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Fishbowls in the Field: Using Listening to Join Farmers, Ranchers, and Educations in Advancing Sustainable Agricultue

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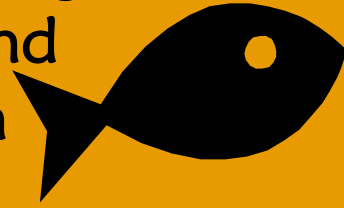
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Fishbowls in the

Field:

Using Listening to Join Farmers,
Ranchers, and
Educators in
Advancing
Sustainable Agriculture



~ Tools, proceedings, lessons learned, data, perspectives, and how-to's from the 2005 Reaping Our Rewards Conference, a project of the Nebraska Cooperative Development Center and the North Central SARE Professional Development Program.~

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Why another manual and why this format? *Introduction . . .*

Why *Reaping Our Rewards*? From 1992 to 2005, 586 research and development grants were awarded to farmers and ranchers in the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program's North Central Region (NCR SARE). Two hundred were granted in the states of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, alone. Farm/ranch research ideas for crop and animal production, processing, and marketing were innovations in their communities and regions. They were also relevant to farmers' and ranchers' day-to-day lives, questions to which they needed answers, in part because the information was not accessible through traditional agricultural education means.

These farmer/rancher researchers learned a great deal from their projects, engaged in local outreach, and filed their reports with the regional office. But, the information didn't seem to effectively percolate up to SARE decisionmakers, State SARE Coordinators, Land Grant University Extension Agents, NGO staff and others, where it could guide future work and funding priorities.



The NCR SARE Region

Not just another conference. In March 2005, a group of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North and South Dakota NCR SARE State Coordinators, educators, NCR SARE board members, and others created a conference in Sioux City, Iowa to gain knowledge from regional farmers and ranchers who had received SARE research funding. *Reaping the Rewards of Our SARE Investment: The Multi-State Farmer Linkage Program* was a NCR SARE Professional Development Program-funded, one and a half-day conference structured so that farmers and ranchers would identify:

- specific emerging needs for research and education in the North Central region,
- holes in research related to their interests,
- priorities for research and education planning,
- how best to deliver this information to farmers, and
- ways agricultural educators and farmers/ranchers can work more closely in the region and individual states on sustainable agriculture efforts.

Techniques that allow for more listening. In many meetings, even those held to gain community input, academics overpower members of the community, diminishing their voices. The "fishbowl" creates space for the on-the-ground experts: community members, to inform research and practice. In *Reaping Our Rewards*, masters-level social workers, acting as third-party facilitators, used fishbowl techniques to create common ground between educators and farmers/ranchers. The result? Answers to all the above, plus

- enhanced networking between farmers/ranchers, educators, and researchers,
- state SARE plans of work utilizing identified research and education priorities, and
- suggestions for improvement of the NCR SARE farmer grant program.

After *Reaping Our Rewards* was over, we started getting calls and e-mails from people who wanted to replicate this process in their own communities. Organizers had committed to writing a standard report for the conference, but re-thought that idea and decided to turn the report into a tool for future work – in essence, *Reaping Our Rewards* squared. So, this manual/report is organized such that each chapter provides techniques and guidance on how to create a productive listening experience, weaving together how-to's with on-the-ground experience, data, and outcomes from the *Reaping Our Rewards* Conference.

Each chapter begins with insight and perspective on why and how to organize the process. The remaining sections are:



Going Fishing . . . actual planning, scripts, tools and materials used for *Reaping Our Rewards*. Feel free to borrow, adapt, replicate, and otherwise use these tools.

The Harvest . . . What We Learned By Listening . . .

Actual data, experiences, and interviews from the conference and conference participants, including some retrospective interviews and what has been done with the findings and information since the conference.



Chapters conclude with a list of:

Things to think about . . .

This checklist of items or questions you might want to consider will help you think through what you want to accomplish, how you want to get there, and who should be involved. Good luck, and happy listening!

1 - Listening

What is gained by listening? Perspectives from farmers/ranchers, educators, and researchers.

Since 1928, researchers have known that more than 70% of our waking time is spent in communication. Of that, 45% is spent listening, with speaking, reading, and writing making up the balance.¹ For students in grades K-12, 65-90% of the school day is based on listening. Yet in school, and in life, few of us learn to listen.² Ours is a speaker-centric society, dominated by the idea that we need to persuade others to our point of view. Even those who try to listen often have a difficult time refraining from interjecting their own views in an attempt to bring the speaker around to their own perspectives.

To Whom Should We Listen? In agriculture and other fields, educators and researchers are largely trained that information goes only from the speaker to the learner. Farmers and ranchers are too-often perceived as only learners and not teachers or experts, though research supports their positive impact on other farmers and ranchers – even when their lessons were delivered solely through videotape!³ Perhaps this is because some of our core ideas of who a speaker “is” are formed early and are so deeply embedded we don’t recognize them, as Matalene suggests: *We listen because it sounds, looks, and maybe even smells as if the speaker is the sort of person conventionally listened to by those among whom we have grown up.*⁴

Listening is hearing, plus more.

~ Michael Purdy

Farmers & Ranchers as Customers. While some of us DID grow up listening to (and on manure-spreading or hog-sorting days, also smelling) farmers and ranchers, somehow once we are in educator roles, we find it difficult to stop speaking and open our ears. This is ironic, because farmers and ranchers are also our customers, our market for education, practice changes, research, etc. Starting in 1982, business researchers argued that the success of companies such as Proctor & Gamble, IBM, 3M and others rested on values such as listening to their customers.⁵ With customer desires already built in, the product sells itself. For the *Reaping Our Rewards* participants, researchers and educators needed to hear that farmers and ranchers wanted more sustainable agriculture research and practical applications.

