Best practice in extension

DESIGNING AN EXTENSION PROGRAM? BEST PRACTICE INDICATORS

If you are designing or reviewing an extension program a good place to start is with the indicators of best practice detailed in this factsheet. These indicators were developed as part of a major research project, "What Works and Why". Five extension models were identified and best practice guidelines developed based on these models, which are as follows:

- group facilitation/empowerment
- technological development
- programmed learning
- information access
- personalised consultant.

ABOUT BEST PRACTICE

Best practice is not static, rather it is changing and improving as a result of practitioners examining what they do and their results. This means that we can't ever sit still and think we have achieved an endpoint of best practice. Instead we need to be aware of the importance of the 'reflection' part of the action learning cycle, i.e. reflect on performance so that we can draw conclusions and work to improve what we have done.

We also need to remember that action research cycles have an arrow taking us to the **next** cycle. Just because we come up with 'best practice' based on our reflection and research, doesn't mean that it can't be revised further over time and as a result of changed circumstances.

EXTENSION MODELS AND BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES

The Group Facilitation/Empowerment Model. Projects conforming to this model should provide support such as a facilitator where the need is indicated. By definition, the groups will ultimately need less support over time, although they may seek more help from outside of their immediate resource area.

Indicative best practice guidelines for designing extension programs using this model are as follows:

- Self formed groups are best
- Groups should have guidelines/boundaries and then be allowed to find and select their own facilitator
- Groups should follow a planning, action and review cycle
- Provide support and training for facilitators
- Provide opportunities for groups and representatives to meet and interact with other groups
- Encourage groups to become self-funding after an interval

Examples: *BestWOOL 2010; BeefPlan; Women in Dairying; Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project*.

FACTSHEET

The Technological Development Model. This model assumes a hands-on approach within defined boundaries, and has a clear goal about the type of technology to be developed. Projects will have a life, often to be replaced with projects that focus on related issues as critical needs become clearer.

Indicative best practice guidelines for designing extension programs using this model are as follows:

- Look to establishing strong industry-funder-government partnerships, where they are applicable
- Include a strong on-farm/in-community practice component to ground and test technology or practice change or both
- Take the broader 'target' community along with you through use of mass media and other communication channels
- Include local or regional committees to overview direction and developments
- Use incentives and awards to encourage interest in developments
- Link in to applied research and tie in with relevant legislation.

Examples: *Western Flower Thrips Management Strategy; Rural Water Use Efficiency Initiative; Living Landscapes; Farmscape on-line; Profitable Pastures Project; Swan-Canning Clean-up Program.*

The Programmed Learning Model. While this model may appear top-down, it must be based on widespread 'grassroots' involvement in defining needs and testing content to ensure relevance and participation.

Indicative best practice guidelines for designing extension programs using this model are as follows:

- Learning events must be based on researched and expressed industry needs
- Incorporate latest research on the topic
- Include local examples
- Change the focus to align with the needs of different geographical areas
- Pilot test the events with a range of participants
- Use a tried and tested TQM system
- Link outcomes with competency standards from the Vocational Education System (VET) from outset
- Provide for mentoring, particularly of small enterprises, after or between events
- Use interactive and small group work to balance 'lectures'
- Allow for participants to develop their 'next steps' by the end of the event

Examples: *Research to Practice® Viticulture; Master Tree Grower Program; Quality Management Training for the Vegetable, Melon, Stonefruit and Mango Industry; Grazing Land Management and Northern Nutrition workshops.*

The Information Access Model. These guidelines are incomplete as more examples are needed to prove them. It is obvious that clear guidance is needed for individuals and groups to seek and effectively use information from an information initiative.

Indicative best practice guidelines for designing extension programs using this model are as follows:

- If there is the model is based on a website, the information on it needs to be continually promoted
- The basis of finding information needs to be intuitive rather than classical 'library' based
- Specific information links or access points need to be circulated at timely intervals
- Some form of 'human' facilitation adds value
- Scanning for new information and links/linkages with other information initiatives is necessary

Examples: *DPI Queensland Website; Scienceworks Museum Melbourne*

The Personalised Consultant Model. While indicative best practice guidelines haven't been developed, one key point has been the need for consultants/mentors to encourage individuals to understand and make their own decisions based on their understanding of the facts and their own unique situation – rather than providing ready made answers.

Examples: There are numerous examples in all industries but these were not been collected for this project.

INTERACTION OF EXTENSION MODELS

In designing extension projects that support capacity building using the best practice guidelines outlined in the factsheet, it is important to note that the models don't operate in isolation. Rather, it was clear to the "What Works and Why" researchers that the models are interactive.

As an example, projects under the Group Empowerment/Facilitation Model relied on programmed learning projects to provide training when it was appropriate to the individuals or group involved. Similarly, many of the participants for Programmed Learning Model projects came from people involved in projects under the Group Empowerment/Facilitation Model and the Technological Development Model. Each of these models depended on initiatives following the Information Access Model for **information support** and follow up. Individuals involved in group extension processes often need to work with **mentors** or **consultants** to see how to appropriate learnings to their own situation. **Technological development** support is often needed to make advances in practice in key areas.

This means that a project initiated under the Programmed Learning Model needs to consider how it will provide ongoing access to **information support** for participants attending the course or link into an initiative that does. The projects under the Group Empowerment/Facilitation Model need to consider how they, or others, will support appropriate **technological development** when groups and communities see a need to focus in a certain way.

For more information see Factsheet Number 1, *What works and why in extension.*

PROJECT INITIATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

Projects are initiated by different people and organisations and for different reasons. Some projects analysed in the project resulted from demand from the community or growers. *BeefPlan* is an example of a Group Facilitation/Empowerment Model that resulted from grower demand and vision. In this model, self formed grower groups are provided with planning and facilitation support to help a group of growers to pursue their common interests and needs in a difficult environment.

BestWool 2010, which also fits in the Group Facilitation/ Empowerment Model, is an example where industry organisations joined with government to develop a strong facilitation network to support self-driven industry groups. With both *BeefPlan* and *BestWool 2010* funding bodies entered into partnerships to bring about the vision and meet the needs.

Other projects have started out as top down and evolved as a result of interaction between funders, researchers and the broader community. For example, *Research to Practice® Viticulture* was initially designed to facilitate practical training for grape growers and associated industry personnel in integrated pest management with a view to improving levels of adoption and assisting with informed decision making. Over the past 7 years (1996 – 2003), it has evolved to become a national "flagship" program for the industry covering a broad series of topics focussed mainly on sustainable economic growth and natural resource management and involving researchers and experts from numerous agencies and organisations.

The implication is that while extension projects can be initiated from any part of a relevant community of practice, it is critical to involve all of those parties who wish to contribute to its working.

About the project

"What Works and Why", funded by the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building and Innovation in Rural Industries. The aims of the project are to evaluate extension and education programs being implemented around Australia, looking at best practice as a means of sharing and learning, and to identify how new guidelines, principles and tools will generate effective information and learning.

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If you want to know more about the project of know of a project that could be included in the review contact Jeff or Kate:

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