

Making collaboration last longer than your average marriage - Lessons in supporting grower groups in extension over the 11 years of the Grower Group Alliance

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Abstract. During the past decade of constant change in the grains research, development and extension (RD&E) environment, particularly in extension, the Grower Group Alliance (GGA) has supported an expanding grower group network of varying yet effective groups in Western Australia. The GGA supports grower groups with expanded operational and networking capacity and greater involvement in collaborative RD&E projects with other grower groups, industry partners and the wider research community. It does this by ensuring a relevant network that facilitates the exchange and application of knowledge and research results; through enhanced participation of grower groups in delivering research, development and extension through independent and collaborative projects; and by grower groups becoming more relevant, sustainable and effective. This paper will examine key lessons and outputs of the collaborative model in extension delivery and participatory research and development, as well as development and progression of the network, as the current GGA project comes to an end, after more than 11 years of support from the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC).

Keywords: extension, participatory research, collaboration, grower groups.

Introduction

Collaboration can be defined as 'a mutually beneficial and well defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals' (Mattessich and Monsey 1992, p. 6). It often involves the sharing of resources and experiences and has a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility. These attributes of the GGA can be compared with those developed in a successful marriage, with lessons from the success of the project delivering the long-term success of the relationships in the network.

In this context, network refers to an organisational structure, designed to work in complexity. Howden (2006, p. 6) defines a network as a 'system involving multiple nodes (individuals, agencies and organisations) with multiple linkages – not just informal patterns of interaction, but also structures through which public goods and services are planned, designed, produced and delivered'.

Grower group networks create such a complex environment, where shared understanding and collective action is used to achieve outcomes where there are no readily available solutions (Gianatti and Carmody 2005). The organisation of grower groups into networks has also made them more accessible and relevant to researchers and industry and is a continued strength of the GGA project.

The GGA was formed in 2002 by five grower groups with an overall objective to communicate and collaborate. After a two-year pilot phase, the project was funded for a further three years, with a network of 16 medium and large sized grower groups. During this time, the Local Farmer Group Network was formed, catering to 25 smaller, locally-focused grower groups. In 2007, with the support of their member groups and the GRDC, the two groups merged into one project, delivering operational and resource efficiencies. The GGA, existing in its current form since 2007, provides one network servicing all groups in WA regardless of size, one set of communications to network members, a united face for grower group representation and a wider network for grower groups, while being more streamlined for industry partners. It encompasses 39 grower groups, research and government agencies, NRM bodies, advisors, agribusiness and a broad range of grains industry stakeholders.

The GGA, over the past 11 years, has developed a history in collaboration, building trust and gaining mutual respect from its grower group members and industry and research partners. The GGA shares an understanding and respect for its member groups in how they operate and their values, limitations and expectations. More importantly, the GGA has supported the growth of grower groups in WA, not only as key partners in research, development and extension delivery, but as strong social and community structures. Building these strong collaborative relationships has taken time, but with the GGA's flexible and adaptable approach and shared vision with member groups and partners, the project has developed a strong reputation as a leader in agricultural extension. This bottom-up model has built capacity of groups to deliver extension, created a peer-group of those working in similar roles to learn from and share information with

and created two-way communication pathways between grower groups and various stakeholders, including researchers, government agencies, agribusiness and funding bodies.

This paper will examine key lessons and outputs of the collaborative model in extension delivery and participatory research and development and highlight the importance of a network approach in delivering the GGA's three key outcomes of improved communication pathways between grower groups; improved collaboration between groups, researchers and industry; and more effective and efficient grower groups.

Trends in agricultural extension

Trends in agricultural extension in Australia have seen broad withdrawal of government funding, due to funding restrictions and policy directives focusing on provision of services for public good (Marsh and Pannell 2000). Preceded by growth of extension and service provision, since 2000 there has been a subsequent decrease in the amount of funding provided to landcare and natural resource management (NRM) based activities and agency-based personnel and an increase in focus towards grower groups and group-based extension.

A changing paradigm in extension has seen a shift from the traditional linear or top-down approach, from researchers to farmers, to a 'demand-pull' approach, with participatory methods delivering more control to farmers over what they need or want and how it is delivered. A major change associated with this shift is the increasing use of farmer groups for agricultural extension, with extension officers acting more as facilitators, rather than experts in a field (Marsh and Pannell 2000).

