- → **General** addressed to the group as a whole
- → **Direct** addressed to an individual
- → **Open questions** that cannot be answered by a simple 'yes' or no'
- → **Factual** demands a specific answer
- → Redirected the facilitator throws a question asked of him/her back to the group or a member of the group
- ightarrow **Leading** steers the member towards a particular answer

Use open ended questions to encourage the speaker to contribute more. How the facilitator asks a question is crucial to generate contribution from the group members:

- → If you ask the question as follows (closed ended question): "Did you have breakfast this morning?" The answer is: "Yes"
- → However asking the question as follows (open ended question): "What did you have for breakfast this morning?" The answer is: "I had tea, toast, juice...etc", gives a lot more information

³ Probing – drawing people out, clarifying questions or opinions, creating dialogue, solving problems.

⁴ Paraphrasing – repeating what somebody has said using your own words.



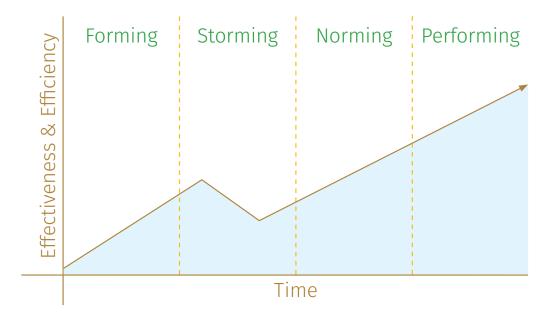
O3 UnderstandingGroup Dynamics

One key skill of the facilitator is to identify the dynamics that develop when farmers interact with one another, and to help the group manage those dynamics. Group dynamics are important because they are essentially what drive the group forward. There are numerous types of dynamics within groups; however this chapter will look at the two most relevant to you as a facilitator of farmer discussion groups:

- Stages of group development
- Group participation

i. Stages of Group Development

Tuckman's 4-stages of group development (below) is the most widely recognised model which looks at how groups develop over time to become more effective.



Each farmer group has a diverse range of characters and different dynamics. The time it takes one group to go from 'storming' to 'norming' could be months longer than another group.

So what does this all mean for you the facilitator?

The following page shows the typical characteristics of the group at each of the four development stages and ways you can handle the main challenges of each. Think of the group(s) you facilitate and ask yourself 'what stage is my group at?' Recognising this can help you tailor your facilitation approach accordingly.

CHARACTERISTICS

FORMING

- Group is not yet a group, but a collection of individuals
- Individuals want to establish personal identity within the group and make an impression
- Participation is limited as individuals get familiar with the setting, the trainer and each other

Intra-group conflict and lack of unity

- Preliminary ground rules on purpose, leadership and behaviour are damaged
- Individuals can become hostile towards each other
- · Individuals can pursue personal agendas
- Friction increases, rules are broken, arguments can happen
- If handled well, this stage leads to new and more realistic setting of objectives, procedures and norms

GROUP SIGNALS

- Reluctance to talk
- Uncomfortable
- Talk during the walk between stops

Tough questioning

· Individuals 'marking

their territory'

Resentment

Scepticism

HOW TO HANDLE?

- Limit the number in the group
- · Meet frequently
- Involve everyone in the session

• Identify a chairman

 Good facilitation skills essential

NORMING

STORMING

- Tensions overcome by developing group cohesion in which norms and practices are established
- Group members accept the group and accept each other's idiosyncrasies
- Group allegiance develops and group strives to maintain it
- Development of group spirit, harmony becomes important
- Acceptance of each other
- Acceptance of group rules
- Group settling down
- Facilitator motivational skills important
- Ambition for the group needs to increase e.g. financial information, ICBF data sharing
- Establish ground rules

PERFORMING

- · Full maturity and maximum productivity
- Only reached by successfully completing previous three stages
- Members take on roles to fulfil the group activities since they have now learnt to relate to one another
- Roles become flexible and functional
- Group energy channelled into identified tasks
- · New insights and solutions begin to emerge

- Group activities working
- Group performing
- Group members co-operating
- Feedback through the chairman
- Targets set and monitored
- · Plan set for the year

ii. Participation

Assuming that the farmers in your group are all valuable resources, it is necessary to facilitate the involvement of everyone and the appropriate level of participation from all group members.

The best groups operate with an overall dynamic that is characterised by even-participation. Groups left to their 'natural' ways will not operate in this state of even-participation. The requirement of creating and maintaining a healthy and relatively even balance of participation is one of the key purposes of a group having a facilitator

High participation can indicate enthusiasm and discontent. Low participation can signal boredom, general agreement, or a fault in the session design. Uneven participation is more often a problem (e.g. a few members dominating, or a few members not participating). It is important to watch out for high and low participation rates.

Ensuring the success of the group is a balancing act. You will often have to intervene to increase participation, or reduce participation by some while maintaining involvement of others.

The following are techniques that you can use to 'level' participation to ensure that the effectiveness of the group is maintained (adapted from 'The Facilitator's Fieldbook' by Justice and Jamieson):

→ Divide the group into smaller groups:

Ask the group to break into groups of 2, 3, or 4. Pairs force the most participation.

→ Round robin participation:

Ask everyone their thoughts and ideas.

→ Call on those who haven't been participating:

Pick out someone who hasn't been participation, saying "[Name], I notice you've been doing a lot more thinking than talking. What are your thoughts on..."

→ Acknowledge the participation problem and ask group members to share their feelings:

"I notice we seem to be having a few problems with participation today. What do you think the issue is?"

→ Call a time-out:

Ask group to pause for a moment of silence and reflect on their own contribution. Have they been giving all they have to offer the group? Have they been talking too much or too little? What members of the group need to be heard more? What adjustments do we need to make to maximise the success of the group?

After the moment of silence you can either discuss peoples' thoughts or simply move on.

→ Review your meeting plan and change it:

If you get the feeling participation is low because of a flaw in how you've designed the session you need to review the agenda with the group and see if it needs to be altered. You could ask the group chairman during a break or between stops on the farm walk on whether you need to change tack.

→ Assess and re-assess the participation levels of the group:

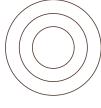
Draw three circles on the flip chart, one larger than the other.

Explain to the group that those who are participating a lot and perceive themselves to be having a significant contribution to the group are closest to the centre.

Ask everyone to take a sticky note and place it on the circle to mark what they feel their level of impact has been on the group.

Then explain to the group that research indicates that the groups that work best have an even level of participation and mark on the flip chart the ideal scenario where everyone is on the middle circle.

Tell the group that you will be repeating the exercise at the end of the group. When the time comes, repeat the exercise and discuss what it looks like now and talk about the changes that were made.







04 Handling Common Problems

Given that there is such a variety of people interacting in a discussion group, problems are inevitable. The following chapter provides you with a number of ways to help you deal with problem people or situations.

Many authors on facilitation agree that the vast majority of problems anticipated by facilitators don't happen if you've prepared well and group sessions have been carefully designed.

The following section looks at the two kinds of problems you will face - difficult group situations and difficult behaviours. You will be provided with a number of options, most of which have been adapted from 'The Facilitator's Fieldbook' by Justice and Jamieson, a well-established resource for novice and experienced facilitators.

General Approach to Difficulties

As a facilitator you should model an open, honest and risk-taking approach to handling difficulties. The risk in being honest and direct is that one might be isolated, ridiculed or ignored. This is very real for people, and you will help others to take this risk by modelling it. When members recognise these characteristics in you, they will be encouraged to behave similarly.

1. Difficult Group Situations

i. Dwindling Group Energy, Interest, or Attention

Try using one or more of these options when you are confronted with this type of situation:

- · Ask the group what's going on.
- · Provide descriptive feedback on what you see; ask why
- Take a short break. Get the group to do something physical (walk, stretch etc).
- · Ask the group what they would like to do.



ii. Group Unresponsive

Sometimes a particular activity may flop and you are met with silence from the group. There are a number of potential reasons; the session design may be inappropriate, confusing or too complicated:

- · Ask group what's going on.
- Provide descriptive feedback on what you see; ask why.
- Try a different way to start the discussion.
- Take a short break; ask a few individuals why they are silent or do not seem to want to take part.
- Ask the group if what has been proposed would be helpful right now.
- · Ask group if they have any suggestions to make it better.
- · Ask individuals to respond.





iii. Group Getting Side-tracked

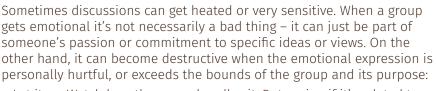
This generally happens if group members are thinking of other personal agendas or disagree with the agenda:

- · Refer members back to the topic of discussion.
- · Ask people if the current agenda is helpful or necessary.
- · Point out the behaviour and ask why the group is going off topic.
- · Offer to change or re-order the agenda.
- Ask if the current conversation is important to everyone of if it can be postponed until after the meeting.

iv. Only some of the Group Participating

Please refer to previous section on Group Participation (Pg. 20) for detailed approaches to deal with uneven group participation.





- Let it go. Watch how the group handles it. Determine if it's related to the topic and relevant to the group.
- Take a break and ask everyone to relax and come back with some input.
- If you see people acting uncomfortably, ask why?
- If just a few of the members are emotional, see whether or not the discussion is important for all to hear and ask if it can be held privately.



2. Difficult Individual Behaviours

Regularly there will be people in the group who cause problems through inappropriate or unhelpful behaviours. There are some general guidelines to follow when dealing with such individuals:

- a) When possible talk to them privately and point out the problem and coach them towards more desirable behaviours. Approach as a friend and ally, not as a figure of authority.
- b) Focus on a specific desired behaviour.
- c) Don't judge a person's behaviour as right or wrong.
- **d)** Try to maintain the balance between protecting the group from the distracting behaviour and protecting the person from attack.
- e) Be sure to have ground rules and norms for the group. Refer to the group for enforcement when someone is out of line.