Targeting Efforts. Until we know the story of the situation as it is told by the individuals, or groups who experience it, we don’t *really* know the story and can’t begin to address it.⁶ While educators and researchers can gather information from statistics, theory, overviews and abstracts, without listening to farmers and ranchers, they only have a “What do I see these people doing/ needing?” viewpoint, instead of a “What do these people *see themselves* doing/ needing?”⁷ Listening to farmers and ranchers to find out what they want and need can help target efforts with greater success. Without an understanding of reality as farmers and ranchers see it, they are at risk of creating information sheets that gather dust, websites that receive few hits, and workshops and

field days that go wanting for participants. Or, as one *Reaping Our Rewards* educator put it, “I threw a party and nobody came. I really don’t want that to happen any more.”

Understanding sustainable farmer and ranchers’ points of view also goes to making sure educators and researchers will be understood. Even though speakers may be doing all the talking, they can’t control the message. The listener really controls the final interpretation of the message being presented. The listener hears the speaker’s message and then modifies it so that it makes sense from the listener’s set of experiences in the world. Listening first, to understand the targeted audiences’ values, beliefs, and experiences in the world can go a long way toward getting your message across.⁸

Creating Community – and Teaching Resources – Through Listening.

Looking at this from a different perspective, some farmers and ranchers engaged in sustainable agriculture see University or Extension-based research and education as at best, irrelevant, and at worst, harmful to their way of farming, ranching and living. Based on their or shared experiences of these institutions supporting and promoting industrialized commodity agriculture, sustainable farmers and ranchers may have learned to be quite skeptical about or to just NOT listen to traditional sources of agricultural information. If researchers and educators are interested in working with sustainable farmers and ranchers, listening can help rebuild the relationship.

John Dewey held that the terms community, communication and in common are intrinsically interdependent.⁹ Part of creating community happens through relationship, as people speak and feel heard with each other. Once people feel heard, especially if they are not used to that, they are more likely to trust and even offer information, time, expertise, and other resources they have. This is especially true if the researcher or educator can offer them information, resources, or assistance that is genuinely helpful. As one *Reaping Our Rewards* farmer participant said, “Don’t discount Extension all together. There are some good eggs in there, but it takes some time to find them.”

Through the exchange of ideas, respect and assistance, sustainable farmers and ranchers and researchers and educators can build community. They also feel more confident that they have something to say that is worth someone else’s time.¹⁰ As they build their confidence and the relationship grows, they might be interested in sharing their stories further, perhaps on panels, through field days, and in workshops. In this scenario, communication is a joint venture in which both the speaker and listener perceive each other on even footing, adjusting continually to what is happening moment to moment. It is a co-creation, with great possibility.¹¹



Going Fishing . . . Setting the stage for listening . . .
pre-conference planning, materials, & publicity . . . the
first session . . . explanation of process . . .

Tone. From the get-go, the tone of *Reaping Our Rewards* was on valuing and honoring farmer and rancher experiences: From the brochure: . . .

Since 1992 nearly 200 SARE Producer grants have been awarded to farmers and ranchers in Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. This represents a wealth of knowledge and expertise that can benefit all those involved in agriculture . . .

Cost & Recruiting. The meeting was designed to be cost-free for farmers and ranchers. Travel, lodging, and childcare expenses were covered by NCRSARE Professional Development Program funds. Should the response be more than was expected, some state SARE Coordinators offered funding from their budgets to cover the rest. State SARE Coordinators were key recruiters for this conference, sending out e-mail and letters like this one from Beth Nelson of Minnesota:

Dear NCR-SARE Producer Grant recipients:

You recently received an invitation . . . to attend a SARE producer grant recipient gathering in Sioux City, IA . . . I wanted to encourage you to attend, and . . . (am) offering to cover any travel costs that . . . (the) grant can't cover, using our Minnesota SARE funds . . . As I said to the educators I invited to attend, we are excited about this opportunity to glean information from the many SARE grant recipients funded in these five states. . . The emphasis is on farmer to farmer exchanges, with the rest of us benefiting from those exchanges . . . I hope you are able to fit this gathering into your busy schedules . . .

Beth Nelson, NCR-SARE MN Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator.

Setting and Hospitality. The setting was the beautiful Briar Cliff University Assisi Center which featured multiple comfortable breakout rooms. Conference food was locally grown or brought in by participating farmers, and then prepared by the Briar Cliff chef. Restrooms were plentiful, notepaper, newsprint, markers, pens and pencils were all provided.

Structure Encouraging Relationship. *Reaping Our Rewards'* agenda was structured to move right into establishing connections between participants. After a very brief welcome by Bill Wilcke, the Regional Coordinator for NCR-SARE, participants went immediately to break-out sessions based on interest group. In these groups, independent facilitators led them through an introductory exercise and explained the process for the rest of the conference. Their script is below:

BREAKOUT 1: 4:30 – 5:30 PM, FRIDAY, MARCH 4

4:30 - 4:35 Facilitator Welcome and Purpose:

The Purpose of this session is for us all to get to know each other a bit, and to get an idea of your hopes for this conference. My name is (Facilitator's Name) and I will be facilitating. (Notetaker's Name) will be taking notes for us in this session and the morning sessions tomorrow.

Explanation of introduction (with flip chart prepared ahead of time)

4:35 - 4:55 Get to know your neighbor – all play

REAPING OUR REWARDS DAY ONE

3 pm	Registration
4 pm	Welcome & Introductions Bill Wilcke, Regional Coordinator of NCR SARE
4:30 pm	Break Out Sessions: Participants will meet in groups based on their area of interest in one of the following tracks: Animal Production, Crop Production, Marketing, Horticulture, and Other to review objectives and goals for the weekend.
5:30	Social hour
6:30	Banquet, "All Local Dinner" and Keynote Speaker: Dr. John Ikerd, Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics University of Missouri, Columbia. Dr. Ikerd will present: Twenty Years of Sustainable Agriculture

Workshop participants pair off. If even number, facilitator sits out (notetaker should take part), if odd, facilitator participates. Participants have 20 minutes to interview each other about the following areas:

- Name
- Where are you from?
- Tell a bit about your family.
- Describe what you do for a living – what kind of farming and other activities, what kind of education/organizational work
- What do you enjoy most about what you do?
- If you had a SARE grant or participated in one, what was it about? In a nutshell, what did you learn?
- What do you want to learn at this conference?

