



Five step plan to engaging with grower groups

Susan Hall¹ and Megan Meates²

¹ Grower Group Alliance, www.gga.org.au, Email: susan.a.hall@uwa.edu.au

² Grower Group Alliance, www.gga.org.au, Email: megan.meates@uwa.edu.au

KEY MESSAGES

- Research, development & extension (RD&E) partners need to develop a greater understanding of what grower groups can offer and how they operate, and vice versa. The role of a grower group in a project, and if it is in partnering or outsourcing, should be considered.
- Projects should have clear expectations from all partners and deliver mutual benefits.
- Strong relationships and networks need to be developed, and ongoing good communication within and beyond partners is essential.

AIMS

Over the past two decades, many farmer groups have formed in WA's grain production zone as they realise the importance of a participatory approach in the adoption of new technology and the advantages of local adaptation, development and extension. They have also recognised the advantages of networks and are actively forming partnerships with other grower groups, researchers and industry. The farmer groups now play an important role in extension in WA broadacre agriculture.

Funding bodies also recognise the benefits of strong partnerships, and are supporting projects which encourage active collaboration within and between grower groups. This change in the agricultural landscape has emphasised the importance of stable relationships amongst groups and industry stakeholders and a need for improved understanding of the requirements of all parties.

The Grower Group Alliance (GGA) is a farmer-driven organisation developed by grower groups seeking to improve communication and function, with a primary role in connecting grower groups, research providers, funding bodies and agribusiness in a network across WA.

The five step plan aims to provide a framework for developing and maintaining a successful partnership between grower groups and industry stakeholders, to deliver greater benefits on-ground. It will assist with improved relevance and rigour of projects, increased adoption of technologies and improved efficiency and effectiveness of RD&E rollout.

METHOD

The Grower Group Alliance

The GGA acts to support more effective groups with an expanded networking capacity and greater involvement in collaborative projects with farmer groups, industry partners and the wider research community. There are currently more than 40 grower groups within the GGA network.

The GGA was formed in 2002 and is funded by the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC). It is managed by two full time staff and governed by an advisory committee with representation from grower groups, research organisations and private agribusiness.

Some of the GGA activities include an annual forum, study tours, operational and governance support, coordination of presenters or workshops, regional meetings and other communication activities.

Strategies for working with grower groups

Twelve steps were originally compiled by the GGA, developed from the wealth of knowledge gathered from the past nine years of working with grower groups. Feedback from each step was sought at the 2011 GGA Annual Forum, involving 90 researchers, industry and grower group attendees. The



consultation utilised a World Cafe format, a conversational process allowing ideas to be linked and built as people move between tables, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the topic presented. During the process, repetitions and commonalities emerged, and the 12 steps were merged to five.

RESULTS

The five step plan for engaging with grower groups

1. Know what you're looking for and what a group can offer you. Make them an offer they can't refuse.

Ask: what is required from the project? Why is a grower group relationship needed? It should be appropriate to the scope or context of the project.

Grower group involvement in the research and development process can include:

- Identification and supply of field sites, involving groups or a single farmer.
- Minor role within a larger project, including a grower group hosting local trials and farm scale demonstrations, workshops, seminars and other development and extension activities.
- Co-development of research: The researcher and the group develop and implement a project together. Co-development allows for research outcomes to be in-line with grower needs which will increase the likelihood of funding, adoption and industry benefit. By involving grower groups, research outcomes are not only shared by growers directly involved, but with the whole grower group.

Visit the GGA website (www.gga.org.au) for grower group information and examples of collaborations in order to select the right group. Use the knowledge base of GGA staff, including network and grower group structures, research interests and activities.

Choose groups with the capacity and networks to get the best results, but don't be restrictive. There is potential to work with groups of different capabilities to help lift their capacity. Look for a group with enthusiasm, commitment and interest in the issue.

Make sure the offer and project idea is something the grower group will consider of high value to its members. There needs to be something tangible the group can take away at the conclusion of the project, or a topic which is a priority to the group, in which they feel they can have an outcome or impact.

Be aware of the cost-benefit for groups. Adding value to group and community is a positive, but groups also need cash, and can't always be involved simply on a volunteer basis.

2. Develop clear expectations and make it a win-win situation.

Establish what the grower group will receive, and what they need to provide. Be realistic.

Consider getting these in writing where many partners and administration is involved, but be aware smaller groups don't need more administration. Have a clear plan of how the project will be carried out.

Have a common goal and clear vision that both parties are working towards (but be open to new ideas). A linkage to a grower group should be for a genuine need within a project, and should be made with groups who are in need of, and interested in, the project. Work hard on the mutual benefits that come with the common goal.

Don't expect farmers to co-invest in the research or pay for research results. They can contribute through in-kind support such as land and labour, or providing knowledge. The more the research fits their needs and interests, and the better the relationship with them is, the more support they will provide.