There are a number of specific actions you can take when problem behaviour pops up. Some of the more common behaviours and possible responses are listed below:

i. Dominating the Discussion

- Stop the person, thank them and say you'd like to hear from someone else.
- · Call attention to the meeting agenda and the time frame.
- Break eye contact. Move away from the person. Stop giving him/her focused attention.
- Move closer and closer to the person maintaining eye contact. Get in front of him or her. The problematic behaviour will start to stand out (even to the person).
- Summarise what the person has said and move to someone else.
- · Give the person a time limit.
- Propose a ground rule at the start of the session that everyone 'monitor the air time'. Explain that for some this means talking less, and for others it means talking more.



ii. Personal Agendas

A person continually inserts a concern or disagreement or alternative. This can be annoying and distracting for the group:

- Ask the person how what he or she is saying relates to the current topic of discussion.
- · Record the point, thank the person, and move on.
- Ask the person what he/she wants the group to do with such input?
- · Give the person a time limit.

iii. Repeating the Same Point Over and Over

People can often get caught up in something that they care about and can't let go of it:

- Acknowledge the importance of the point and the person's passion, advocacy, or determination.
- Demonstrate that he/she has been heard and the point recorded.
- Explain how and when the point will be dealt with.
- · Ask directly if the person 'can let it go for now'.

iv. Having Side Conversations

- · Invite them to share what is being said.
- Stop discussion, be quiet, and look at the people talking.
- · Ask them to stop.
- Move closer to the people having the side conversation.
- · Say "Let's have one discussion," or "Let's all focus on the same thing".
- · Point out that the talking is distracting.

v. Being Constantly Negative or Antagonistic, or Hostile in Manner

As many advisors are aware, some people are 'nay-sayers', doubters and cynics. Their negative expressions may either be verbal or non-verbal:

- · Acknowledge their point of view.
- Make a special point of thoroughly paraphrasing their view the first couple of times they speak. Stick very close to their exact wording.
- · Point out the negative pattern.
- · Ask for their opinions. Record the opinions. Ask the group to respond.

vi. Interrupting Others

When someone cuts off the speaker or jumps into a conversation too soon they disrupt the flow of information and show disrespect for the other person. Even when there is a ground rule against this it still seems to happen:

- Enforce the related ground rule.
- Stop the interrupting person and ask them to wait while the speaker finishes
- Ask people who feel impatient to write down their thoughts rather than spout them out.
- Be neutral and consistent. Don't let some interrupt and not others.

vii. Non-Participation

Some of the group may remain silent during the meeting and seem unable or unwilling to speak. They may be timid, fearful of something, or unsure of themselves and what they have to offer. Sometime they will withdraw from the discussion or drop out of the group altogether:

- Talk to them privately at another time about their level of participation.
- Call on them by name "Pat, we haven't heard from you on this. Could you share your thoughts with us?"
- · Thank them when they contribute.
- Turn to them when the discussion turns to an area you know they can respond to with confidence i.e. a particular issue which they had on their farm in the past.
- Early on in the session, have everyone respond briefly in turn to a specific warm-up question.

viii. Attacking, Criticising, or Picking an Argument

Some people will go after other group members or you the facilitator to argue or personally attack. Sometimes this is just counterdependency (a state refusing personal dependency, acting strong and pushing others away). The person may be aiming to discredit or change what the group is doing:

- · Describe nonjudgmentally what the person is doing.
- Ask if the criticism or judgement is based on something that has occurred in the meeting.
- Stop any argument. Ask for and record a statement of each position. Engage other group members in discussing their points of view.
- Ask the person what the group could do to respond to his/her concern

ix. Clowning

Humour is great at creating energy in the group but sometimes a person may overuse humour, act silly, or make a joke about everything that's discussed. They are generally attention-seeking behaviours if it is a regular occurrence:

- · Ignore the behaviour and the person.
- · Ask the person to stop.
- · Describe what is going on and how it is distracting.
- · Talk to the person privately after the group meeting.

x. Attendance Problems

Some people will repeatedly arrive late or leave early or miss meetings altogether – all of which distract and hold back the groups progress:

- Take the time to get an attendance commitment from the group. Enforce it.
- · Speak to the person outside the meeting.
- Don't review anything or stop the meeting for such people.
- Ask members to announce if and why they have to leave, arrive late, or miss a meeting.
- Have the group chairperson to ask these members to come to meetings regularly and on time. If they can't do that ask the chairperson to consider replacing them.

xi. Objections

It can sometimes be the case that you as an advisor may input some advice or try to introduce the group to a new technology or approach, with the intention of encouraging a discussion on the matter (e.g. grass measuring). On occasion it may be met with objection from certain members. The 'Feel-Felt-Found' technique can be useful to deal with such objections:

STEP	EXAMPLE OF WHAT YOU SAY	WHY IS THIS APPROPRIATE?
1. Feel	"I understand why you'd be concerned about the extra work involved in setting up the system."	You are acknowledging and emphasising the objection
2. Felt	"I've had other farmers express a similar concern."	You are validating the credibility of the objection, which will cause your prospect to remain engaged.
3. Found	"What they found though is once the system is set up and operational, the savings in feed and fertiliser costs make it worthwhile."	You are explaining how your solution overcomes the stated objection.



05 Group Establishment

This is a critical step in the group's developmental process

How you set out your stall at the start of your tenure as the group's facilitator will have an impact on how well the group performs and develops over the next number of months and possibly years.

This chapter will provide you with methods to help achieve buy-in by the group, whereby everyone is aware of the purpose and goals for the group, the role of the facilitator, and what is expected of each member to achieve the desired goals.

i. Group Objectives - Developing a Mission Statement

A vital component of any successful group is a clear understanding among the members of the purpose of the discussion group and the presence of a common objective. Helping the group to develop a mission statement is a great way to focus them on why they are taking part in the group.



The best time to do this is in the early stages after the group's establishment. However if you are facilitating an established discussion group who don't have a mission or set of norms it can still be very beneficial to do so. It is a good idea to revise these from time to time to refocus the group.

How to develop the Mission Statement:

Asking the group "What is your mission statement?" can be overwhelming. Instead you could ask them: "What is our purpose?" or "Why are we in this business?" or "What motivates you to leave the farm and come along to this group?" From this you can help the group put together their mission statement.

Some key qualities of a good mission statement:

- · Clear and concise language.
- In a single sentence. As much as possible, keep it short and sweet so that it is easy to remember.
- Clear, actionable words. When a member reads it, they are clear about what the company is and what it stands for.



"Our group exists to improve the profitability of our farm businesses by offering our knowledge and experience to each group member and to support each member in achieving their farm goals, while maintaining a group environment that everyone enjoys being part of".

The first meeting is also a good opportunity to clarify your role as facilitator. Ask members what they realistically expect from you and set limits as to your level of input.



ii. Establishing Group Norms

Setting norms does not mean regulating every aspect of group interaction; rather it is an opportunity for the group to express its values i.e. mutual respect, equality, punctuality etc.

There are many ways you can work with the group to establish a set of group norms. Below is a suggested process for how you might go about it:

- **1.** On a flip chart brainstorm and list all member ideas for norms they'd like to see the group adopt.
- **2.** Have a period for questions and clarifications so that everyone understands what each of the proposed norms mean. Re-word as seems appropriate.
- **3.** Go through the list item by item to see which norms all group members want to adopt. No member should be pressured into accepting any norm that he or she cannot fully endorse.
- **4.** If the list of approved norms is longer than ten items try to reduce the list by simplifying and combining complementary items.
- **5.** Make sure all group members are comfortable with the revisions.
- **6.** Adopt the set of group norms.

Norm setting can only work if the group is truly able to arrive at consensus. Norms won't stick if members have reservations about them. However, once consensus is reached, the group is equipped with a guide that can serve to strengthen positive practices. A set of norms can serve as a common reference if contrary behaviours arise.

A written set of norms are also handy for potential members and newcomers who need to quickly get an understanding of how a group operates.



GREEN ACRES DISCUSSION GROUP

MISSION STATEMENT:

"OUR GROUP EXISTS TO IMPROVE THE PROFITABILITY OF OUR FARM BUSINESSES BY OFFERING OUR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE TO EACH GROUP MEMBER AND TO SUPPORT EACH MEMBER IN ACHIEVING THEIR FARM GOALS, WHILE MAINTAINING A GROUP ENVIRONMENT THAT EVERYONE ENIOYS BEING PART OF".

GROUP NORMS:

- 1. OUR MEETINGS WILL BEGIN AND END ON TIME.
- 2. WE WILL LISTEN TO EACH OTHER AND NOT INTERRUPT.
- 3. WE WILL MAKE SURE EVERYONE GETS A CHANCE TO SPEAK.
- 4. WE WILL SUPPORT OUR FACILITATOR'S EFFORTS TO MODERATE DISCUSSIONS.
- 5. WE WILL RESPECT EACH OTHER'S OPINIONS AND SPEAK WITH RESPECT TO EACH OTHER.
- 7. REGARDLESS OF AGE, GENDER, BACKGROUND, FARM SIZE EVERY GROUP MEMBER IS AN EQUAL AND VALUABLE PART OF THE GROUP.
- 8. ALL GROUP MEMBERS WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE GROUP DISCUSSION.
- 9. WHAT IS SAID IN THE GROUP STAYS IN THE GROUP, WE WILL NOT SHARE INFORMATION OUTSIDE THE GROUP.

iii. Group Infrastructure and Organisation

The importance of establishing a defined structure and a regular routine for discussion group activity cannot be over-emphasised. Successful discussion groups operate on the principle that consistent activity yields consistent progress. This section describes some of the essential elements of group infrastructure.



Chairperson

A discussion group chairperson is required to co-ordinate activities throughout the year. Appointment to the position may occur on a rotating annual basis. The primary roles of the chairperson are to:

- · Compile and circulate an annual meetings plan.
- Inform group members of the details and requirements for upcoming meetings and events.
- Liaise with the host farmer and group facilitator to organise and set the agenda for the next group meeting.
- Encourage all members to fulfil their requirements for data recording, information sharing and participation in group activities.
- Arrange assistance for group members who may have difficulty completing aspects of group activity.
- Outline to the facilitator the group's objectives for the year and the issues to be addressed.
- Provide feedback to the facilitator regarding members' opinion on the progress of the group and the conduct of meetings.
- · Organise guest speakers, field trips and excursions.
- Maintain group focus on the objectives set out in the mission statement.
- Function as a public spokesperson for the group. A secretary may be appointed to assist the chairperson by taking responsibility for external correspondence on behalf of the group.

Group plan

The following is a summary of the key features of the plans prepared for meetings of successful groups:

- The schedule of meetings for the year is drawn up by the chairman and circulated to group members.
- Meetings held on group members' farms are conducted on a rota basis.
- Timing and location of scheduled indoor sessions (e.g. annual financial review) are detailed in the plan.
- Excursions and field trips are scheduled into the annual meetings plan.



Protocol for Monthly Group Meetings

The conduct of monthly meetings should conform to a set format. This promotes the adoption of discussion group participation as habitual behaviour. Ideally, meetings are scheduled for a convenient, consistent and easily remembered time, for example the second Tuesday of each month.

Exp dis

Time of meetings

Experienced facilitators suggest that the best time to organise dairy discussion groups is during the working day especially in the 11.00am to 1.00pm period. The reasons for this include:

- The increasing proportion of dairy farmers who are responsible for the 'school run' in the mid-afternoon.
- · Attention and participation levels are highest at this time of the day.
- Evening meetings are more likely to be poorly attended and tend to be more difficult to keep focussed on business. A time limit prevents wandering off the topic in hand.
- Some groups will commence at 11.00am and finish at 3.00pm with members bringing a packed lunch to eat during the session. Shared lunchtime can offer an opportunity for more relaxed conversation and helps with group bonding.

