

## **Towards a profitable and sustainable future for grain growers - a professional development model for farm partners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many Australian grain growers need to change their management approach to ensure their continued viability, but do not have the required knowledge and skills. Uptake of relevant education and training is poor, despite the positive correlation between learning, change and farm viability. As men are generally occupied with the operational aspects of the farm, much of the management role has been taken on by their partners, despite their lack of relevant formal qualifications. Professional development of farm partners therefore has the potential to improve the viability of grain growers. A model combining learning circles and action learning projects is proposed.

**Keywords:** *Professional development; agriculture; farming; grain industry; Australia; learning circles; action learning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A large proportion of Australian grain farms require a change in management focus to ensure their continued viability. However, uptake of education and training to equip farmers with the relevant knowledge and skills is poor. This paper briefly reviews some of the reason for farmers' resistance to education and training, explores the changing role of women on the farm and proposes a professional development model for farm partners which has the potential to bring about change at farm level.

### **THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN THE GRAIN INDUSTRY**

In the period 1998-2002, 25% of Australian grain farms returned an average cash income of \$173,624. In marked contrast to this, the mid 50% of grain farms returned an average of \$48,916 and the bottom 25% averaged a *negative* return of \$35,947 (Clark & Harrop 2004). Once allowances are made for depreciation and imputed labour costs, 50% of grain farms in Australia are not making enough money to meet their farm succession and stewardship obligations (Clark & Harrop 2004).

Australia's relatively poorly educated farm workforce, compared to overseas competitors and other Australian industry sectors, limits productivity. It also has a compounding effect by inhibiting further training, which further limits farmers' capacity to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to change (Kilpatrick 1996).

Current public policy therefore focuses on achieving profitable and innovative agricultural industries, sustainable resource management and vibrant rural communities based on a culture of

change (Bellamy *et al.* 2003). In fact, Australia's grain growers are unlikely to remain globally competitive unless farmers can change their focus from yield and 'paddock' to a 'whole farm' approach (Clark & Harrop 2004).

### **BARRIERS TO ON-FARM LEARNING AND CHANGE**

Change and learning are inter-linked (Bellamy *et al.* 2002) so that there is a growing need for continuous (life-long) learning in the agricultural sector to match the pace of change (Taylor 2003). Life-long learning has been shown to promote responsiveness, flexibility and an ability to make successful changes among farm managers (Kilpatrick 1998).

For example, studies show that farmers who participate in training other than field days are more likely to make changes to their practices which result in improved profitability (measured by value of assets) and those who attend more training events are more likely to make a change than those who attend fewer events (Kilpatrick 2000). Those farmers who both attend field days and make changes to practice are reported to have a higher average gross operating surplus (\$73,170) than farmers who do neither or only one (\$55,335) (Kilpatrick 2000). In addition, those farmers who attend training other than field days and make changes to practice have an even higher average gross operating surplus (\$83,651) (Kilpatrick 2000).

Despite this positive correlation between learning, change and profitability, participation in post-school education by the farming sector is low compared to the rest of Australia's population. For example, although 80% of Australian farm businesses participate in training (AFS data), 25% attend only field days and only 3% participate in courses of several sessions (Kilpatrick 2000). This is contrary to the reported steady increase throughout the 1990s in participation rates amongst the Australian working age population (DEST 2003). In particular, farmers are not participating in the type of training that industry leaders and agricultural educators see as a priority, such as marketing and management (Fulton *et al.* 2003).

The reasons for these low levels of participation in learning or change opportunities by farmers are many and varied (Fulton *et al.* 2003) and include barriers such as:

- personal characteristics of the farmer, including personality type, current level of education (better educated farmers are more likely to engage in continuing education), previous unsatisfactory learning experiences, low actual or perceived literacy levels and lack of confidence as a learner (Kilpatrick 2000). For most farm women, care of the family, particularly the children, is the first priority, and provision of suitable child care is difficult: child care centres are heavily regulated, so that informal care is no longer an option, and the distances involved eat further into limited time available for women's own pursuits (Strong Consulting Group 1997);
- characteristics of individual and institutional providers of education and training which appear ineffective for farmers' purposes, inappropriate and inflexible training models and inflexible funding arrangements for training providers (Condell 2005);
- learning content is seen as irrelevant or inapplicable to a farmer's individual context;
- accessibility of learning opportunities, which are often poorly publicised, involve lengthy travel and time off-farm and are rarely scheduled to meet farmers' needs;

- method of delivery, in that information and activities are not targeted to meet the specific and individual learning needs of participants (Fulton *et al.* 2003).