4:55 – 5:20 Facilitator invites workshop participants to introduce each other

Facilitator helps process. Notetaker records answers on charts (re: location, occupation/farming interest, most enjoyable, SARE grant experience, what they want to learn)

5:20 – 5:30 Facilitator explains what will happen in the rest of the sessions

Facilitator describes the fishbowl process, distributes handout with “rules.”

Tomorrow morning, we will begin at 9:00 am in this room. In the first session, we will use a discussion process called a fishbowl to learn what motivated the farmers in our group to apply for SARE research funding and carry out their projects, how they found the process, and what they think is necessary to move sustainable agriculture along. In a fishbowl, farmers will sit in an inner circle, and all educators and others will sit in an outside circle. I will facilitate a discussion involving only farmers, while we all listen to what they say. There is an exception – there will be one empty chair in the inner circle for educators and others to pop in, ask a clarification question, get that answered, and then move out to the outside circle again. I will be the referee for the process, and my job is to make sure the farmers have room to talk. So, I will invite you back out to your observer chair when it is time.

In the second session, we will all talk in a facilitated discussion about how farmers get information, what works best for them, who they go to when they get stuck, and what they need and what they think other farmers need to be more involved in sustainable agriculture.

All of the information from tonight’s session and the morning session will be used in your state groups to guide state sustainable agriculture plans. The North Central and National SAREs are also planning to use this information to improve and focus how they do things, so your involvement is very important.

So, have fun tonight, rest up, and I look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning!

The Harvest . . . Research and Education Priorities . . .

Overall Learning. Stated objectives for *Reaping Our Rewards* were to:

- Learn directly from farmers and ranchers about their experiences.
- Identify future research and education needs, and
- Set priorities and identify ways for sharing information.

These are the priorities that emerged from the work farmers/ranchers, educators and researchers completed during the conference:



1. *Youth:* Elementary, Middle, High School, and College Students need to learn about sustainable agriculture. Develop curriculum which includes field days.
2. *Farmer & Rancher Outreach:* Increase information sharing between farmers. Increase volume of information available. Create a platform for sharing (i.e. learning communities, mentorship, online, network opportunities).
3. *Public Outreach:* Educate people on the environmental, social, economic, and health benefits of sustainable agriculture systems.
4. *Financing:* Create economic indicators for loans. Develop a system for FNA and FSA to value land that is not conventional corn/bean rotation.
5. *Farmer Input:* Farmer and Rancher input needs to be incorporated into University research. More University based research that supports sustainable agriculture. (Micro-processing, local food systems, finding markets, economic comparison: Sustainable Agriculture vs. Conventional Systems)

Other Areas of Learning. Sustainable farmers and ranchers contributed other information, including:

- Why they developed their research idea and sought funding for it;
- How well the NCR-SARE Producer Grant process worked for them;
- How farm research is different from Experimental Station research;
- What is necessary to move sustainable agriculture along;
- Where they go for information and how they decide what is valuable;
- What are barriers and incentives for farmer and rancher involvement when it comes to being involved in education and research efforts (such as being speakers, holding field days, etc.)

Questions/processes used to get this information and what the participants shared will be covered in upcoming chapters.

What Was Different About *Reaping Our Rewards* . . . reflection by Pat Altrichter, farmer from Randall, Minnesota, SARE Producer grant recipient for Saskatoon Berry U-Pick operation

Other meetings always have somebody teaching, and someone hands out information. It's kind of a cut and dried thing. Here it was different because the farmers were talking about research (they were doing) that wasn't done yet. . . .It's unusual here that the farmers were the teachers. I think the hands on experience these people have had is probably more interesting to learn than something that has been printed to learn. This is something that was more at our level, not University style.

Maybe the Extension people sat (in the) outside (ring of the Fishbowl) because then they could pick up some ideas. It was a chance for them to learn more information too. If we put them in the circle, they might have said, "No it should have been done this way or that way." They might have their own ideas about what works and doesn't work, but we do too. One thing is that farmers have so many different ideas they are trying. They have the hands on experience, digging in the dirt, fighting the grasshoppers and bunny rabbits like we are.

There are some really good Extension people out there, but there are so many different situations, climates, soils, etc. What it says in the book is basic. The different workers can learn different quirks for their area, I guess, not to say that they don't know and pay attention, but it doesn't hurt to find out more. It is always fun to learn more. I think educators should build in time (in their workshops, etc.) for farmers to talk together (about what they are doing on the farm).

This (NCR-SARE Producer grant process) has really been fun. When we applied for the grant and had to do the outreach project and all, it seemed overwhelming and high tech. Now we are getting in the swing of

things, we are having a blast. We just love it. It is so much fun sharing the information, making new friends. At (*Reaping Our Rewards*) there was some good information. We learned from other farmers about (how to do) our SARE reports. We got some good ideas. We really enjoyed the national conference in Wisconsin (in summer 2006) and got to know some other farmers. That's the best part.

What I Learned from Listening . . . reflection by Jim Peterson, Nebraska State SARE Coordinator and University of Nebraska Extension Educator for Washington County.

. . . At least in my world, we go to a classroom session and teach and everyone else listens. The first person I ever saw NOT do that was Charles Francis (Professor of Agronomy and Horticulture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln), but he was superior . . . (At *Reaping Our Rewards*) . . . one of the things I learned to do was listen. I sometimes didn't agree with what was being said there, but I really got to listen.

It is very difficult to be in a (designated) listener role because sometimes you want to say and clarify things and you are not able to do that. I was quite impressed with what was being said by the farmers and ranchers. I am sure that I have incorporated some things into my education and programming based on what on what they said. I was just totally impressed with the level of the discussion going on during that period of time, especially in the fishbowl. That was very good and I appreciated that. I kept my mouth shut and I had a hard time doing that, . . . but I heard people really discussing . . . There were even a few people there who were not really convinced about sustainable agriculture being wise and by the end I think they were showing a glimmer of change and interest.

I think if you can do some kind of facilitated discussion, where you make the educators listen to the farmers, then they can get some good information. There's nothing to worry about in not being part of the discussion. You need to see what the people want and need, and then you can take the action that they think is needed. One of the things I do a lot is work with committees. This (experience at the Conference) has helped me to work better with committees. I always had a really difficult time working with committees because I didn't know how far to go, and now I find myself listening more than I have before.