In the case of drystock groups predominantly made up of part-time farmers, evening meetings may be the only time suitable for most members.



Whose farm next?

Deciding on whose farm to visit next can be a daunting process particularly for new groups. Farmers are often reluctant to 'open their gate' to group scrutiny. We often forget that the farm is for many farmers, a reflection of themselves. Farmers, particularly those with poorer facilities may be reluctant to allow others to visit during the winter period. Others with excellent facilities and poor grassland management skills may be reluctant to host a meeting during the grazing season.

Ideally over the course of a number of years, it is best to visit individual farms at different times of the year to see how they are managing the farm in the different seasons.

The following suggestions have been used by advisers to overcome the issue of 'whose farm next':

- At the start of the year, when setting out the plan for meetings during the year, assign the venues as well. This allows group members to decide when to host their meeting
- When planning the venues, if farmers are still reluctant to volunteer to host a meeting, facilitators will sometimes put all group members' names into a hat and pick names out for each monthly meeting.
- · Visit farms in alphabetical order.



ob Meeting Preparation

How well you prepare for your discussion group meeting can have a major bearing on the quality of the discussion group event itself. This section goes through the step-by-step process of preparation necessary to run a successful meeting.

i. The Pre-Visit

The pre-visit is a key step in preparing yourself for the group meeting. The aim is to get an overview of the farmer and the farm business, and identify issues or areas for discussion. The information you gather at the pre-visit will help you structure the meeting.

While some of the discussion topics may be pre-determined by the group, it is up to you to gather the relevant information from the host farmer and frame it in such a way that is interesting and stimulating for the group.

The two angles you might use to look at the farm are:

- 1. Areas the farmer needs some help with; or
- 2. Use the farm to demonstrate best practice.

You, the advisor, play an important role in achieving farmer buy-in. An important step, particularly in recently formed groups, is to make the host farmer aware of the purpose and potential benefits of hosting the group. This will keep the host farmer focused and demonstrate to the other group members the advantages of hosting a meeting on their own farms.

It is advisable to conduct the pre-visit at least one week before the meeting, giving you and the farmer enough time to prepare. SUGGESTION

GOOD PRACTICE

ii. The Host Farm Summary Sheet

The Host Farm Summary Sheet is a tool you can use to help familiarise yourself with the farmer and prepare for the pre-visit.

It is designed to get the farmer thinking about his/her business, to focus them on what exactly they want to gain from the meeting, and what particular issues they would like discussed.

Giving the Host Farm Summary Sheet to the farmer to complete in advance of the pre-visit will allow him/her sufficient time to think about their farm business and help you in conducting the pre-visit process efficiently.

TOP TIP: 'Know your Group!'

The more you know about each farmer the better. As time goes on, you will build up a detailed picture of the farmers in your group. It is this knowledge and awareness that you can refer back to time and time again. It makes it easier for you to facilitate, and draw in group members into the discussion.



In the case where you are taking over a completely new group or have new clients coming into an existing group, the Host Farm Summary Sheet can be distributed among the farmers to help you familiarise yourself with them and their farming operations.

Host Farm Summary Sheet

Farmer Name(s)		Date			
Group Name					
BACKGROUND					
Years Farming			Hobbies and Intere	ests	
Family Situation (Married, single,	no. of childr	en, ages etc.):			
FARMER COALC					
FARMER GOALS Long term goals for you, your fan	nily and the	farm husingss			
In 5 years' time	iity, and the	iaiiii busiiless			
e yeare amaii					
Scare each of the following areas	of your bus	inoss out of 10			
Score each of the following areas (e.g.1: Herd health is good but I've h			the last few years - A	nimal H	lealth 6/10)
(e.g.2: I'm having difficulty managir	g cash flow a	t different times o	f the year and need s	ome he	lp – Financial Management – 4/10)
Grassland Management	/10	Work-life Bal	lance	/10	
Breeding Performance	/10	Buildings an	d Facilities	/10	
Financial Management	/10	Farm Efficier	ncy	/10	
Soil Fertility	/10	Profitability		/10	
Animal Health	/10	Farm Safety		/10	
Any other Strengths? (e.g. Other Farm Income)					
Any other Weaknesses? (e.g. Frag	mented Farn	1)			

Specific Changes or Issues arising on the farm in last 12 months
Financial Animal Health & Nutrition Grassland Family
Labour Breeding Environmental Personal Health Other
Brief Description of the changes/issues selected above:
PURPOSE OF THE DISCUSSION GROUP MEETING
What do I want out of the meeting?
TOP 3 THINGS I WOULD LIKE DISCUSSED AT THE MEETING:
1.
2.
3.

iii. Approach to the Pre-Visit

- **1.** Using the Host Farm Summary Sheet, sit down with the farmer and determine what the main issues are on the farm.
- **2.** Conduct farm walk and begin to develop your opinion on the farm.
- **3.** Decide what to discuss at the meeting. Include your own analysis and opinion in the conversation based on what you've seen on the farm. Also discuss what level of sharing the farmer is comfortable with.

TOP TIP: 'What's said in the group stays in the group'

Group confidentiality is critical. A farmer may be happy to verbally share some sensitive information in the group as long as they feel safe in doing so.



The following are the main areas of analysis for the farm pre-visit:

Background	(i) Current position – years farming, family situation(ii) Future plans – succession, expansion, off-farm interests
Business Overview	Brief overview of farming operation
Financial Results	Profit Monitor data. Current efficiency levels.
Farm Management	How do you think the farm is performing compared to its potential and why?
Labour	Farm labour situation? Off-farm job, time available for farming?
Farm Infrastructure	Farmyard facilities and grazing infrastructure
Environment	Any environmental constraints or issues that could impact the business?
Topics to focus on	Any significant changes/issues in the last 12 months? Anything in particular the farmer would like discussed? Any timely issues relevant to the rest of the group?

iv. Deciding what to Discuss

The discussion group meeting serves two core purposes:

- i) To assess host farm performance and provide feedback and recommendations.
- ii) For other farmers to learn from this process.

In addition it can be useful to integrate timely topics that are relevant to the group as a whole.

The discussion topic may be pre-selected from the previous meeting or at the start of the year when the group sets out its annual agenda. Group-ownership is an integral part of the discussion group concept, and farmers appreciate being allowed to choose what they would like discussed.

TOP TIP: Avoid Information Overload'No more than three topics per meeting.
Keep the messages clear and simple.



Sample topics

The following pages will give you some suggestions of what you might discuss. At the start of the year you can ask all group members to select five topics from the list that they wish to cover throughout the year. Feel free to add in more topics as appropriate.

SAMPLE BEEF DISCUSSION GROUP TOPICS			
Equipment & Facilities			
Animal Housing	Calibrating the Fertiliser Spreader	Cheap slurry/soiled water storage	
Farm Business Management			
Beef Profit Monitor	Tax Management	Office Management	
Cash Flow Budget	Computer Training	Dealing with the Bank	
Saving on Farm Costs	Other Farm Ventures		
Financial Management Course	Pensions		
Labour			
Managing Employees	Time Management		
Health, Safety, and Wellbeing			
Health and Safety Statement	Group Health Check (by professional)	Signs of Burnout and Depression	
Dealing with Hard Times	Tips for Maintaining Wellness		
Animal Health & Welfare			
Condition Scoring	Managing Disease Risk at Calving	Herd health at Housing	
Dosing Cattle/Minerals	Suckler Mastitis Management	Animal Welfare Issues	
Weaning Management	Vaccinations eg. Lepto, Salmonella	IBR and Viruses	
Cost of Animal Disease			
Breeding and Nutrition			
Improving Herd Fertility	Beef Breed for Future	Winter Feed Plan	
Choosing Bulls	Winter Feeding /Mgmt. of cows	Meal/ration for coming year	
Meal Feeding (type/quantity)	Feeding Concentrates (Brewers etc.)	Finishing cattle indoors	
Weanling Performance at Grass			
Grass and Forage			
Nutrient Management	Managing Turnout to Grass	Grass Budget for Spring	
Grass budgeting course	Grassland Plan for coming year	Grass Budget for Autumn	
Making Quality Silage	Silage Costs	Reseeding	
Weed Control			
Calves			
Rearing Heifers	Bucket Feeding Calves		
Beef Production			
Beef Quality Assurance Scheme	Managing Sale of Stock		
Big Picture			
Future in Beef Farming	Simplifying the Farm System	Partnerships	
Forward Planning		Goal Setting	

SAMPLE DAIRY DISCUSSION O	GROUP TOPICS	
Equipment & Facilities		
Milking Parlour Adjustments	Calibrating the Fertiliser Spreader	Cheap slurry/soiled water storage
Low Cost Animal Housing	Parlour Cow Flow	
Farm Business Management		
Dairy Profit Monitor	Tax Management	Office Management
Cash Flow Budget	Computer Training	Dealing with the Bank
Saving on Farm Costs	Other Farm Ventures	Net Worth Improvement
Financial Management Course	Pensions	
Labour		
Managing Employees	Foreign Labour	Employment Legislation
Time Management		
Health, Safety, and Wellbeing		
Health and Safety Statement	Group Health Check (by professional)	Signs of Burnout and Depression
Dealing with Hard Times	Tips for Maintaining Wellness	
Animal Health & Welfare		
Condition Score Group's Herds	Johne's Disease	Calving Practices
Dosing Cattle/Minerals	Mastitis Management	Animal Welfare Issues
Lameness in Cows	Vaccinations eg. Lepto, Salmonella	IBR and Viruses
Cost of Animal Disease		
Breeding and Nutrition		
Improve Herd Fertility	Breed of Cow for Future	Winter Feed Plan
Choosing Bulls	Winter Feeding /Mgmt. of cows	Meal/ration for coming year
Meal Feeding (type/quantity)		
Grass and Forage		
Nutrient Management	Maize/Wholecrop	Grass Budget for Spring
Grass budgeting course	Grassland Plan for coming year	Grass Budget for Autumn
Making Quality Silage	Silage Costs	Reseeding
Milk Quality		
Milk supply profile graph	Thermodurics	Interpreting Milk Recording
Improving protein %	Improving fat %	Correct Milking Practices
Replacements		
Cost of Rearing Heifers	Labour-efficient Calf Rearing	
Big Picture		
Future in Dairying	Expansion Costs/Opportunities	Partnerships
Forward Planning	Simplifying the Farm System	
Goal Setting	Winter vs. Spring Milk	