These barriers to professional development were confirmed by farm partners surveyed in South-West Queensland (Condell 2005) who stated that they have not participated in vocational education and training because:

- time-tabling of training does not fit with the partners' child care responsibilities;
- available training is not tailored closely enough to their specific enterprise context.

The result of the poor uptake of business management training was illustrated by respondents to the same survey which revealed that:

- the majority of respondents had no formal business plan or marketing plan for their farm business;
- the business plans of the minority were generally completed by their accountant and had a financial planning focus to satisfy financial institution requirements;
- more than two thirds of respondents had no formal succession plans for either land ownership or farm management;
- none of the respondents had developed a human resource policy;
- only one farming enterprise provided staff with formal induction at the beginning of employment, including coverage of workplace health and safety requirements. Although a few provided informal instruction on workplace health and safety, an introduction to physical setting of the workplace and familiarisation of equipment, this is not documented and staff are not given handbooks for referral;
- some respondents believed that hiring contractors relieved them of their responsibilities for both industrial relations and workplace health and safety (Condell 2005).

## **THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN FARM BUSINESS**

Historically, farm men and women generally occupied traditional gender roles in relation to domestic and farm tasks, with partners of farmers taking the role of homemaker (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999). These traditional roles carried over to the management and decision making areas of the business, with women ignored when strategic farm management decisions are made (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999).

For example, although women contributed 48% of real farm income in Australia in 1997, fewer than 20% of agricultural decision makers were women (Elix *et al.* 1998) and fewer than half of Western Australian farm women surveyed considered themselves equal decision makers in their family business (Haslam-McKenzie 1998). In times of stress such as drought or recession, however, women's leadership in rural, regional and remote Australia has often been the difference between a community surviving or failing (Haslam-McKenzie 2003). This leadership role has historically been largely under-valued and often unrecognised.

*The preconception of rural life as a predominantly male domain is false, as women have always played a major role in rural work, on the farm and in communities, and will continue to do so (Black et al. 2003 p.102).*

However, traditional gender roles are now being challenged on farms in the same way as other areas of Australian society. Over the past decade, farmers have increasingly recognised the need to run the family farm as a business requiring strategic planning and other business/management skills. As men are generally occupied with the operational aspects of the farm business, much of the planning and business management role has therefore been taken on by women, despite their lack of formal qualifications. However, the majority of women surveyed in Victoria were found to have little confidence in their abilities and often underestimated the contribution they made (Strong Consulting Group 1997). This is further illustrated by the finding that 'where women undertake work in family businesses . . . the work women perform is perceived/construed as 'help' rather than 'work' ' (Whittenbury 2003 p.156).

By 1998, 32% of Australia's farm work force was female, with more than 70,000 women defining themselves as farmers or farm managers. The contribution of these women to the market value of farm output was estimated to be at least 28% or a gross figure of \$4 billion annually (Elix *et al.* 1998). While women have always contributed significantly to farm production by way of their unpaid domestic work (Black *et al.* 2000), this contribution was estimated at about \$8 billion in 1998 together with about \$1.1 billion contributed to the overall viability of farming through off-farm work (Elix *et al.* 1998).

Thus, today's farm partners are increasingly involved in and concerned about their farm businesses, with key issues raised by rural women in Western Australian being farm business viability, community sustainability, farm and business succession, health and education provision, ageing rural population, availability of labour, disposable income and stress (Haslam-McKenzie 1998). Women play an important role in resource management strategies within the family farm, having 'opinions about farming, soil conservation, and environment that are not carbon copies of those of farm men' (Rickson & Daniel 1999 p.248).