(About the Conference) I was very pleased. My initial reaction to the program was concern. How many people would show up? But it met everything I wanted and more.

Things to think about . . . Creating a valuable listening environment . . .

- Who needs to speak?
 - How much and when?
- Who needs to listen?
 - How much and when?
- How are you going to create a listening environment?
 - How is the meeting space arranged? What is the tone? Is it swanky, inviting, sterile, or homey? Does it promote conversation?
 - Will it comfortably accommodate the number of people involved? Is it accessible? Will the setting bias the information offered?
- How does the structure of the meeting encourage good communication and partnership?

2 - Goalsetting

Determining the goals for your meeting. Deciding what you want to learn.

A long time ago in Hollywood, the “let’s put on a show!” musical genre was very popular. In these movies the plot (if there was one) was predictably limited (boy meets girl, they decide to put on a show, they fall in love, there is some misunderstanding, girl is angry with boy, they make up and live happily every after). But, audiences didn’t mind. Movie tickets weren’t that expensive then, entertainment options were limited, and the singing, dancing, and costumes made up for the (lack of) storyline. The studios turned pictures like this out with great success for quite a while.

Then the market changed. More entertainment options cropped up. People got tired of seeing the same movie dressed up with different costumes and music. Studios couldn’t just make a film, thinking that if it’s at the theatre, they will come. They had to start thinking about their market, setting goals, and really inviting their customers in.

In a similar way, years ago, farmers and ranchers had more limited options to gain additional agricultural education. In some areas, formal practice and marketing education were the sole domain of the Extension service and of course, ag product salespeople. Now we have the Internet, hundreds of journals and magazines, and workshops by multiple organizations. So, similar to film studios, agricultural educators find themselves needing to:

- Know their audiences
- Set goals about what will be accomplished and
- Decide what they and the audience want to take away in terms of message, data, or key learning.

Seeing Workshops and Meetings as Tools. Before doing anything else, *it is critical* to determine what your “big picture” looks like before starting to plan the actual workshop, meeting, or conference. Sometimes that is difficult to do, because successful event organization can seem like the end in itself. However, this is really not the case. Workshops, meetings and the like are only tools, much like hammers or screwdrivers. Many people automatically plan workshops as a way to educate others or gain information, reaching for their trusty hammer each time. The risk they run in not first considering what work really needs to be done and how it can best be accomplished, is that everything starts looking like a nail to them. In fact, it may be that a Phillips screwdriver (or a phone call, personal interview, survey, etc.) may do a better job for that circumstance. If you DO decide that a workshop or meeting is the best tool for the job, you need to set goals to:

- direct who will be invited,
- create interest in your target audience,
- keep the process focused,
- and generate the data and other outcomes you desire.

Creating a Goal. Working with others in your planning group, it is helpful to step back and determine several things:

- What do we need to know? What kind of information is it?

- What would we do with the knowledge if we had it?
- Who has that information?
- Who needs to hear the information?
 - Is this meeting less about discovering new information and more about particular listeners hearing information in a new way?
 - This audience could be lenders, institutional customers (hospitals, schools, etc.), policymakers, etc.
- How does the process of getting the information fit into our other work (e.g., can you combine an information gathering opportunity with a membership meeting, appreciation dinner, Continuing Education requirement or other event)?

Keeping It Manageable and Focused. You must be focused and disciplined if you want to get information that is valuable, especially if you have a short timeslot. Otherwise, you will be at risk for the “while we’re at it” syndrome, and your meeting, like many home remodeling projects will run amok, addressing a little bit here, and a little more there, with nothing really to show for your time. Further, it will be hard for your target audiences (listeners and hearers) to understand how they fit in. With your partners, develop a goal statement and stick with it, resisting the urge to let the meeting creep. Logic Modeling is one tool that can help in keeping you focused, requiring the planning to address:

- The problem or need (what is currently)
- The goal (what could or should be)
- Objectives you can use to reach the goal
- Methods to do that
- Inputs you will need (money, time, facilities, etc.)
- Short-term outcomes (measurable short-term changes) and
- Long-term outcomes (measurable long-term changes)

A modified Logic Model for *Reaping Our Rewards* is presented below, in “Going Fishing.”

Communicating Your Message to Your Audience. If your goal setting is thorough, you have determined the answers to the above questions, and perhaps even completed a logic model plan for your work. If you have, it will be easy to communicate to your audience why they should be part of your event. You will be able to articulate your goal, discuss the plotline for what you are going to cover, and even share what’s going to happen as a result of their participation. In effect, you will have a great trailer for your movie and can now tend to the rest of your planning, fully expecting your audience to show up on opening night.



Going Fishing . . . Setting the goals for the meeting . . .

Goal. Planning committee participants included four state SARE Coordinators, a member of the NCR SARE administrative and technical committee who had some experience reviewing farmer and rancher proposals, the Project Coordinator, and

the lead facilitator. The committee developed the following Logic Model to focus *Reaping Our Rewards* and to gain funding for the conference.

Figure 1. North Central SARE Professional Development Program *Reaping Our Rewards* Logic Model