SAMPLE SHEEP DISCUSSION G	ROUP TOPICS	
Equipment & Facilities		
Lambing Facilities	Calibrating the Fertiliser Spreader	
Farm Business Management		
Sheep Profit Monitor	Tax Management	Office Management
Cash Flow Budget	Computer Training	Dealing with the Bank
Financial Management Course	Other Farm Ventures	Pensions
Saving on Farm Costs		
Labour		
Managing Employees	Time Management	
Health, Safety, and Wellbeing		
Health and Safety Statement	Group Health Check (by professional)	Signs of Burnout and Depression
Dealing with Hard Times	Tips for Maintaining Wellness	
Animal Health & Welfare		
Condition Score Group's Flocks	Lambing Practices	Managing Disease risks at Lambing
Dosing Sheep & Minerals	Animal Welfare Issues	Weaning Management
Cost of Animal Disease	Vaccinations	Flock Health at Grass
Anthelmintic Resistance		
Breeding and Nutrition		
Improve Flock Fertility	Sheep Breed for Future	Winter Feed Plan
Buying Rams using €urostar	Meal Feeding (type/quantity)	Meal/ration for coming year
Late pregnancy Nutrition	Mating Mgmt. & ewe nutrition	Buying/choosing replacements
Mating Ewe Lambs		
Grass and Forage		
Setting up Grazing Infrastructure	Silage Costs	Grass Budget for Spring
Grass budgeting course	Managing Grass Supply	Grass Budget for Autumn
Making Quality Silage	Planning for Catch Crops	Nutrient Planning
Reseeding		
Quality Lamb Production		
Producing lambs to market requirements	Lamb drafting; Creep feeding lambs, managing sale of lambs	Monitoring lamb performance
Big Picture		
Future in Sheep Farming	Simplifying the Farm System	Partnerships
Forward Planning	Goal Setting	

SAMPLE TILLAGE DISCUSSION GROUP TOPICS			
Establishment Systems			
Plough vs. Min Till			
Farm Business Management			
Cash Flow Management	Tax Management	Crop Margins	
Marketing and Storing of Produce	Computer Training	Dealing with the Bank	
Record Keeping	Other Farm Ventures	Pensions	
Labour			
Managing Employees	Time Management	Role of Contractors	
Health, Safety, and Wellbeing			
Health and Safety Statement	Group Health Check (by professional)	Signs of Burnout and Depression	
Dealing with Hard Times	Tips for Maintaining Wellness		
Crop Agronomy			
Role of Rotations	Variety Choice	Seeding rates	
Establishment Rates	Weed Control	Pest Control	
Fungicide Control	Crop Nutrition		
Schemes and Legislation			
DAFM Schemes	Pesticide Legislation	Integrated Pest Management	
Machinery			
Machinery output measurement	Machinery Costs	Sprayer Calibration	

v. Considerations for Session Preparation

As with any farmer event you will use your facilitation and technical 'tool box' to come up with a range of ideas for running the group session. As with any adult learning group, you need to give consideration to how the group of farmers you deal with prefer to learn.

Learning Styles

Outlined below are the three learning styles of adults and the methods you can use to cater for each. A good meeting will offer a number of stimuli and incorporate all three modes. To find the right balance between the three it is worth noting that:

65% of people are visual learners (respond well to visual cues such as pictures, notes and diagrams);

30% are auditory learners (tend to retain information after hearing it); and

5% are kinaesthetic learners (pick things up through touch or imitation).

1. Visual

- · Flip charts of key facts and graphs
- Recording key points/questions on the whiteboard
- · Handouts that give greater detail

2. Auditory

- Get the group involved in discussion using open questions
- If the group is quiet and will not answer your questions suggest they talk to their neighbour and then report back

3. Kinaesthetic (movement/learning by doing)

- Going on farm walk, practicing using a plate meter
- Using the farm as a resource (e.g. counting plant tillers, body condition scoring etc.)



How Group Members Process Information

It is also worth noting that there are differences in how people process information. Some people need to work with data and engage in conversation about it and discuss what it means. Others need to think about the data, listen to discussion and then put the pieces together in their head. In short a group member can be either an external (extrovert) or internal (introvert) processor of information.

This is a key consideration for you in facilitating discussion groups. **Some farmers, by nature, may just be quieter than others.** The challenge for you is to draw these quieter members into the discussion and to have them contribute to the group - the processes and techniques in the following chapters will help you do just that.

How/Why Group Members Want to Learn

For adults, learning occurs best when it is motivated, not forced. Their level of motivation comes from the context, relevance and involvement level in the discussion.

The farmers in the group will ask themselves:

- Why are we looking at this issue?
- · How does it relate to my own farm at home?
- · Could this be immediately useful to me?
- · What does my past experience tell me about this issue?

What this means for you, the facilitator, is that **the purpose of the group** and **the context of each session needs to be clear, understood and agreed** with. And you need to allow farmers the opportunity to contribute and share their viewpoint and past experiences.

vi. Session Preparation Worksheet

The work to this point provides you with the necessary background information that will enable you to run a discussion group meeting. Now ask yourself 'What can I do to bring an interesting angle to this topic? What are the issues and what can I do to prepare for that?'

TOP TIP: Reach out

Your fellow advisors and specialists are a rich source of experience and expertise. Don't be afraid to consult with them on ideas and approaches they've used in the past.



In order to remain focused, carry on a worthwhile debate, and arrive at a conclusion or summary, you must plan in advance. The Session Preparation Worksheet is a practical guide to help you develop an effective discussion group session based around the issues identified on the farm or other timely topic that the group would like to discuss.

A blank copy of the worksheet is supplied in the appendices section of the handbook

TOP TIP: 'Fail to Prepare, Prepare to Fail'

Research in Ireland and abroad has shown that advisors feel the facilitation of farmer discussion groups requires a combination of roles.

Apart from facilitation alone, technical knowledge plays a part. When you've decided on the topic of discussion, do some background reading and familiarise yourself with the key research findings in that particular area.



Session Preparation Worksheet

<i>y</i> -	
m	Instructions
Торіс	Write down the broad topic. Then break this down into one or several specific objectives to tease out the issues.
Objective	Decide what you are going to do. This must be very specific to stay focused and to get an end result. It may be beneficial to write this on the flip-chart, but at the very least, spell it out to your audience.
Plan of Action	How are you going to do it? Write down all the issues that need addressing, where you will do it e.g. various locations of the farm etc. What back up data, charts, props etc. will you also require?
Opening Statement	 Gain attention. Arouse interest. Stimulate a response related to the objective that you are trying to achieve. It can be factual or radical but it must relate to the objective.
Questions / Enquiry	 Where possible avoid closed questions i.e. questions that allow you to reply 'yes' or 'no'. Such answers rarely promote good group discussion. Use open questions to stimulate conversation by demanding a more detailed answer. Preparing some of these in advance will help immensely. The very first question is crucial as this sets the whole session on the right or wrong foot.
Summary	 Emphasise the message. Sum up what action is to be taken by the host farmer/group. Warning: while you will get greater buy in from the group if you ask the chairman or another member of the group to summarise, alert them in advance. Make sure that you know what they are going to give as the summary

before they tell the rest of the group!

The following two pages demonstrate examples of completed Session Preparation Worksheets for dairy and drystock respectively.



Торіс	Labour reduction on dairy farms.
Objective	To examine options to improve time management on dairy farms and establish time group members spend on various tasks. This session will take 20 minutes.
Plan of Action	Review main findings of Moorepark Labour Survey. List labour-saving techniques / practices / equipment and their associated costs. Have self-assessment labour audit worksheet for each farm. Have flipchart ready.
Opening Statement	Average herd size is increasing – is labour / work routine being modified at the same pace. If not, system becomes unsustainable. How can larger herd sizes become sustainable?
Questions / Enquiry	What are symptoms of poor time management? What corrective actions are normally taken? Any suggestions for better time management? Which of these are: • Time planning? • Time saving? • Work substitution? How can you decide which areas you need to focus on?
Summary	As cow numbers increase on farms – labour efficiency must also increase. All of these areas outlined will improve labour efficiency. To identify which areas are relevant – every farmer must complete a labour audit of their own farm. The group have agreed to complete a labour audit of each farm and send to the facilitator in advance of the next meeting.



Торіс	Liver Fluke in beef cattle
Objective	To look at ways of reducing the fluke burden on finishing beef cattle 20 minute session.
Plan of Action	Review main findings on fluke research from Grange/AHI etc.
	List ways of detecting/ treating/ avoiding liver fluke.
	Go through farmer's post-mortem report from factory.
Opening Statement	With wet summers occurring more frequently the threat of liver fluke is higher than ever. 50% of livers were condemned in factories last year. How do we make sure it doesn't affect our farms?
Questions / Enquiry	What impact has liver fluke on the farm business?
	How can we find out if we have a fluke problem?
	What do you normally do to prevent and/or treat it?
	What products should we use?
	Any suggestions what [John Farmer] could do differently?
Summary	All measures outlined will help reduce fluke problem on the farm.
	Know what you're dealing with - use the right product at the right time.
	The group have agreed to carry out faecal egg testing on a sample of their stock before the next meeting.



of The Discussion Group Meeting

The last chapter detailed how best to prepare for the discussion group meeting in terms of dealing with the host farmer and selecting and structuring discussion topics. The next task is to facilitate the discussion group meeting itself.

This section looks at the key considerations involved and will provide you with ways to structure and facilitate the session. These will help you capitalise on the depth of knowledge and experience that exists within the group and have a worthwhile and meaningful discussion that benefits group members. Basic as it seems, doing so will support 'peer-to-peer learning' – the fundamental principle which underpins the discussion group model.

i. Designing the Day

There are a number of factors that can influence what structure you decide to choose for your group meeting:

- · Time of year weather conditions.
- · Time of day daylight.
- Purpose of meeting. (eg. Profit Monitor analysis meetings will most likely be indoors).
- Guest speaker allocate a slot or incorporate into the discussion throughout the day.

As a general guide the following page illustrates an example of a typical meeting design, where the meeting is split between indoor sessions in the shed and outdoor sessions in the field/yard.

TOP TIP: International Lessons

Interestingly host farmers in New Zealand often offer tea before the discussion group meeting commences.

Facilitators feel that it serves as an ice breaker and promotes interaction among farmers, after which they tend to get involved in the discussion earlier.





Start

Arrive at least 30 mins early to ensure venue is set up correctly

		Introduction		
Follow up with last host farmer	Whip Around (*See note)	Overview of farm, objectives and outcomes of the day	Outline structure and timeframe	Ask group if there are any other topics they want discussed
Beware of using too much time here	Info needs to be relevant and valid			Allow time for this at some point during the day

Host Farmer

Ask host farmer to give overview of the farm business and outline what they want out of the day.

Refer to Host Farm Summary Sheet

Discussion

Discussion around issues and options with group members

Farm Walk

At least two stops

Avoid standing in one place for too long

Wrap-Up

Conclude discussion around options, issues and group recommendations. Summarize and agree actions.