Understand the strengths and weaknesses of each party, their limitations, their perspective and their ability and capacity. Consider incorporating capacity building into the funding application. Ensure expectations are manageable, achievable and realistic.

Understand a group is involved in many projects. Each project is a priority, but not the only priority. Events and field days may incorporate a number of projects, which may even attract more participants and value-add to extension. Include this arrangement in project milestones.

3. Build a strong relationship with the grower group and with the partners.

Recognise the power of networking. Use the GGA network to improve relationships and share information with grower groups in a formal coordinated manner. Be there on the ground, become easily accessible and get involved.

Attend the grower group's events. Get to know their committee who are there to interact with you. Invite grower groups to research presentations and other relevant events.

Be aware of volunteer time and other commitments when partnering with grower groups, respect and understand the people running the groups are not usually getting paid, or are also committed to a number of other projects and activities. Understand time structures.

Building trust takes time, openness and honesty to keep it going and once built, the relationship should consider succession planning. Deliver on agreed outcomes as a continuous process. Foster the partnership in good and bad times.

Always acknowledge partners and their contributions. Keep a clear record of what each partner contributed. Unclear acknowledgements can lead to confusion of roles in future projects. Make sure papers, presentations and media contributions mention the group as a partner, and ensure field days and newsletters acknowledge researchers, organisations and funding bodies. Put acknowledgments at the start of presentations, publications and events. Send thank you letters! Acknowledgements should include the farmer and the grower group who identified the farmer, made the link, and coordinated participation and extension. This recognition is important with the success of any project, no matter how small or large the group or project. Be conscious of this and help all partners get it right.

Use ongoing projects and relationships with grower groups to build future projects. Ideas, feedback and interaction can all feed into your next (relevant and rigorous) project.

4. Partnering vs. outsourcing? Be clear on the differences and what you need.

Partnering with a grower group involves working towards a common goal. Ensure two-way interaction in project development and extension. Partnering in projects is favoured with: new ideas requiring broader thinking, common skills, inadequate resources to do on your own, for large or long-term projects and when there's a possibility of getting or achieving more.

Outsourcing work to a grower group is not a partnership, and if using groups in this way, for example to run events, survey their members on your behalf or become extensions of project staff, they should be fairly compensated. However, if the activity is for a project you are working on together, this contribution could be part of the partnership arrangement. This highlights the need to be clear about expectations. Outsourcing in projects is favoured when skills are in one party's hands, results are under control of the outsourcer, the project is short-term or a smaller component of a larger project, and when there's a clear task or objective that needs to be done efficiently and effectively.

Expectations need to be considered from the start, but don't rush the process as it's not always clear if it is partnering or outsourcing, and it's not always an either/or situation. Look at each circumstance along the way (each circumstance will vary case-by-case and in different situations).



5. Good communication and extension is essential.

Maintain contact with the group during and after the project. Email is easiest, but consider other options, for example, social media. Be short and to the point and provide communication expectations up front. Provide annual updates of activities and events and use the GGA website as a go-to point.

Make sure extension reaches the wider agricultural and research community. Use the GGA, the grower group and your networks and keep it two-way between grower group and researcher. Delivering research outcomes can provide researchers with opportunities for impact well beyond a partnership with one or two groups. Use social networks and facilitators to extend information beyond the group to get different people, groups and organisations talking to each other. Get results published in searchable databases. The research process needs to be extended just as effectively as the outcomes and results, to avoid duplication. Finally, remember to look at a marketing point of view – market your project and results, and look for value-adding and potential opportunities that may arise.

CONCLUSION

As industry stakeholders engage with grower groups as genuine RD&E partners, the five step plan to working with grower groups will assist with ensuring smooth formation and maintenance of strong partnerships to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of RD &E. Improved relationships will not only improve adoption of technologies within the grower group, but will filter through networks across the wider agricultural industry.

The five-step plan for engaging with grower groups:

1. Know what you're looking for and what a group can offer you. Make them an offer they can't refuse.
2. Develop clear expectations and make it a win-win situation. Have a common goal with mutual benefits and clear expectations both parties are working towards.
3. Build a strong relationship with the grower group and with partners.
4. Partnering versus outsourcing? Be clear on the differences and what you need.
5. Good communication and extension to the wider agricultural community is essential.

KEY WORDS

Grower group, partnership, extension, communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the GGA Strategic Advisory Group and attendees at the 2011 GGA Annual Forum for their invaluable input in developing the five steps to engaging with grower groups.

Generous funding from GRDC is gratefully acknowledged.

Thanks to the UWA Institute of Agriculture for hosting the GGA project.

GRDC Project Number: MIG00010

Paper reviewed by: W/Prof Kadambot Siddique