Problem/Need: Knowledge and interests of NCR SARE Producer grant recipients are not being fully utilized to advance sustainable agriculture research and education at the state and regional levels.						
Goal: The knowledge and interests of NCR SARE Producer grant recipients inform and advance sustainable agriculture research and education at the state and regional levels.						
Objectives	Methods	Inputs	Short-Term Outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-term Outcomes	Evaluation Indicators
NCR SARE Producer grant recipients provide information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their on-farm research experiences. • future research and education needs and priorities and • best ways for sharing information. 	2 facilitated "fish bowls" of 5 tracks 2 State specific breakout sessions 1 networking break and evening banquet	Grant Funds In-kind time of farmer/ranchers In-kind Facility Rental Matching for meals and breaks State Sustainable Agriculture Coordinators support for educators' travel expenses 4-5 Student Volunteers 3-5 Student Facilitators In-kind video and computer equipment	Awareness: educators become aware of SARE producer grant recipients Knowledge: Educators know the impact and effectiveness of SARE producer grants Attitudes: Educators identify farmers/ranchers for future mentoring and training Skills: Educators become better able to serve farmers/ranchers in their state by learning direct from them	25 farmers/ranchers participate in educators and NC SARE programs and activities 4 local farmer support groups for educators and SARE established Educators, NC SARE, State Coordinators, and AC Will respond to farmer/rancher needs and concerns Farmer base knowledge from SARE Producer Grants will be incorporated into 4 state POWs in 2005	North Central SARE AC will adopt 2 or more research and education priorities 4 State Sustainable Agriculture Coordinators & 4 other educators have 3 farmers/ranchers in their future PDP training NCR SARE AC will designate and implement two priorities for research and education RFAs	Educators and farmers/ranchers surveyed 3 to 6 months post program 3-5 graduate students and 4-5 student volunteers surveyed on their knowledge of farmer/rancher/educator issues

The Harvest . . . Why On-Farm Research and How Well the SARE Process Worked for Them . . .



The goal for *Reaping Our Rewards* was to use farmer /rancher experience and input to advance sustainable agriculture in their states and regions. Part of that had to do with understanding why they developed their research idea and sought funding for it, how well the (then-called) NCR-SARE Producer Grant process worked for them, and how farm research is different from Experimental Station research. Below are the themes from those farmer/rancher discussions, with quotations to illustrate the points raised.

- ***Why they developed their research idea and sought funding for it***

Regardless of the track (Animal Production, Crops, Horticulture or Marketing) farmers and ranchers attended, they developed research ideas because they wanted to

- a) develop options or practices they needed but couldn't find information on elsewhere
- b) try out a promising concept they had heard about from another region
- c) move into a market or crop that they hadn't been able to try before, and
- d) show other farmers and ranchers in their area that sustainable practices (including working cooperatively and marketing in a new niche) could work.

NCR-SARE funding allowed them to invest both time and materials to fully implement a practice or method, document its outcomes, and engage in educating others. From one farmer, "*This is how farmers give actual input on research questions. When it's your idea, you wake up at night thinking about it! It's something you're interested in and excited about. You've thought it through a long time.*" And another, "*I was excited to find out about the program. Farmers have no shortage of ideas, but time is limiting. The Producer Grant gives me time to do it.*"

- ***How well the NCR-SARE Producer Grant process worked for them***

Using a rapid-fire rating system, participants were to give the SARE process a number from 1 (representing the process being incredibly difficult) to 10 (meaning the process was very easy). Scores ranged from 1 to 10, with the bulk from 7-8. They had ideas about how the process could work better. Primary themes are below. Those with a ✓ beside them have been acted on by NCR-SARE or State Coordinators.

- ✓ Adjusting the payment timeline so money would be available at the time materials, etc. were purchased;
 - ✓ Changing the name of the program from "Producer Grant" to "Farmer and Rancher Grant" to place the emphasis on the person, and not on the product
 - ✓ Provide grant writing assistance for potential applicants. The grant writing process is intimidating for some. Resources for grant writing can be available at not-for-profits, through some Extension offices, and through the SARE State Coordinators.
- Give applicants feedback on why their proposal wasn't funded. With 75% of all applications unfunded, it would be helpful to applicants to know what kept their proposal from making the cut. From a participant,

Some had concerns about grant writing ability (or lack thereof) overly influencing who was funded, regardless of the merit of the idea. Said one Horticulture group member, "*I have been going to conferences where writing ability is valued more than research ideas. Producer grants should be different. Maybe proofing your spelling shows you have a strong commitment to your project, but these grants should really be reviewed by other farmers and ranchers for the why, when, and how. Farmers should not have to*

compete against professional grant writers.” And input from another, “I get inspired after submitting (my grant proposal). I do think reviewers should look at replicating some ideas from one area to another. What is old news in one place is a radical idea in another.” For a member of the CROPS group, the process was helpful in identifying, in a deliberate way, good ideas for his farm. “Ask questions that are meaningful – your farm, your problems. You can pursue it in a thoughtful process all the way from thinking about the problem to sharing the ideas with neighbors and then applying for the SARE grant.”

- ***How farm research is different from Experimental Station research***

Participants felt that farm or ranch-based research was similar to Experimental Station research in that they both involved some controls and replication of techniques. Farmers/ranchers might have to guard against the impulse to make corrections if the experiment was going poorly, since that would not follow scientific protocol.

Regarding differences, university-based research was seen as a starting point, but the group felt that farm- and ranch-based research was more practical, performed at a realistic scale, and less expensive. Further, farm- and ranch-based research was thought to save time and lead to real innovation. Farmer/rancher research was described as more specific to the region where it is carried out. It also was characterized as being measured by a different set of criteria. Successful university-based research was seen as refining processes for mass production, whereas on-farm or ranch research was successful relative to its positive impact on farm, social, economic, and spiritual systems. As one Animal Production group member said, *“Universities want to control nature, and farmers want to watch, figure out why and how. University research is about proving points, farmer research is about figuring out what works.”*

Some participants expressed wanting Extension researchers to partner with sustainable farmers and ranchers to perform experiments on their farms and ranches, a program that is in place in some areas.

Things to think about...

Setting and accomplishing your objectives. . .

- What are you trying to accomplish?
- Who’s your audience? Why would they want to be a part of this?
- How will you know you’ve accomplished your objectives?
 - What would that look like if it happened?
- What is the best tool for what you want to do?
 - Data gathering meeting?
 - Survey
 - Interviews?
- What are three reasons for choosing this tool out of all the others?
- What kind of inputs are you going to need in terms of time, money, space, participants, etc.?