Issue details of next meeting

(Adapted from DairyNZ Discussion Group Guide)

ii. Venue on the Farm

Discussion group effectiveness will be reduced if people are not comfortable. Decide in the pre-visit the location for the 'sit-down' part of the meeting. A few ideas to consider:



- Liaise with farmer to find a suitable space (decide this in good time as it may mean cleaning out a shed before the meeting).
- Seating is essential, ideally in a horseshoe shape. Bales of straw can work well if no seats available.
- · Avoid noise from tractors, calves, lambs, bulk tank, automatic scrapers etc.
- · Ensure dogs are not a distraction.

iii. Resources

The basic set of resources needed includes:

- · Flipchart.
- · Hand-outs.
- · Calculator.
- · White board.
- · Pens.



Depending on the specific discussion topic in question you may require, for example:

- · Clippers, scales, and quadrat.
- Farmer/Group Reports EBI, €urostar, Profit Monitor, Soil Analysis, Silage Analysis etc.

iv. Facilitating the Indoor SessionProcedure for facilitating a session/topic

Use the simple five point procedure below when facilitating a session. Carry out each step as described and you will be well on your way to running an effective discussion:



OBJECTIVE

Decide what you are going to do



PLAN

How are you going to do it?



OPENING

Gain attention & arouse interest Should relate to the business



ENQUIRY

Avoid closed questions



SUMMARY

To emphasise message
To conclude what action is to be taken

Facilitation Processes and Techniques (Adapted from DairyNZ)

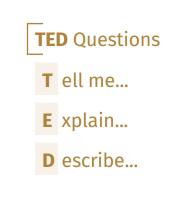
Four simple techniques and processes that can be used are:

1. Open Questioning

Questions that encourage farmers to share their views.

OPEN QUES	TIONS
Who	
What	
When	Demand
Where	detailed
Why	answers
How	
If	

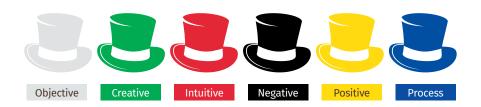
CLOSED QU	ESTIONS
Do you	
Would you	Yes
Could you	or No
Are you	



2. DeBono's Six Hats

- White hat information and facts (e.g. what are the scientific facts we know?)
- Green hat creative ideas (e.g. could we do this a different way?)
- Red hat feelings, intuition (e.g. what is your gut feel on this project?)
- Black hat logical negative (e.g. why will this not work?)
- · Yellow hat logical positive (e.g. if this works what are the benefits)
- Blue hat overview and process (e.g. what is the next step?)

Allocate a time slot per hat. You might only choose to use a few of these hats, e.g. three of four colours.



3. H-Forms

Draw a large H on a flip chart. In the top part of the H write the question you want answered. (i.e. How well do John and Mary manage grass on the farm?) The cross bar represents a scale from one to ten. Ask the group to rank where they think John and Mary's grassland management is now and mark on the cross bar. On the right side of the H write positives and on the left negatives, and in the bottom part of the H record suggested improvements.



HOW WELL DO YOU RATE GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT ON THIS FARM?

Negatives (Why did you not give it 10?)

No reseeding in last 2 years Low soil pH Not measuring grass

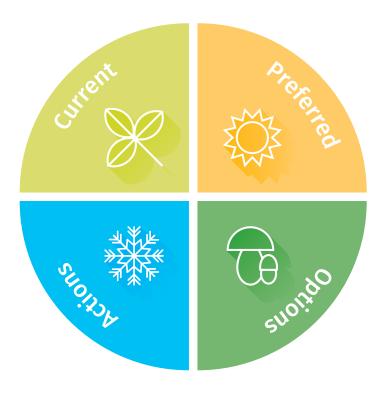
Group agreed score (Out of 10) 6 Suggestions for Improvement Spread lime on target fields Reseed 10% every year Start measuring grass

Positives (Why did you not give it 0?)

Potential to grow more grass Soil testing regularly Farm divided into paddocks

4. Four Seasons

This four step process for working with groups is a simple yet effective template that can be used in a number of scenarios. It is particularly effective when focusing on a particular situation or issue on the host farm.



The process is most effective if each of the four steps is followed (i.e. Group options and recommendations may not be relevant to the host farmer if members are not firstly made aware of what the ideal scenario is. Likewise a list of options, although useful, is much more effective if it is followed by a number of actions).

v. Facilitating in the Field

One of the key components of a farmer discussion group is the session in the field. Farmers want to come and observe, and discuss key issues of their farm business. One of the difficulties for you, the facilitator, is to leave the comfort of the flip chart and head out to the field. Some days the field session will be alive with great ideas and discussion and other days the session can be flat. Problems include:

- · Group unresponsive.
- · Lack of energy.
- · Host farmer quiet.

To help overcome these **Simon Sankey (DairyNZ Regional Team Coach)** has developed a range of processes and techniques that can be used to supplement your own 'toolbox' of questions. An Irish farmer example is used to help illustrate each.

Farmer John

John is a beef farmer finishing 100 Angus-x-Friesian bulls every year at 24 months of age.

At the pre-visit, John stated that his meal bill is very high compared to some of the other members in the group. He would like to get more grass into the diet and reduce meal costs.



1. Facilitation Process

'Four Seasons'

As previously outline on Pg62 this facilitation process has four steps that form the basis for your discussion group session:

Farmer example with John:

Step 1: "John what is your current situation?"

- · Performance at grass not as good as other farmers in the group
- · Cattle are normally set-stocked
- · Finding it hard to manage grass

Step 2: "John what would be the ideal scenario for you?"

- · Better daily weight gains
- · Be able to kill cattle earlier
- · Kill cattle off grass

Step 3: "What are the options for John?"

- · Divide existing fields up into paddocks
- · Put in more drinkers

Step 4: "What are the actions he needs to take from here?"

- · Consult with advisor to map out paddocks
- · Purchase materials for fencing and water system
- · Consider grass measuring & budgeting



2. Facilitation Techniques

1. Interview host farmer in the field



This is one of the most common techniques used in the field. Problems can often occur when the advisor asks a question and the farmer gives a short answer. Another question is asked and the farmer gives back another short answer, and so on.

To counteract this the **Questionning Funnel** technique can be used to get a more detailed response from the host farmer.

Farmer example with John:



- · "What do you think the issue is?"
- · "When and why did you decide things need to change?"
- "Who might be able to support you in the process and what do they bring to the table?"
- "Which actions do you consider to be the most important?"

2. Discussion Tree

All advisors have at some stage asked a group a question and received silence as an answer. The Discussion Tree technique can be used to force other farmers to share their ideas, opinions and what actions they would consider.

"What is happening on your farm in relation to this situation?

"What options did you consider?"

"What actions did you decide to take?"

"If you were in this situation on this farm what options and actions would you choose?"





"Before we get to John's situation, Tom can we focus on you for a minute?"

"Tom what is the situation with grass on your farm?"

"What options had you and what changes did you implement?"

"What were the key reasons for it's success?"

"If John's farm was your farm, what three things would you consider and

"Which ones would you do first?"

implement?"

3. Hard Facts and Science 'Hit'

This is where the value of familiarising yourself with the research findings in the area of discussion comes to the fore. Hitting a group between the eyes with cold hard facts and/or research findings can create energy and lead to action.



A technique for this can be:

- 1. "Research shows that A + B = C"
- 2. "How does this relate to this situation?"
- 3. "Do we believe that the science is wrong? Why would we make changes due to the facts?"

Farmer example with John:

- 1. "If we look at the research, cattle can potentially gain up to 40kg liveweight more in a paddock system compared to set-stocking as a result of extended grazing season and having highly digestible grass ahead of the cattle at all times."
- 2. "In that case do you think the cost of setting up the paddocks would be justified?"
- 3. "Do we agree that its worth doing? If not why so?"



4. The Scenario

Building a scenario can help farmers comment on a situation in a non-judgemental way (easier to criticise someone they don't know). The key is to build a situation that they can relate to easily and it is not outside the bounds of possibility.

- 1. "Recently I have been on a farm where the following was happening...."
- 2. "What are your...
 - Immediate thoughts?"
 - Burning questions you would ask the farmer?"
 - Considerations?"
 - Actions you would take?"

Farmer example with John:

"I was on a farm recently and this was the situation.."

... The farmer had 20 suckler cows set-stocked on 50ac with only 5 field divisions. His only option to control the sward from going stemmy was to top the grass after the cows.

"The questions I ask you are...

- How worried would you be in this scenario?
- What does he need to do?
- What would be the first steps?

You could also use an industry scenario...

"What would happen if the factory announced next month that they would stop taking bulls over 20 months of age?"





5. The Grenade

The 'grenade' is a question or statement that provokes an immediate and emotional response from the group (usually negative).

You should exercise caution with this technique. If over used it can focus the energy it creates on the facilitator as opposed to the discussion. It is best done with a smile and a sense of humour.

Farmer example with John:



"If we're promoting Ireland as a green producer of beef would it be fair to assume that all cattle should be fed a grass based diet with no meal?"

Linked questions could be:

- "Why are we disagreeing?"
- "Could it be done?"

6. Summarising and focusing actions for the host farmer

The summary session in the field can be useful to outline the actions that the host farmer is going to take. The technique can be as simple as:

"What we heard in the discussion was this"

 \downarrow

"The key actions and options where these"

 \downarrow

"As for the host farmer which ones would you implement?"

.1.

"When and how would you implement them?"

Farmer example with John:



"Great discussion and a lot of valid points were raised"

 \downarrow

"The 3 key areas for John to focus on were..":

1. Divide fields into paddocks.

2. Avoid meal supplementation at grass.

3. Get cattle out to grass in February and finish off grass in Sept/Oct/Nov.

 \downarrow

"So John how would you go about making these changes?"

"What are your concerns/barriers to implementing them?"

 \downarrow

"If we came back next month, what would we see and what would be put in place?"

 \downarrow

"What will be in place this time next year?"

7. Create a Debate

A debate can create instant energy in the group. It can be used in the yard or in the field. The key considerations are:

- · Clarity on the topic.
- · That ground rules are made clear.
- That it doesn't get personal.
- · Do you make it a group debatae or individual debate.

Farmer example with John:

"We have a range of views with some of the group saying that John would be better off killing the bulls at 16 months and others saying he should kill them at 18 months"



"With that in mind, I would like to split the group in two to debate each side of the argument"



"I will give two minutes to discuss then as a group you need to come back and outline your argument. After that you will get a chance to pull apart the other groups argument."





For more facilitation
tips and techniques see
Appendix I:
Sankey's Ideas
for Working with
Groups: Facilitation
& Participation
Techniques

vi. Summarising group Recommendations and Actions

At the end of the meeting, it is crucial to bring all the information together into concise conclusions, recommendations and actions. Many of the conclusions will be self-evident from the previous discussion but it is important to capture these points on one or two flip chart pages.