The service delivery and contracting to grower groups has been double-edged, with the opportunity for increased income and impact, but also the possibility of subsidising or providing extension services which don't fulfil the needs of members and growers. It has also led to competing tensions between stakeholders, particularly in partnerships, with resulting tensions between creating benefit and creating value, about focus on member value, potential for groups to lose focus of what drives them and delivery of external projects begins to take over. As trends continue to evolve, the past three years have seen growing involvement by the private sector, such as consultants, in delivering RD&E, particularly extension, bringing with it various advantages and disadvantages and necessitating even more brokering of partnerships and relationships, more collaboration and more sophisticated leveraging.

Grower groups in Western Australia

Farmer groups in Western Australia (WA) are independent, self-directed and mainly comprised of broadacre grain and livestock enterprises. The groups are located through the WA grainbelt, covering an area of more than 27 million hectares. There are currently 39 grower groups with a combined membership of about 3000, representing more than half of WA's grain farmers. WA grower groups are usually incorporated, not-for-profit organizations, aiming to increase the production and profitability of their farm businesses through the adoption of new production technologies while minimising the impact on their environment. Issues can be at a local, regional and state level.

In the past 11 years, the GGA has worked with grower groups to actively form partnerships with other farmer groups, researchers and private industry. Groups and industry stakeholders recognise the advantages of social network connections and the potential impact they have (Gianatti and Carmody 2005). These formal networks – becoming the GGA - were developed by farmer groups and managed by advisory committees comprised of growers, researchers and private agribusiness. The network then worked to support groups to provide their members with access to the latest information, technology and research, which allowed them to make the best possible decisions for their farming businesses. The GGA also established collaborative research and development projects between farmer groups, agribusiness and research providers across the state.

There have been both implicit and explicit indications from key stakeholders about the RD&E landscape in the next three to five years, with further reductions in both financial and human resources; and an expectation that grower groups, consultants and private agribusiness will fill the service and funding gap left by traditional providers.

A recent GGA strategic review emphasised grower groups have a vision for taking the lead in RD&E and filling the gap left by traditional providers– in generating achievements, identifying research direction and undertaking RD&E with professionalism. Grower groups both are willing and enthusiastic to increase activity and their role in the delivery of relevant RD&E to their members and continue to develop and support networks to share information and maximise this opportunity, although limits on grower time and group capacity may prevent this.

The strengthening of the GGA project, through its current phase of funding from 2010 to 2013 and the resulting maturation of the grower group network has seen an increase in the professionalism of groups who now have an improved understanding of their capacity versus resource limitations – not unlike the growth of a successful marriage with trade-offs between an ideal versus realistic lifestyle. The GGA's belief is that grower groups are currently operating at or beyond their capacity. Sustainable partnership and project models must be developed by grower groups to ensure that the increased RD&E delivery expectations can be fulfilled. This includes an active approach by the GGA to encourage succession, knowledge and skills transfer, RD&E rigour and strong corporate governance.

As the agricultural sector, RD&E delivery and grower groups continue to evolve and refine, the GGA has also evolved to meet the needs of these stakeholders. Although the project objectives have remained broadly similar and relevant in the past six years, supporting grower groups in effectively and efficiently delivering relevant agricultural RD&E that directly impacts on their member's profitability and sustainability has remained a key driver.

As the project evolved, it has sought to focus on areas within its sphere of influence, thus protecting the network relationship from perceived 'infidelities':

- Maximising effective communication between grower groups and RD&E stakeholders with clear project and partnership outcomes.
- Promoting and fostering best practice research and extension methods and partnership models.
- Maintaining grower group capacity and building towards skills and knowledge self-sufficiency (including governance and succession, attracting and retaining staff and volunteers, engagement, branding and membership).
- Playing an active role in the research 'space' by seeking out and brokering efficient and effective RD&E partnerships and projects.

In recent years, the GGA has cemented itself as a key hub of information for and about grower groups. As well as servicing grower groups, many research, government and agribusiness stakeholders now utilise the GGA in both an advisory capacity and as an effective and efficient means of initiating new relationships and partnerships with grower groups. Further, the GGA provides a conduit, a meeting point and information facilitator at an industry level, which is well utilised in WA and nationally. In short, the GGA has become a one-stop-shop for collaborative RD&E in WA.