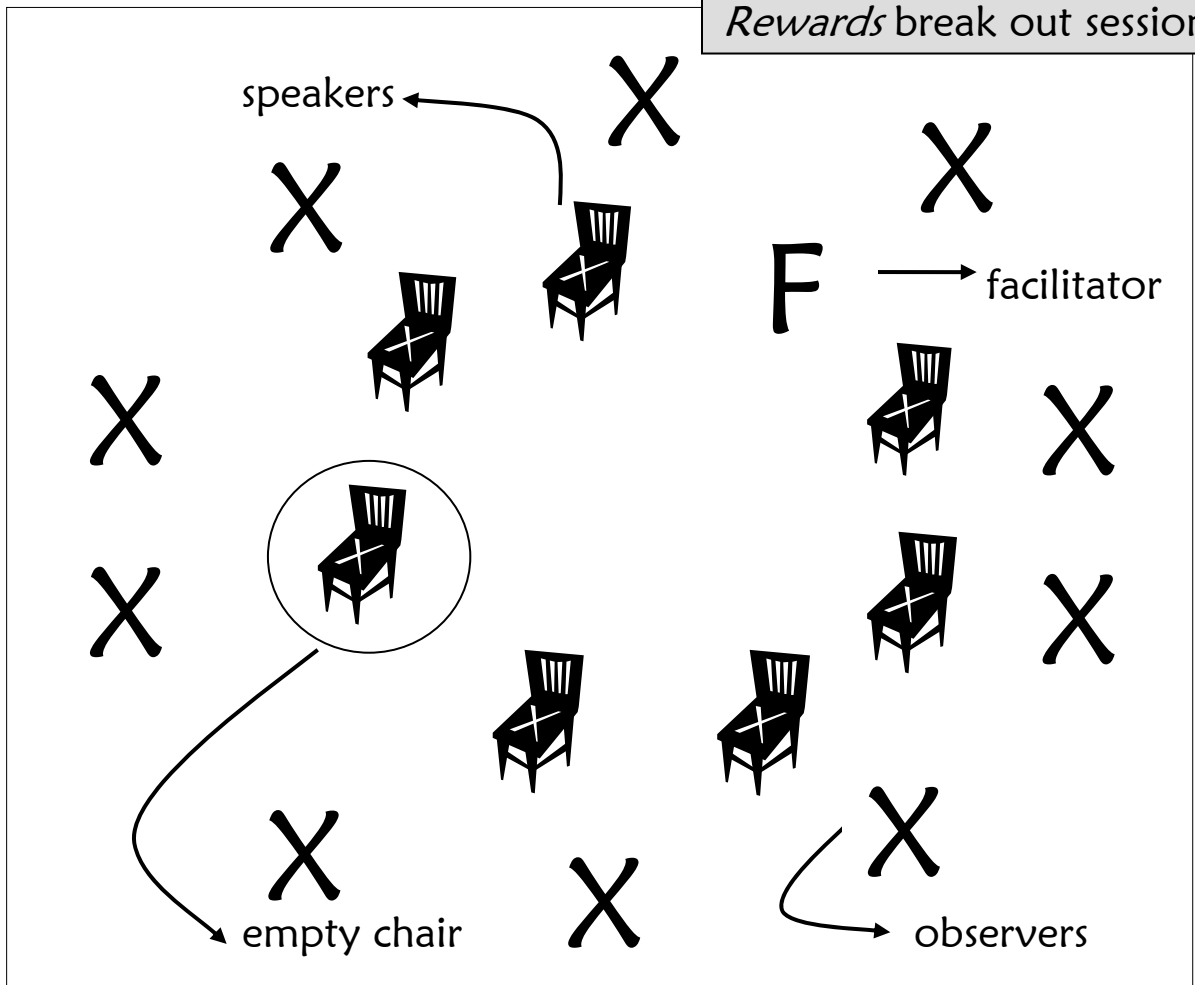
3 - Fishbowls

What they look like, how to use them, and what you can get from the exercise.

A fishbowl is a communication technique that divides a group into speakers and listener-observers. It usually involves two rings of chairs, with the inner ring for speakers, and the outer ring for observers. This can be used to advance many purposes including:

- *To advance consensus*, using a few members from the group to have a focused conversation while others observe, to focus key points of agreement or disagreement.¹²
- *To clarify opposing perspectives*, in the case of strongly conflicting opinions, one group discusses their view while the other listens, and then sides exchange locations so that the second perspective is presented. And,
- *To reduce barriers to communication and information generation*, in situations in which one group is usually considered *learners, listeners, or followers* and the other group is usually considered *teachers, speakers, or leaders*. In this case, the first group speaks while the second listens, a turnabout in roles. See below for an example of this arrangement.¹³

Chair set up for *Reaping Our Rewards* break out sessions.



Farmers and Ranchers in a Fishbowl. For the *Reaping Our Rewards* conference, agricultural educators and researchers were in the listener-observer group, while the farmers and ranchers were in the inner circle, engaged in a discussion facilitated by an independent party. In this version, there was one empty chair that could be used by observers to enter the circle, ask a question, and then leave again, once the question was answered. Facilitators managed the process, guiding the conversation so that all the farmers and ranchers could participate. They also preserved the boundary between the farmer-rancher speakers and the researcher-educator listeners. That proved to be tricky at times because researchers and educators are not used to being in a listening role, and wanted to add their comments and questions as time went on.

Who speaks sows, who listens, reaps.
~ Argentinian Proverb



Going Fishing . . . Fishbowl preparations and set up . . .

Planning. To achieve the goals of *Reaping Our Rewards*, farmers and ranchers needed to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experience while researchers and educators

listened. The fishbowl was chosen as the best way to do that within limited time and space resources. Using the fishbowl for four tracks (crops, animal production, horticulture and marketing) required four facilitators who were familiar with the technology, but not necessarily with the topic to be discussed. The lead facilitator created a guide to the process, and a script used with each group. Each facilitator introduced the fishbowl idea the first night of the conference, and then revisited it during the first session on Day Two:

Workshop 2: 9:00 – 10:15 am, Saturday, March 5 – Fishbowl: farmers talk only, with educators and researchers observing.

9:00 – 9:10 Facilitator Welcome and Rule Overview

(Chairs are already set up in a fishbowl arrangement.) Facilitator greets participants and guides farmers and ranchers to the inner circle, and researchers and educators to the outer circle. This is easier if everyone comes into the room on time, so it can be clearly explained once. After that, the facilitator has to gracefully invite latecomers to sit in the correct places.