Summarise Key Recommendations and Actions

- 1. To start off the session, you should refer back to the group / farmer objectives for the day e.g. 'remember John and Mary's objective for today was to get help in identifying the benefits of paddock grazing and what steps they need to take to do this. How do you think they should address these and other issues outlined?'
- 2. The following are options for generating the group recommendations and actions. To bring some variation to your sessions you could pick and choose between a number of these:
 - get groups to record ideas and then sort into themes.
 - get pairs to discuss what they would do and prioritise their top three actions.
 - give specific groups individual topics to focus on and report back.
 - record actions on the whiteboard straight from group.
 - break group into smaller groups, then get top two points from each group.
 - based on the previous discussion, gaining agreement from the group and host farmer as you go.
 - or two key farmers to summarise and then throw open the group for additional points.
 - **3.** Record main points.
- **4.** You should summarise by paraphrasing what the group has suggested and add in any other key points they think have been missed or need emphasising. You should also summarise the key points about any seasonal or topical subjects.
- **5.** Ask host farmer to briefly comment on what they think of the recommendations, and any they may look to implement immediately this will help achieve more commitment to action.

TOP TIP:

Go a step further and ask the group to outline what the farmer has to do; (i) over the next week; (ii) the next month, and; (iii) the next year to make the recommended changes and bring about the desired improvements.

"It's not just about

motion."

providing the information

to make change, it's about

putting the process into

Handy Hints:

- Include some key strengths or positive messages in the summary.
- Ensure take-home messages are clear and factually correct.
- It may be useful to use the CRC method: Commend, Recommend, Commend.
- Conclusions should be relevant to the host farmer and other farmers attending the group.

vii. The Action Plan

Getting the host farmer to act on the recommendations of the group is regarded as one of the major challenges of discussion group facilitators. It can often lead to frustration among group members.

The Action Plan concept developed by DairyNZ aims to address this issue by providing the farmer with a clear and concise direction towards positive change. It also serves as a reference for the farmer and advisor to review progress in the months after the meeting.

You can simply transfer the recommendations to the Teagasc Farm Advice Summary Book and add any further suggestions you might have. Be as specific as possible with the action plan, and include the following:

1. Key Strengths:

Highlight two or three key strengths of the farmer and the farm business. (Positive comments)



2. Key agreed recommendations:

Discuss recommendations with host. Decide two or three key agreed recommendations. You will also need to discuss areas of disagreement for clarification.



- 3. For each recommendation you can record appropriate actions. Some may be long term, some may be immediate:
- What needs to happen?
- Timelines. When will this be started and finished?



You can leave a handwritten carbon copy of this plan with the farmer or alternatively email/post a typed version to the farmer within a week.



Action Plan

Farmer Name: John Farmer **Date:** 15th March

Autumn-Calving Suckler Calf to Weanling enterprise

Key Strengths:

- Great ambition. Wants to progress the farm and is willing to adopt new technologies.
- Good paddock system in place
- Plenty of grass on the farm at present just needs to be managed better.

	AGREED RECOMMENDATIONS	ASSOCIATED ACTIONS
1	Make better use of grass	Higher stocking rate in paddocks. (more stock or smaller paddock sizes). More drinkers to allow paddocks to be split. Consider grass measuring to help manage grass better.
2	Reduce cost of keeping cows	Allow out to grass next week weather permitting. Stop meal feeding at grass.
3	Better calf performance	Allow calves access to paddock beside the shed immediately. Graze ahead of the cows using creep gate or raised electric fence. Weigh calves to monitor growth rates.



Post-Meeting:Reflection

The concept of reflective practice, (also known as self-reflection) is widely recognised as the foundation of lifelong learning and continuous development. Reflective practice is centered around the theory that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; but that deliberate reflection on experience does. Often overlooked, it is a critical step in improving yourself as a facilitator.

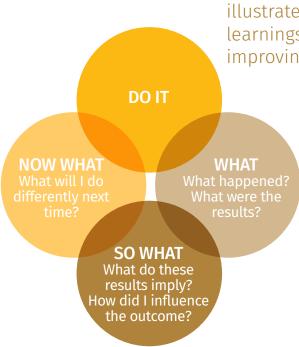
After you have facilitated the discussion group meeting it is recommended that you reflect on how it went. There are a number of ways you can find out how you perform as a facilitator and the impact it has:

1. Feedback from a fellow advisor;

2.Self-review; and

3. Participant feedback.

Reflective practice is a continuous process (as illustrated below). The key is to ensure that learnings from your last meeting goes towards improving your performance at the next one.



Feedback from a Colleague

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, facilitating a group isn't unlike playing in a football match or taking part in a race. You can get immersed or caught up in the moment and may not be aware of other things going on around you. The great sports teams, boxers, jockeys, race drivers – they all take time after each match or race to reflect on their performance, either through feedback from coaches, video analysis, or simply recalling in their own minds. Their reason - to learn from their mistakes and ensure they don't happen the next time.

Like in a match or race a lot of things happen simultaneously in a discussion group, and the reality is that it's hard to track everything. Regardless if you're a new or experienced advisor, it can be a great idea to ask a fellow advisor to co-facilitate with you from time to time and watch how you perform. A frank and honest debrief after the meeting can make you mindful of things you weren't previously aware of.

Self-Reflection

Reflection can be as simple as asking yourself a few basic questions:

- → Was I well prepared for the meeting today?
- → Did I accomplish what I set out to do?
- → What did I do well and why was it effective?
- → What could I have done better and how can I accomplish that the next day?
- → What did I myself learn from the farmers today?

A custom-made **facilitator self-reflection form** is included on the next page. Try filling out one after each of your next few meetings and you should start to see an improvement in your awareness an

start to see an improvement in your awareness and in how you facilitate the group.



The third form of feedback is from the farmers themselves. Techniques for getting farmer opinions on what worked during the last meeting and what didn't include:

- → Ask the group directly at the end of the meeting.
- → Groups members text chairperson their feedback. He/she calls you within a day of the meeting to discuss the opinions within the group.
- → Ask the group to complete a feedback form. See Participant Feedback Form in the appendices section as an example.



Discussion Group Facilitation Self-Reflection Form Credit: F

Credit: Pat Clarke, Teagasc

Name	Date		
Meeting structure Did I		Yes/N	lo
Start and finish the session on time? Outline clear objective(s) at the start of the meeting? Hold the meeting as scheduled on the group's annual plan? Adequately prepare for today's meeting?)		
My contribution Did I		Yes/N	lo
Spend less time talking than the group members (< 30% of Have a number of questions (3 – 4 suggested) prepared for Get the relevant information from group members? Encourage all farmers to contribute during the meeting?	_	'Yes')?	
Rate your satisfaction with your performance und	der the follow Very satisfied	•	ngs Could be improved/ dissatisfied
My use of closed and open questions			
My role in ensuring that the discussion wasn't dominated by 2/3 people			
My role in the provision of a comfortable environment (layout, location, etc.)			
My use of body language (non-verbal) and tone My listening skills			
My ability to keep the meeting running smoothly My approach to handling conflict at today's meeting			
My use of the group chairperson during the meeting			
My method for checking farmer/ group understanding			
My ability to get group members to reach a decision at the end of the discussion on each objective			
My overall summary			
My report to the host farmer following the meeting			
What went well?			
What didn't work well?			

Note: Total of 20 questions/ statements

- → ≥16 ('Yes' or' very satisfied') keep up the good work!
- → 12 16 you need to plan carefully for your next group meeting.
- \rightarrow < 12 you need to work on your facilitation skills.



09 Appendices

i. Simon Sankey's Ideas for Working with Groups: Facilitation & Participation Techniques

Encouraging Participation in Groups

Rounds

Whip arounds at discussion groups, introductions, quick comment. Use an egg timer or limit time if you want to keep pace.

Continuums

Can be used to get people to vote (Strongly agree on one end, strongly disagree on the other), Assess a view on a range (What is the residual in this paddock? 1300 on this end, 1800 on the other), Indication on experience (Get in order of the number of years of experience in farming).

Four corners

Establish four segments that people might group themselves in. Can lead to discussion with likeminded or people in a similar situation. Example: Succession Planning: 1. 'I feel prepared', 2. 'I feel like I need more information', 3. 'Limited understanding', 4. 'Don't know'.

Encouraging Interaction with Others or Meeting New People

Number off

Break people up that came together leading to small group discussion with a mixed group of participants.

Assign groups

Group participants prior to the event based on known information about them and how well they work together, break a large group into a smaller groups and assign a 'job' or discussion topic, follow on from a continuum based on experience.

Small group work/discussions

People are more comfortable sharing or contributing in smaller groups. This technique can be useful if one or a couple of people in the group dominate the discussion. It is also an opportunity to speed up discussion if small groups are assigned different topics so they are discussed simultaneously. The group can then report back on what was discussed/concluded.

Managing Difficult People or People/Groups Going off Topic

Parking lots

Capture questions or discussion points that are off topic, need further exploration or beyond your knowledge and 'park' them to be discussed at the end of the meeting, explored at the next meeting, or followed up individually.

Techniques for Discussion and Analysis

Brainstorming

Blue sky thinking, capturing any possible idea, encourages creativity, anything goes.

Storyboarding

Group post-it notes. Get participants to write ideas on post-it notes, group common themes together, identify most common responses or highest priorities.

Open Questions

How, When, What, Why, Where. Stimulate people to describe or explain rather than just Yes/No answers.

· Post-it Note Planning

Brainstorm and then timeline. Can be useful for preparing for an event. Example: Have participants brainstorm ideas on separate post-it notes. After ideas are captured put activities in order that they would need to be completed to achieve an outcome. This might be useful for seasonal issues like planning for calving, preparing for a wet autumn, winter crop management, or employing a new staff member.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats. Help analyse a situation with a balanced view. Strengths should offset threats while opportunities should offset weaknesses.

T Charts

Pro/Con lists. Helps evaluate a balance of strengths and weaknesses of an idea or option to be actioned. Multiple small groups can be assigned to completing pro/con lists for a variety of options and possibilities.

PMI (Plus, Minus, Interesting)

A technique developed by Edward de Bono. A variation on a Pro/Con list but with the addition of discussing what 'interesting' issues are raised by the option/action. The technique better allows new possibilities to be explored.

The 4 Ws and How analysis

Ask these questions: What happened? Where did it take place? When did it take place? Why did it happen? and How did it happen? Useful to explore conflict, evaluate actions and discuss a process/approach.

Five Whys

The idea is that by asking a why question five times you'll be able to get to the root cause of a problem. Example: An employee was late for work. Why did it happen? Employee overslept. Why did they oversleep? They haven't been sleeping well. Why haven't they been sleeping well? Etc...

• Brainwriting 6-3-5

This is a variation on brainstorming where participants come up with three new ideas within five minutes and the cycle is run six times. The idea is that by giving a fixed amount of time participants know they are working to an end point but going for thirty minutes. It's longer than a typical brainstorming session but the outcome is meant to be a greater number of ideas that are more creative than the absence of structure might give.