Making collaboration last has been key to the success of the GGA. An effective network requires buy-in, trust, respect and commitment from key stakeholders (just like a successful marriage!) and without these, it would be difficult to engage the GGA network and achieve their key outcomes.

Key success factors of the GGA

Improved communication pathways and improved collaboration between groups and partners are two factors seen as critical to success of the GGA project and both are indicative of the success of the project. A suite of GGA services has built the networks, associated communication pathways and opportunities to improve collaboration over the past few years. Personal contact is a strong advantage (as in a marriage!), overcoming the huge distances experienced by the 40 groups in the network, which span the WA wheatbelt. Regular meetings, including an annual forum for all groups and stakeholders, regional meetings to link local groups and executive officer meetings focusing on operational issues of larger groups, are all well supported – emphasising the importance of varying communication channels in relationships and networks.

Collaborative projects

While the GGA was driven by the desire of groups to collaborate, working with researchers and industry partners is also rewarding and challenging. To address some of the challenges, the GGA, utilising a World Cafe process and further consultation, developed five key steps to engaging with grower groups (Hall and Meates 2012). Based around communication, clear expectations and equality, the plan could offer tips for entering into any relationship.

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.

The five-step plan for working 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.

Operational support

Supporting groups to become more effective and efficient, while perhaps seen as outside core business of RD&E, is especially important in the changing environment, as expectations increase on groups to lead or partner in the RD&E delivery. It is also essential in building the capacity of groups as they grow and take on new challenges.

The GGA's support along with other environmental factors (such as: continued decline in funding availability, increased competition for private and public funds from consulting networks and other grower groups) has meant that grower groups have had to become increasingly self-sufficient. In addition, the gradual exit of state and federal agencies from the RD&E space and staff rationalisation in regional areas, has led to increased grower, industry and community expectations in terms of the role and service delivery of grower groups. This has contributed to the increasing professionalism of many grower groups but has also led to groups delivering beyond their capacity, attributing to high rates of staff and volunteer burnout across the network.

Increased demand for support in this area has been evidenced in four ways: increased 'end of the phone' support; increased demand for strategic planning; support for new and growing groups; and continued demand for the GGA Toolkit and other resources.

Groups have been utilising phone support for operational issues (insurance, sponsorship, employment), event support, project application and development and much more, at an increasing basis. Those groups who engage regularly with the GGA have contact approximately once a month for 'end of the phone' support. The GGA receives about three to five of these calls or emails weekly. Beyond the obvious assistance, it gives groups a key contact and builds collaboration through trust and consistency. It also allows for continued development of the network, which is vital for on-going collaboration.

Demand for 'professional' services has grown noticeably in the past six years, with key areas including employment and insurance. The GGA has been well placed to provide advice using knowledge gained from other groups. Without this network, groups would spend a lot of time trying to source information (as an example, one group spent half a day attempting to source award rates for an employee, the GGA was able to source and provide answers in less than an hour).

Professionalism is also reflected as groups continue to seek support in strategic planning: through financial support for an external facilitator; accessing a facilitator through the GGA; or seeking GGA knowledge and input into strategic plan development and operationalization. Again, trust and an effective relationship facilitates the privilege of being involved in this area.

The relevance and regard of grower groups in delivering RD&E is also demonstrated through network growth. New groups, such as the West Arthur Trials Group and Lake King Grower Group are still accessing support and advice from the GGA as they form and develop. Like a marriage, these groups can be time intensive as you work with the group to develop goals and objectives, build an understanding of the grower group network and opportunities for groups and work with them as they develop structures and operating procedures.

Interestingly, there has also been rationalisation as groups within the network develop their own relationships and coordinate to share resources and skills. Smaller groups are trending towards increasing formality or working with larger groups, both requiring support to help function effectively. Those who formalise need increasing support through the incorporation process, in developing links, creating sponsorship, with employment and other operational issues. Those who work with other groups require support as both seek to develop procedures and processes that work effectively for both.

While collaboration has been key to the success of the organisation, consideration of a longer-term footprint is also vital. In 2010, the GGA produced the Grower Group Toolkit, with more than 400 print copies and 300 electronic copies being distributed to date. Groups have also engaged in how they want the footprint to look, providing feedback on what to include. Other publications such as templates, an event guide and a policies and procedures guide, also cater

for grower group (and other community group) needs and leave a lasting legacy of the collaborative effort – going beyond fond memories.