The purpose of this meeting is to learn what motivated the farmers in our group to apply for SARE research funding and carry out their projects, how they found the process, and what they think is necessary to move sustainable agriculture along.

REAPING OUR REWARDS DAY TWO

- 8 am Continental Breakfast
- 8:30 am Morning greeting
- 9 am Break Out Sessions: Continuation of “track” based sessions. Topics: What have you done on your farm/ranch, what does it mean to be a farmer/rancher researcher, and what are the needs for research and education.
- 10:15 am Break
- 10:30 am Break Out Sessions: “Track” based sessions: How can farmers/ranchers be involved in education and research, what can educators assist farmers/ranchers with, and what are the best ways for everyone to connect.
- 12 noon Lunch
- 1 pm Break Out Sessions: Afternoon sessions will be State focused. Participants will meet with others from their state and determine how information from previous sessions can be used in their state.
- 2 pm Break
- 2:15 pm Break Out Sessions: Continuation of State sessions.
- 3:30 pm Closing and goodbye.

As a reminder, farmers are sitting in the inner circle, and all educators are sitting in the outside circle. I will facilitate a discussion involving only farmers, while we all listen to what they say. There is an exception – there is one empty chair in the inner circle for educators and others to pop in, ask a clarification question, get that answered, and then move out to the outside circle again. I will be the referee for the process, and my job is to make sure the farmers have room to talk. So, I will invite you back out to your observer chair when it is time.

The Harvest . . . What is Necessary to Move Sustainable Agriculture Along . . .

Conference organizers wanted to know what farmers and ranchers thought was necessary to move sustainable agriculture along. Facilitators used the fishbowl and earlier questions to build comfort within the group so that they felt they could be very open with their opinions and ideas. *Italics* indicate quotations from participants.



- ***What is necessary to move sustainable agriculture along?***

Farmers and ranchers identified factors and resources that could help advance sustainable agriculture, what hinders others from changing from conventional to sustainable practices, and what keeps sustainable farmers and ranchers motivated.

Things that could be done/used to *advance* sustainable agriculture included:

- **Policy and Incentives:** Changing farm policy so that subsidies for conventional production are reduced; Increasing funding for sustainable practices
- **Research, Innovation, and Information:** Expanding research aimed toward sustainable farmers and ranchers; Increasing the flow of information in terms of volume, dissemination efforts, and ease of access to it; Exchanging information with other farmers and ranchers at conferences like *Reaping Our Rewards*; Trying new ideas on your farm or ranch and being willing to have low-risk failures, and then share those lessons learned with others; Sharing what you learn on farm tours and giving feedback to other farmers.
- **Support:** Mentoring for farmers who are interested in changing practices; Having support from like-minded individuals. *"We need companionship. We need to find our herd – it's not a bad thing – just recognize it."*
- **Public Relations and Conviction:** Convincing your neighbor to try sustainable practices by them seeing you succeed; Talking about what you do with pride, and in ways that you are not describing a "backward operation." *"They need to see this is not a hippie, back to the future kind of thing."*; Being grounded in your mind as to why you are doing what you are doing; Making your practices more public by putting them close to the road so the neighbors can see; Sharing your farm or ranch's economics – *"It's hard to argue with \$14 (organic soy) beans."*; Hosting farm tours to demonstrate practices; and Getting the average citizen to really care about where their food comes from: *"If we made people aware of what industrial ag is REALLY about, then things might change."* And, on a positive note, in regards to sustainable eating, *"Be excited about your food!"*

What was felt to *hinder* sustainable agriculture included:

- **Financing and Credit:** Banking institutions including the Farm Service Agency don't know how to use sustainable agriculture economic indicators for loans. They are too reliant on subsidies, crop insurance,

etc. as markers. Further, they don't know how to appraise values for things like organic land and cross-fenced pastures.

- **Fear of Ridicule and Peer Pressure:** Stigma is attached to different practices like hoop houses, cross-fencing, weedy fields etc., *"You need a thick skin when it comes to things like organic weeds. The neighbors drive by slowly, shaking their heads."*
- **Farm Policy:** Federal farm policy encourages farmers to get bigger, but sustainability is more possible with a limited number of acres.
- **Lack of Farmer Knowledge and Awareness:** Conventional farmers don't know anything different from what they have always done, and it is hard to get them to change.

Motivations for practicing sustainable agriculture (in the words of participants) included:

- **Spirituality:** *"Faith is a part of my life. The issues I am involved in are bigger than myself."*
- **Stewardship:** *"I want to leave the land better than I found it. I have a century farm I want to sustain and restore it back to the way it was when I was a kid."*
- **Health:** *"My family has experienced cancer."*
- **Challenge:** *"I want to show the difference between conventional and sustainable agriculture."*
- **Quality of Life:** *"I enjoy the wildlife around my farm, and I have no debt. Life is measured in many ways."*
- **Fellowship:** *"I enjoy getting together with others that want to stay small. We are of like mind on many other things that are important."*

How It Felt to Be in the "Outer Circle." . . . reflection by Paul Hay, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Educator for Gage County.

(Outside of the fishbowl) you're kind of forced to listen. There are some real pluses, but there are some minuses because you didn't get a free flow of information. I wrote it down and brought back the idea of it, but I don't know if I would use it again or not. I had a mixed reaction to it. The pluses are that a person in the outside ring has to listen. If you are going to get something out of this, you have to take notes, listen, take it for what its worth. You are going to see a real valuable interchange by just the (people inside the fishbowl). . . . You can create a zone (so farmers can) say what's on their mind. There is an interchange, but I'll tell you one thing, I've never been beat up nor applauded so much for being an Extension educator. One speaker might say, "University Extension will do nothing for us," and then sometimes by the next speaker someone will come up saying they wanted to learn more together (with Extension) to solve our problems. I heard all kinds of points of view.