In 1997, a survey in Victoria revealed that the primary contributions made by women to farm businesses were:

- care and maintenance of the family unit, as the first priority, ensuring that the necessary support structures are in place to allow the farm to operate. This requires the co-ordination of all activities including:
  - the consideration of the need to separate the farm business from family life;
  - highly developed communication skills;
- business, administrative and communication skills with an increasing perceived need to succeed in marketing;
- earning off farm income to allow the farm business to remain/become viable. Approximately 55% of those women surveyed earned off farm income;
- gathering, interpretation and dissemination of information by accessing various media sources including the internet, magazines, television, papers and attending groups that provide learning opportunities;

- assisting in the farm operations by driving machinery, overseeing Occupational Health and Safety issues, marketing grain and coordinating the pick up of farm requirements e.g. chemicals, seed and machinery parts (Strong Consulting Group 1997).

On the women's own rating of the skills they contributed to their farm business, the largest proportion (39%) was business/marketing skills (Strong Consulting Group 1997). These contributions overlap with many of the traditional roles of the male farmer. The biggest barriers to increased involvement of these partners in the farm business were perceived to be lack of clear role (14%), care of family (13%) and lack of time (12%) (Strong Consulting Group 1997).

Thirty six per cent of women on grain farms surveyed in 1997 had a post-school qualification (Strong Consulting Group 1997). The proportion of farm partners with post-school qualifications continues to increase, accelerating the pace of change in attitudes and traditional gender roles. For example:

- twice as many farm women as farm men now hold tertiary qualifications (Black 2000);
- women in rural, regional and remote Australia have more and higher formal qualifications than men and are increasingly taking overt leadership roles in traditional and non-traditional spheres (Haslam-McKenzie 2003);
- a survey of 40 partners of grain producers in South-West Queensland revealed that the majority had tertiary qualifications (Condell 2005). However, these qualifications are primarily in teaching, nursing or child care rather than agriculture, business, leadership or risk management.

Those partners who achieve the transition from traditional roles to that of management within the farm business do so by restructuring their role and introducing different solutions to ensure all responsibilities are met. For example:

*'I had to make a choice, whether my skills were better utilised sewing, cleaning, ironing and washing or marketing our grain. We decided to buy in home help and have since paid for that three times over with the achievement of better product prices' (Strong Consulting Group 1997, p.5).*

## **FARM PARTNERS AND LEADERSHIP**

The attributes required by future business leaders in Australia have been identified as:

*. . . people skills, strategic thinking, vision, flexibility, capacity for self management, the ability to solve complex problems, high ethical standards and team players (Karpin 1995, cited in Alston 2000 p.55).*

Women very often possess these attributes as well as contributing cooperativeness, collaboration, empathy and rationality in problem solving to decision making and management tasks (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999). Women who work or have worked off farm may bring an additional range of skills including financial and high level people management skills. The combination of attributes and skills that women bring to the farm business can therefore enhance its capacity to be flexible and adaptable.

In management and leadership roles, women reveal transformational leader's traits in which the needs and growth of others are central (Haslam-McKenzie 2003). Seeking advice, creating a network and building a team have been identified among core influencing strategies for management used by women (Sinclair 2005). In addition, women often bring a more holistic and future-orientated perspective to complex social, environmental and economic issues (Bellamy *et al.* 2003).

These strengths can be fostered by business, leadership and life skill programs which 'operate within a community or industry and focus on networking, mentoring and partnership, in the context of meeting local goals' (Williams 2003, p.172). The women surveyed by Strong (1997) welcomed the opportunity to support one another and their partners in a business type networking forum and most women who attended the focus groups were grateful for the opportunity to discuss farming on a professional basis.

Rural women identified training, confidence building and support/encouragement as being the three most useful strategies for their personal development (Alston 2000). The latter two strategies are often met best by the women's peer group rather than in a training situation. For example, the participants in a Rural Women in Leadership Program acknowledged that they learnt as much from each other as they did from the skilled presenters, and that this rekindled their belief in their own ability to be effective leaders (Haslam-McKenzie 2003). Some also noted that they felt it was important to learn how to mentor others.