Other activities

Other achievements of the fourth phase (2010 – 2013) of the Grower Group Alliance project include:

- Increased engagement of new and traditional research and industry partners.
- Three successful Annual Forums, each linking more than 80 stakeholders; with the most recent forum celebrating 10 years of the GGA with stakeholders invited nationwide, 10 interstate groups attending and more than 100 participants.
- Three series of annual regional meetings for sharing ideas and presenting opportunities.
- Provided training in governance, facilitation, communication, on-farm trialling and more. Grower group exchange program utilised by more than 15 groups. Grower group members sponsored to attend various events, including Crop Updates, WANTFA (WA No-Till Farmers Association) Conferences and AAAC WA (Australian Association of Agricultural Consultants Western Australia) Outlook Conference.
- Two staff tours, with staff from seven groups visiting industry partners, trial sites and other grower groups.
- A study tour with 10 farmers from 10 grower groups to South Australian and Victoria.
- Coordination of project opportunities for grower groups, including involvement in developing extension processes and sitting on advisory groups.
- Four researcher roadshows, supporting interstate visitors to speak at group events.
- Fortnightly Calendar of Events and Monthly Newswire. Revamped website including useful partners and resources pages.
- An increased number of groups accessing GGA support for project development and funding application, operations and governance support.

Cultural aspects – what makes the GGA work?

Just like any relationship, there are emotional and physical (or in the case of collaboration through the GGA, cultural) aspects which are vital to delivering success.

In the past 10 years, the GGA has worked with grower groups to actively form partnerships with other farmer groups, researchers and private industry. Groups and industry stakeholders recognise the advantages of networks and the potential impact they have.

A defining characteristic of the GGA is in supporting a culture of information and knowledge exchange which evolves to meet grower needs. The effective role for the GGA is to ensure groups have access to information, with the grower group network maximising opportunities for communication and information exchange. To this end, GGA staff have remained hands-on, developing effective links and relationships, building trust and facilitating collaboration through being well networked and well informed.

With the reputation as a trusted and objective stakeholder in the RD&E space in WA, the GGA is an ideal conduit for two-way communication between grower groups, researchers, industry partners and agribusiness. An external review of the project in 2009 found the GGA had created a new culture for information sharing and knowledge extension to meet grower group needs, which continues to evolve, as in any developing relationship (Read 2009).

As grower groups that comprise the network vary widely, grower groups perceive the GGA as being respectful of their individual identities and a trusted source of assistance, guidance and support. Informally, the GGA network comprises two distinct types of groups: larger groups employing paid staff to manage activities over a large geographical area; and smaller groups whose localised activities are run solely by their voluntary committee (sometimes with the assistance of a consultant). The level of complexity and involvement in projects generally correlate with a group's membership size. The GGA adopts a flexible approach to service delivery to ensure that milestones are implemented as efficiently and effectively as possible. The 2009 evaluation found the GGA has improved the confidence and identity of groups, contributed to the recognition of the significance of groups and ensured individual groups are not isolated – all important factors in supporting the social values of regional communities (Read 2009).

However, the GGA actively develops and promotes sustainable partnership models and advocate for equitable resourcing from collaborating partners. The balance of grower-pull and industry-push extension is kept front-of-mind in GGA activities and more widely in the expectation on grower groups to deliver RD&E. The structure and nature of the project also provides flexibility to be both proactive and reactive and undertake projects and opportunities which, while they

may not fit within project milestones, align with the greater outcome of the project and their stakeholders. This puts the GGA in a unique position within the industry and provides value beyond the intended outcomes.

Conclusion

As the project enters a transition phase, it has become apparent the activities and successes of the GGA can be broadly split into two categories – products and services. Products are singular activities which are quantifiable and easily transferable, while services are more intangible and reflective of the entire project, rather than individual activities. Services are built on relationships, trust and collaboration and are earned and developed, rather than delivered. Products are the give-and-take of the relationship, while services are the intangibles – they are difficult to quantify on an internet dating profile and in a project evaluation, but are vital to making the relationship work. Flexibility is required around developing and delivering services.

The future will see the impetus returned to groups and stakeholders to continue to maintain these relationships, although these would be considered secondary to the primary relationships (members and key partners) and as such may suffer the same neglect as other relationships.

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