Reverse Debate

Get group participants to argue the opposite of their position or belief. It is meant to force consideration of another point of view or better understand the defence of their current position.

C&S (Consequence and Sequel)

A process that is meant to assess Immediate, Short, Medium, and Long Term consequences. Based on an idea or proposal what might be the consequences of that action and what might happen next (sequel). They might be good, bad, or neutral, however all of them are relevant.

APC (Alternatives, Possibilities and Choices)

Presented with an idea or option what are the alternatives to it, the possibilities it creates or the other choices it presents?

ii.Session Preparation Worksheet

TOPIC	
OBJECTIVE	
PLAN OF ACTION	
OPENING STATEMENT	
QUESTIONS / ENQUIRY	
SUMMARY	

iii. Facilitator Cue Card

TART

- Welcome farmers
- Introduce members
- Explain your role
- Clarify session goals
- Explain plan of meeting

OURING

- Check the purpose
- Check the process
- Check the pace
- Maintain group environment

ON.

- Summarise discussions
- Clarify decisions
- Create action plans
- Help create next agenda
- · Clarify follow-up process
- Evaluate the session

Remember

Stay neutral

Listen actively

Ask questions

Paraphrase

Provide summaries

Conflict Management

Vent concerns and feelings

Solve problems

Toolkit

Whip around

Brainstorming

H-Forms

Four Seasons

SWAT

iv. IAF Facilitator Competencies

Create Collaborative Client Relationships

A1. Develop working partnerships

- · Clarify mutual commitment
- · Develop consensus on tasks, deliverables, roles & responsibilities
- · Demonstrate collaborative values and processes such as co-facilitation

A2. Design and customize applications to meet client needs

- · Analyse organisational environment
- · Diagnose client need
- · Create appropriate designs to achieve intended outcomes
- · Predefine a quality product & outcomes with client

A3. Manage multi-session events effectively

- · Contract with client for scope and deliverables
- · Develop event plan
- · Deliver event successfully
- · Assess or evaluate client satisfaction at all stages of the event or project

Plan Appropriate Group Processes

B1. Select clear methods and processes that:

- · Foster open participation with respect for client culture, norms and participant diversity
- · Engage the participation of those with varied learning or thinking styles
- · Achieve a high quality product or outcome that meets the client needs

B2. Prepare time and space to support group process

- · Arrange physical space to support the purpose of the meeting
- · Plan effective use of time
- · Provide effective atmosphere and drama for sessions

Create and Sustain a Participatory Environment

C1. Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills

- Apply a variety of participatory processes
- · Demonstrate effective verbal communication skills
- Develop rapport with participants
- · Practice active listening
- · Demonstrate ability to observe and provide feedback to participants

C2. Honour and recognise diversity, ensuring inclusiveness

- Encourage positive regard for the experience and perception of all participants
- Create a climate of safety and trust
- · Create opportunities for participants to benefit from the diversity of the group
- · Cultivate cultural awareness and sensitivity

C3. Manage group conflict

- · Help individuals identify and review underlying assumptions
- Recognise conflict and its role within group learning / maturity
- · Provide a safe environment for conflict to surface
- · Manage disruptive group behaviour
- · Support the group through resolution of conflict

C4. Evoke group creativity

- · Draw out participants of all learning/thinking styles
- · Encourage creative thinking
- · Accept all ideas
- · Use approaches that best fit needs and abilities of the group
- · Stimulate and tap group energy

Guide Group to Appropriate and Useful Outcomes

D1. Guide the group with clear methods and processes

- · Establish clear context for the session
- · Actively listen, question and summarise to elicit the sense of the group
- Recognise tangents and redirect to the task
- · Manage small and large group process

D2. Facilitate group self-awareness about its task

- · Vary the pace of activities according to needs of group
- · Identify information the group needs, and draw out data and insight from the group
- · Help the group synthesize patterns, trends, root causes, frameworks for action
- · Assist the group in reflection on its experience

D3. Guide the group to consensus and desired outcomes

- · Use a variety of approaches to achieve group consensus
- · Use a variety of approaches to meet group objectives
- Adapt processes to changing situations and needs of the group
- · Assess and communicate group progress
- · Foster task completion

Build and Maintain Professional Knowledge

E1. Maintain a base of knowledge

- Be knowledgeable in management, organizational systems and development, group development, psychology, and conflict resolution
- Understand dynamics of change
- · Understand learning/ thinking theory

E2. Know a range of facilitation methods

- · Understand problem solving and decision-making models
- · Understand a variety of group methods and techniques
- · Know consequences of misuse of group methods
- · Distinguish process from task and content
- · Learn new processes, methods, & models in support of client's changing/emerging needs

E3. Maintain professional standing

- Engage in ongoing study / learning related to our field
- · Continuously gain awareness of new information in our profession
- · Practice reflection and learning
- · Build personal industry knowledge and networks
- Maintain certification

Model Positive Professional Attitude

F1. Practice self-assessment and self-awareness

- Reflect on behaviour and results
- · Maintain congruence between actions and personal and professional values
- · Modify personal behaviour / style to reflect the needs of the group
- · Cultivate understanding of one's own values and their potential impact on work with clients

F2. Act with integrity

- Demonstrate a belief in the group and its possibilities
- · Approach situations with authenticity and a positive attitude
- · Describe situations as facilitator sees them and inquire into different views
- Model professional boundaries and ethics (as described in the IAF's Statement of Values and Code of Ethics)

F3. Trust group potential and model neutrality

- · Honour the wisdom of the group
- Encourage trust in the capacity and experience of others
- · Vigilant to minimise influence on group outcomes
- · Maintain an objective, non-defensive, non-judgmental stance

(Available https://www.iaf-world.org/site/professional/core-competencies)

v. Facilitator Competency Framework (National College for Teaching and Leadership)

Competency/level	Effective	Highly effective	Advanced
Emotional self-awareness	Understands the connection between what is happening and the emotions they are feeling.	Able to describe how own feelings affect own actions.	Can describe underlying reasons for those feeling
Accurate self-assessment	Is open to positive and critical feedback and seeks clarification when necessary	Doesn't take self too seriously, is able to be light-hearted about their capabilities.	Seeks positive and negative feedback from a range of sources.
Self-confidence	Is open to challenge and able to use this to generate learning for others.	Appropriately challenges participants.	Has 'presence' so that people want to listen.
Emotional self-control	Demonstrates patience in challenging circumstances.	Responds calmly to challenge and emotional situations.	Stays composed and positive in stressful situations.
Achievement orientation	Sets measurable and challenging goals.	Anticipates and deals with potential obstacles to achieving goals.	Takes calculated risks to reach goals.
Adaptability	Adapts to situation by applying standard procedures flexibly.	Adapts in the moment by smoothly juggling multiple demands. Can tolerate ambiguity and manage complexity.	Adapts overall strategy, goals and plans to fit the situation and to cope with unexpected events or occurences.
Empathy	Accurately reads moods and feelings, drawing on verbal/non-verbal cues to understand their needs.	Accords respect and relates well, to people of diverse backgrounds, showing awareness of their uniqueness as individuals.	See things from others perspectives and uses these differing viewpoints to extend or deepen learning and understanding.
Contextual awareness	Understands the values and culture of the group and their work organisations, and uses this to promote learning. Recognises similarity of conditions under which behaviour occurs.	Understands the dynamics of the group/wider organisational context and can create hypotheses of cause and effect in behaviour.	Observes or challenges the prevailing culture, values, norms and unspoken rules of the group when necessary to generate learning. Can name and elaborate themes and patterns of behaviour for the group.

Competency/level	Effective	Highly effective	Advanced
Partnering	Supports and expresses positive regard and respect for partner's work. Seeks their input and values their contributions.	Works as a team to respond to group needs and create the right learning environment.	Generates coherence within the programme or learning event from a variety of contributions to create the sense of a holistic learning experience.
Developing others	Creates a safe environment to provide others with opportunities to learn and practise new skills and capabilities whilst maintaining warmth and neutrality on an unconditional basis.	Generates timely, individual and specific behavioural feedback on what is done well and where there is opportunity for further improvement. Offers encouragement, affirmation and challenge. But does not take over and offer the solution.	Helps and encourages others to create their own learning strategies and partnerships. Persists in declining to take ownership while supporting others to the point where they resolve the issue and evaluate the outcome for themselves.
Group management	Helps the group establish and maintain group norms and protocols.	Works flexibly with the content of the programme to meet the learning needs of the moment, and those of individuals.	Balances the diverse learning needs of individuals, ensuring that everyone has appropriate opportunity to ask questions and make their contributions.
Enquiry strategies	Probes for the meaning of questions to clarify the learning need and to open up the possibility that individuals will discover their own answers.	Probes for underlying concerns issues associated with questions and comments.	Formulates and applies a strategy of enquiry to enable individuals to explore issues and develop insight.
Designing learning experiences	At this level a facilitator plans a learning experience that incorporates all elements (pre, during and post session or online activity) as the foundation of learning.	Builds flexibility into the design (while guaranteeing the integrity of the programme) to allow emerging needs to be accommodated.	The design includes planning for learning and development to continue beyond the event.

vi. Assessment Sheet for Discussion Groups: Guide for Facilitators

This assessment sheet, developed by Dr. Aine Macken Walsh, Teagasc Athenry, is designed to assist you to facilitate a structured conversation about how your group is functioning and how it might function better.

The sheet is divided into five components, which correspond to five key ingredients for successful discussion groups. These key ingredients were identified through research undertaken in Ireland and are consistent with research findings internationally in relation to how groups function at their best.

How to use the sheet:

- i. Distribute the appraisal and reflection sheet to group participants.
- ii. Under each of the five components below, question(s) that you can use to prompt appraisal and reflection within your group are listed. Pose the questions to the group and ask them which of the three answer choices they think is true
- iii. Members may identify with more than one answer, which is perfectly reasonable
- iv. Ask the probing questions suggested in brackets beneath each of the answer choices— or your own probing questions to understand their answer choice(s)
- v. Observe the insights and recommendations for improvement
- vi. Refer where necessary to the facilitation tips provided in 'Discussion Groups: Five Ingredients for Success' in order to troubleshoot any issues that need addressing

vii. Discussion Group Assessment Sheet

1.1 Do you have shared goals in this group and how compatible are members' goals?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Members have d (such as?)	Members have different goals (such as?)		We have some similar goals (such as?)		le goals e?)

1.2 Do you always know when meetings take place and is there good attendance?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Sometimes (why do you thi	Sometimes (why do you think this is?)		Most of the time (how could we improve?)		ink this is?)