In addition, a recent study noted that the 'farmers who demonstrated that they were least likely to participate in or seek out learning that did not produce direct on-farm production benefits tended to obtain information through links and services they knew well and could trust. The first source of information many of them mentioned is the family' (Andrew *et al.* 2005, p.xi). This suggests that professional development of farm partners may have more than just individual benefit:

*Through improved communication, the diverse goals of family members are acknowledged and incorporated into better planning and direction for the business. The result is better coordination of effort that recognises and uses the skills of all family members (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999, p.7).*

## **THE BENEFITS OF GROUP LEARNING**

Relevant learning increases awareness of the range of possible innovations, improve decision making capacity and ability to allocate resources efficiently, and develop attitudes which encourage changes to practice (Kilpatrick 2000). However, participation in training does not in itself improve profitability and sustainability, or bring about change, because change occurs only as a result of the application of that learning in the individual's own context and:

*Adaptation of ideas takes time, often revolves around the accumulation of information, the knowledge of their properties, and a range of other contextual factors. The timing of such changes tend to be very individualistic (Arnott & Benson 2001 p.181).*

The key to cost-effective training therefore is to develop long-term, flexible, easily accessed programs (Arnott & Benson 2001) which result in sustained change in behaviour among participants.

Application of learning and sustained change in behaviour are more likely outcomes from situations in which the learner is supported by others in a learning group which facilitates the processes of learning and implementing new practices (Kilpatrick & Bell 2000). Better outcomes

also result when people use their knowledge and skills together with the knowledge and skills of others, through interactions which use networks, shared values and the commitment of others to the group (Kilpatrick & Bell 2000).

*A member [of a learning group] summed up the advantages of having others available for interactive learning who are regarded as credible sources of advice and support: You can employ a consultant anytime you like ... but... he only has one point of view. One on one consultancy is never going to be as powerful as the group consultancy because everybody in our Board or in the group has got an area of expertise (Kilpatrick & Bell 2000, p.8).*

Group learning which draws on the learners' lives and with their full participation means that the participants 'do not distinguish boundaries between their group's learning and their lives. Thus, they infuse their learning into the larger community.' (Kasl 2001, p.93). Group learning therefore has the potential to benefit not only the individual learner, but also their family, business and community (Kilpatrick & Bell 1999).

Group learning in the form of learning circles has been used by up to 50% of the population in Sweden for more than 100 years to engage in lifelong learning (Suda 2001). They are an effective and practical method of learning because they use participants' individual life experiences as the starting point for discussion of relevant concepts (Suda 2001) and allow them to process information and understanding in their own way, their own context and their own time.

Each learning circle of five to seven participants is guided by a trained facilitator to explore issues brought up by participants and direct them to relevant resources if required (Suda 2001). The facilitator is not an expert or teacher in the traditional sense but relies on their own communication skills and understanding of learning processes to empower the participants to construct their own learning. Emphasis is placed on identifying context-relevant issues, seeking, applying and evaluating solutions to those issues and reflecting on the process (action learning).

With the guidance of the facilitator, participants also share their existing knowledge and skills with one another and develop new skills or understanding collaboratively at their own pace. They are encouraged to recognise that skills acquired in other areas, including in their domestic roles, are transferable and so can be applied to their farm business. Where appropriate and/or relevant, participants are encouraged to identify gaps in their leadership, business and/or life skills and opportunities can be provided to address these, either within or outside the learning circle. In addition, the facilitator provides participants with timely and relevant resources such as tools for communication and working with others.

The aim of a learning circle is for transference of knowledge and development of skills, so that learning is valued for its own sake, rather than to meet specific competencies required for formal qualifications (Suda 2001). As the learning circle ethos accommodates and values the differing prior experiences and qualifications of participants, it has the added benefit of diminishing the fear of failure and lack of self-confidence in farm partners referred to previously.

Learning circle participants need time to develop their interpersonal skills and their self-confidence within the group. Only once this is achieved can individuals begin to develop the trust and shared values which enable them to gain maximum benefit from their participation (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** *Development of a support network (Kilpatrick & Bell 2000 p.10)*

An individual also needs more than a single learning opportunity (such as a workshop) to evaluate their farm business. Ideally, an activity-based (action learning) approach is needed over time. With this action learning approach, the learning process begins as information is gathered in an area or areas selected by each participant about how their farm business currently operates. Guidelines for this process are provided within the learning circle, but the activity itself occurs in the participants' own time and context. Participants are then assisted to review and reflect on both the information gathered and process of gathering it. The process of gathering, reviewing and reflecting on information about their own business raises participants' awareness and understanding of the principles of business excellence in their specific context.

Sharing of awareness and understanding among the group encourages individuals to input their own understandings, skills and experience which builds self-confidence/esteem. Where relevant and desired, participants are encouraged to develop action plans to implement improvement initiatives, and report progress and/or constraints and limitations of these. Thus the participants in the learning circle engage in the cycle of assessment, review, reflection, planning and implementation that is action learning.

Learning circles have been used successfully for professional development in areas such as teaching (Lovett & Gilmore 2003). Participants in an interdisciplinary learning circle which incorporated action research projects reported that 'the reflection and peer support woven into the learning circle experience had positively impacted their teaching' (Lynd-Balta *et al.* 2006 p.23).

## **COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE IN RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**

Poor service and infrastructure and a lack of competition in rural and regional telecommunications in Australia have been highlighted recently by the proposed sale of the remaining 50.1% of Telstra. Ruth Povall, regional manager of Australian Business, reportedly commented that 'It is



not uncommon for an email to take more than four hours to reach Sydney. You can fly there faster than that. The lack of proper infrastructure also discourages interest in IT, hampering regional economic development even further.' (Thomsen 2005). Only a very few regional areas currently have access to the internet via broadband, although some farm businesses have invested in the more expensive satellite connection.

The Australian Government is committed to improving communication infrastructure in regional and remote, particularly in respect to access to broadband services, by way of the *Connect Australia* program (Anon. 2005). However, this program commences only in 2006, with a four year rollout. Hence, at present, the only reliable and widely available communications technology available to most farm partners is landline telephone.

### **PROPOSED MODEL OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FARM PARTNERS**

The following conclusions in relation to professional development for farm partners can be drawn from the above discussion:

1. Grain farm businesses need to implement strategies to accommodate change and improve profitability and sustainability.
2. Support in implementing a change is vital if the change is to be successful.
3. Many male farm partners are concerned primarily with production and operational considerations of the farm business, with little time or inclination to undertake traditional forms of professional development.
4. Women, particularly those with post-school qualifications, are ideally placed to learn and apply business and leadership principles to the farm business, and to pass on these skills and knowledge to their partners as, when and where appropriate to their individual situation.
5. It is to the benefit of farm business owners, their employees and the wider community for partners to gain relevant business expertise and skills in the context of their individual business enterprise.
6. Women value a networking and mentoring model of professional development, and many need support to deal with their low self-confidence/esteem and/or fear of failure.
7. Women's access to learning opportunities is constrained by time available, childcare responsibilities and distance. Providing access by way of telecommunications addresses these constraints, although this is currently limited to landline telephone (teleconferencing). Teleconferencing allows farm partners to participate in learning opportunities without the need to travel to a particular location, and while also meeting their family commitments (Tolhurst & Dean 2004).

Based on these conclusions, we therefore propose a model for professional development for farm partners which combines learning circles conducted by teleconference with action learning projects carried out in the participants' own time and context. A learning program delivered based on this model would comprise, for example, weekly one to two hour teleconferences over eight weeks to fit in with school terms. Participants would be encouraged to carry out tasks related to their action learning project between teleconferences to ensure that maximum benefit is obtained from their group interaction time.

A pilot program will commence in January 2006 to evaluate the effectiveness of this model for professional development of farm partners of grain growers in South West Queensland.

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