2.1 Do you feel comfortable talking truthfully in the group?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Some people do comfortable sha (any reasons wh	aring	Most members comfortable, m (but not when	ost of the time	Yes, we all feel sharing (any ideas why	

2.2 Do you think people feel comfortable giving and taking 'helpful criticism' within the group?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Sometimes men offended by oth give an example might happen	e of how that	There's a challe mostly positive (Any ideas on h improve?)	atmosphere	We readily give helpful criticis (can you give a	m

3.1 Are the meetings enjoyable to attend?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Sometimes (particularly when	?)	Most of the time (but not when?		Always very er (any ideas for the meetings s	helping to keep

4.1 In this group, do members subscribe to the motto 'all for one and one for all' – do you provide help and assistance to each other when needed?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Sometimes (a typical examp that help might		Most of the tim (a typical exam that help migh	ple of how	Always (a typical exan that help migh	

4.2 If you were to pick one word to describe this group, what would it be?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Difficult to pick describe group share any comm ambitions?)	(Ok do you	Word that is no positive (Do you ideas on how w improve?)	u have any	Word that is po have any ideas might keep tha	on how we

5.1 A focus on feedback on the facilitation of the group: how satisfied are you with the current approach to facilitation?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Not satisfied wit approach (can y why identify s for improvemen	ou explain uggestions	Satisfied (can y why identify for improveme	suggestions	Very satisfied (you explain wh identify sugge: improvement?	ny stions for

5.2 Can you give examples of a very well facilitated meeting or event that you attended (not necessarily in this group)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 Low appreciation of the Moderate appreciation of the High appreciation of the benefits of good facilitation benefits of good facilitation benefits of good facilitation (What do you think are (What do you think are (What do you think you gain the differences between the differences between from facilitation over and facilitation and other facilitation and other above what you gain from advisory supports...?) advisory supports...?) other advisory reports...?) Describe in detail:

5.3 Is the breadth and depth of expert agricultural knowledge contributed to the group relevant to your needs?

1 2 3 4 5 6

No, the information isn't The information is relevant Highly relevant and few

relevant or adequate (What topics are of interest, are these of common interest to members, should these topics be given time by the group / should experts be invited to give contributions...?)

The information is relevant most of the time (Any additional topics of interest to the group, are these of common interest to members, should these topics be given time by the group / should experts be invited to give contributions...?)

Highly relevant and few further information needs (What topics are of interest, are these of common interest to members, should these topics be given time by the group / should experts be invited to give contributions...?)

viii. Discussion Groups: Five Ingredients for Success

Dr Áine Macken-Walsh, Sociologist, Teagasc Rural Economy Development Programme (REDP) Dr Tom O'Dwyer, Head of Dairy KT, Teagasc

A new scheme to support Knowledge Transfer Groups is due to commence in 2016. Previous discussion group schemes involved almost 600 groups and 14,000 farmers.

As discussion groups continue to be a significant method of advisory support, it is timely to reflect on how they may work at their best. This article presents what we can learn from a discussion group acknowledged to be one of the best in the country. Five key 'ingredients' of the discussion group's success are identified. Furthermore, facilitation techniques tips to successfully promote the five ingredients are presented. These tips are drawn from experienced discussion group facilitators.

A case-study of a discussion group, , was undertaken by Teagasc as part of a larger project funded by DAFM's Research Stimulus Fund. Further research was then undertaken with

Ingredient 1: Membership & Organisation

The group is selective about membership and agreement of all members is necessary when inviting new members into the group.

"Thought long and hard ...about who would join and when"

"A group of like-minded people... It comes back to our common goal is to improve ourselves and to improve our farming"

While members commit to shared goals, they have different interests and skills. Sub-groups of members work on different topics. Members who have shared skills and strengths – such as breeding or financial management – organise into sub-groups. They work on particular topics to an advanced level and they then bring their learning to the group and thrash it out within the group.

"Sub groups are formed and they're the driving force, (for example) there's three or four people who would be particularly strong on genetics, others on grassland management"

Members emphasise the importance of routine and well-organised meetings, at regular intervals - "not lackadaisical". Keeping a tight requirement on members to attend and make contributions is crucial for the group.

Facilitation tips:

- · Meetings taking place on a set date per month avoids confusion and members are less likely to miss meetings
- Carefully select members: new groups should be selected with care and when inviting new members into groups, make sure all existing members are in agreement. Ideally, farmers should have enough options to find a group that suits them but this is often not possible.
- If groups are organised on a 'parish' basis, it may be difficult to all members to have common goals. However, it is possible for the group to work together to forge some shared goals and for sub groups to work on different challenges. This is important in keeping the focus of the group as relevant as possible to all members.
- Get to know the skills that different group members have so that other members can learn from them: an individual member's skills might not always be obvious
- · Carefully encourage sub-groups and 'buddy pairs': periodically review and reorganise if necessary
- Encourage sub-groups to take ownership of tasks: sub-groups can report back to the group with recommendations and facilitate discussion and interpretation of new knowledge

Ingredient 2: Trust & Security

When group members' figures (for example, in relation to fat, protein and financial data) 'were on the table', that was when the discussion group we studied fully 'took off'. In order for the group to work effectively on farm development, members needed to be open and truthful in relation to conditions on their farms and challenges they encounter.

However, before members can be open and truthful, trust and confidentiality must be developed within the group. Group members must feel that they can be open and honest, but they also must feel comfortable challenging each other and being challenged. For that, relationships have to be respectful and non-judgemental.

"No one-upmanship"

"No 'looking down your nose' sort of attitude and no one is made a hero of either within the group"

"Whatever was causing the problem, others in the group would be experiencing something similar and you'd feel you're not alone and you'd come home feeling more positive"

Facilitation tips:

- Stronger members of the group in specific areas (such as grassland management or somatic cell count) can demonstrate how to achieve 'best practice' in real farm contexts to other members
- Sometimes members can challenge each other: this can be positive but also can be counterproductive if farmers withdraw from meaningful participation due to feeling undermined
- 'Destructive criticism' and open benchmarking between 'strongest' and 'weakest' members should be avoided as it can create an atmosphere of fear and secrecy, which is counterproductive
- Benchmarking within the group should involve farmers within the same category (or 'tier') of performance i.e. involving farmers who can identify with each other. Incremental improvements are generally more achievable than large leaps
- Assign 'buddy pairs' for benchmarking exercises, pairing members who are not 'miles apart' so that they can
 better relate to each other. Rotate because members can be both weak and strong, depending on the area of
 skill. All members will want to have opportunities to learn
- Use anonymised codes to make comparisons where necessary and then transition to full disclosure of members' data when members opt to disclose their identities
- · Begin with benchmarking in relation to less sensitive issues, whatever those issues may be

Ingredient 3: Enjoyment & Fun

Fun and enjoyment within discussion groups are important, not only because members are likely to attend more frequently but because a relaxed atmosphere and easy conversation within the group is necessary for what is called 'social learning'. Social learning – meaning farmers learning from other farmers through discussion – is the main purpose of discussion groups. Once conversation is flowing, social learning can happen. If there is a sense of enjoyment, fun and relaxation, discussion 'takes off'. Otherwise, discussion may be constrained and stifled.

"fun and enjoyment... that's very obvious"

Facilitation tips:

- The importance of having a 'cup of tea' prior to/after meetings can't be underestimated. It allows people to get to know each other on a 'one to one' basis, to develop a sense of ease and familiarity, and to discuss topics of individual interest
- Where possible, a social occasion or a field-trip away from home, should be suggested by the facilitator and organised by the members themselves
- On-farm visits are important social occasions. However, it is important to be aware that not all households can or want to provide food etc. so it can be easier to keep catering & hospitality simple

Ingredient 4: Solidarity

While the proverbial saying 'a rising tide lifts all boats' may not be true in many cases, it is true when it comes to the discussion group we studied. Not only do members want to be successful, the want they group to be successful. Above all other ingredients, the group members stressed that group solidarity – meaning members' commitment to the success of the group as a whole and an absence of 'one-upmanship' - is crucial to the group's success. If a member has a problem, they take a collective effort in providing assistance to help resolve the problem.

"And four of us (a sub-group) would meet on one fella's farm and we'd walk the farm and go through the grass growth and we'd sit down and work it out to get him going again"

"We're all competitive in that we all want to be better farmers... But we're not competitive to be half a litre ahead of whoever"

Facilitation tips

- Other ingredients such as trust are necessary for developing a sense of solidarity in offering assistance to members when in need
- Pre-visits in preparation for on-farm group meetings can be a valuable opportunity for providing targeted assistance to individual members. A small group of members make a pre-visit and offer support and advice to the farmer hosting the group meeting.
- · Group routine and developing shared goals are also important to build up a unified group identity
- Agreeing a name for the group; having a stand for the group at farming events; and a media focus on the group can help form a strong group identity
- Group activities such as applying for funding or entering into a competition are also powerful in building a unified group identity

Ingredient 5: Facilitation & Learning Drivers

The members of the group we studied emphasised the importance of having a 'hunger for knowledge' within the group. This is supported by the work and activities of the various sub-groups that continuously seek out new knowledge that is of particular interest to them. The knowledge is subsequently debated and shared within the wider group. However, skilled facilitation and high-level agricultural production expertise are vitally important to the group.

"we had a year or two where there was no facilitator and it's important we discovered how important it was... It's like a ship that's lost power.. t'was just coasting along. What was lacking was being challenged, and information coming"

The group is knowledgeable and driven in its own right, which influences the type of facilitation and advisory approach that it values. There are two main approaches to facilitation and advisory support that the group values. The first is that the facilitator actively debates new knowledge with group members. While s/he must be prepared to present to the group definite opinions based on science, s/he must also be willing to debate the knowledge with the members.

"the facilitator has to nail his colours to the mast too and say what he thinks and has to be capable of bringing up to date information"

"argue it backwards and forwards ... you'd come to a decision at the end"

"He (facilitator) was the foundation stone of our group... as the fellas were saying that they come for the fun but if you weren't getting something out of it they'd stay at home"

The second characteristic valued by this group is that the knowledge provided by the facilitator is credible in terms of its quality and independence.

"That the information that's brought to us is independent.. Plus their integrity"

Facilitation tips:

- Different groups will value different facilitation approaches. However, the goal should be to gradually increase the extent to which the group challenges and debates with each other and the facilitator
- Facilitators ideally should have facilitation expertise and agricultural production expertise. Most of all, it is crucial for facilitators to have expertise in facilitation
- Realistically, it is difficult for facilitators to have a hugh level of facilitation expertise in addition to a wide breadth of agricultural production expertise. Additional agricultural production expertise can be introduced to the group where necessary by inviting contributions from experts in specialist areas
- · It is important for members to have realistic expectations: group facilitation is different to one-to-one advice
- That facilitators are independent and impartial is vital

The research summarised in this article was undertaken by Teagasc as part of a larger project funded by DAFM's Research Stimulus Fund.



CONTACT DETAILS:
Teagasc Head Office
Head Office, Oak Park, Carlow
Tel: +353 (0) 59 9170200
Fax: +353 (0) 59 9182097

Email: info@teagasc.ie