Sometimes I didn't think it was really working well. I thought a strong moderator was needed to target and follow what I thought were important points . . . You need to direct it and draw some of the things out and I don't think that happened in most cases. But then you are interfering. (In this scenario it was) follow the wandering trail, and then when something was interesting there (to me), then by the time someone in the outside could have drawn the point, you were way past it. . . . Another way to do that, let's say I had an hour timeslot. And I have got five people that are researchers or talented people in the area of discussion, my thought in that is that I will give each person 5 minutes, now I've got 25 minutes used up, 35 left, then as a moderator I can then bring questions from the audience or interject points on key things they brought up and draw that out, so you could do that with a panel in question/answer format. I am looking at more of a targeted direction with that, and this (*Reaping Our Rewards*) was looking for a more broad one.

I went there to learn. I enjoyed the meeting, the speakers, going to the Floyd Boulevard Local Foods Market in Sioux City. I did try, when I was interested in what someone said in the inner circle to find them later and find out more that they were talking about, concrete practices.

One of the things I learned at that (*Reaping Our Rewards*) meeting I am using for workshops I'm having (during Winter 2006-2007) for farmers who want to become organic . . . They have to be arm in arm with the certifying agency or else they can get derailed. I learned that. Any time you do anything in this area, you have to have someone from the certifying agency because in the whole organic world it is easy to get crossways on it.

Things to think about..

Fishbowls . . .

- Is a fishbowl the right kind of process for what you want to achieve?
- What purpose would a fishbowl serve in your situation?
- What kind of fishbowl do you want to use?
- If you are using a fishbowl:
 - Who should be in the inner circle?
 - Who should be in the outer circle?
 - Who will monitor and guide the process?
 - Who will set up the chairs and get things ready?
 - Will you use a chair for clarifying questions?
 - How long will it last?

4 - Facilitation

Third-party facilitation: What it is, why you want it, and where you can find it.

To *facilitate* is defined as easing, alleviating, advancing or being of use. Meeting facilitators perform all of these functions as they make meetings easier and more productive. Facilitators help a group move through an agenda, generate information, make decisions, or reach a goal. In rough terms, meetings fall into two categories: regularly scheduled group meetings that are usually run by a Chair or President, and special one-time or single purpose meetings. In some meetings, the facilitator acts as the Chair, but in others, there is a special process to get to a particular goal. Goals for special meetings can include decision making, strategic planning, mission development, mediation of conflict, and community priority setting, among others.

Many people confuse a facilitator with a trainer. A trainer's job is to impart a certain amount of information to educate the group about a set topic. A facilitator is not responsible for the content of the meeting but how the meeting is run and whether or not the group reached their objectives for the meeting. In other words, the facilitator is responsible for the *means*, while participants are responsible for what the meeting is about, or the *ends*. To ensure this, the group needs to agree on what will be discussed or decided during the meeting, and on how they will accomplish these objectives. In an information-gathering process such as *Reaping Our Rewards*, the meeting's purpose was determined by the planning group (see Goal setting above), and a process designed to meet those goals.

Synergy takes place best
in structure.

~ Nancy Kline

Roles a facilitator can play:

- Managing the process
- Suggesting and enforcing ground rules
- Assisting in decision-making processes
- Keeping time so meetings start on time, end on time, and stay on task
- Clarifying and translating people's positions, interests, ideas, and input
- Guiding groups in brainstorming ideas
- Helping groups prioritize or focus ideas they develop
- Linking ideas and concepts together as they are developed by the group
- Aiding members to further develop their own thoughts
- Finding commonalities in the group members or their interests/ideas
- Helping to create timelines for the group's further actions
- Managing conversation to draw out those who speak little and curb those who speak too generously.

Facilitators ask questions and engage in active listening. They are aiming for widespread understanding of what participants have said. Often that means paraphrasing a statement and/or linking it to the goal of the meeting. Facilitators also use ground rules (standards of meeting behavior) and process suggestions to help meetings stay effective. At times, the facilitator may need to intervene by enforcing ground rules and deal with participants who have become difficult, argumentative, or try to take over the meeting.

Facilitator Tasks Before and During Meetings. *Before a meeting, a good facilitator will engage in planning with members of the group or others who are convening the meeting. Elements of that planning include: (again) deciding the purpose of the meeting, identifying the desired outcome, creating an invitation list based on who needs to be at the meeting, engaging in detailed agenda planning, arranging the room, and deciding on a decision-making method (if one is necessary).*

While running the meeting, a facilitator will:

- Explain the purpose of the meeting
- Discuss the meeting's desired outcome
- Be clear about the start and stop times
- Explain the agenda clearly
- Introduce ground rules of behavior
- Create and maintain a safe environment by protecting participants from attack and ensuring that everyone participates in the meeting.
- Record ideas, insights, and information, and then post them in the room in full view. (See "Recorder" section below for more information.
- Clearly describe all processes that you are using at the time the group needs to know them, and then answer clarifying questions.
- Provide positive reinforcement to participants
- Tentatively summarize or repeat participants' words to confirm understanding and make certain the whole group hears them
- Tentatively recap recent sections of the group's discussion
- Offer wording for concepts the group is struggling to describe
- Remain neutral, refraining from contributing or evaluating ideas of the group
- Remind the group of the objectives for their meeting
- Close the meeting well in a fitting way, including summarizing the work the group has done and having some evaluation of the meeting. ¹⁴

From "Meeting Facilitation"

by Prof. John Barkai, Univ. of Hawaii at Manoa

Ground Rules or Guidelines are standards for meeting behavior that are agreed to at the beginning of the meeting and the group agrees to abide by them. The facilitator asks the group for the power to enforce the ground rules during the meeting.

- Respect others
- Be clear and brief
- It's OK to disagree
- Everyone participates, no one dominates
 - Limited air time
 - The first person to raise a hand should not always speak first.
- Listen as an ally to understand
- Avoid interrupting others
- Resist the temptation to put words into another person's mouth
- Maintain an open and positive attitude
- Be open and non-defensive about your own ideas
- Honor the time limits
- Each person has __ minutes to speak
- No one pulls rank in the room
- Be solution oriented
- Listen for understanding
- Stay focused
- You have permission to be creative
- Please stay to the end
- Ambiguity is OK
- We can learn from each other
- Trust yourself, the process, and those you work with
- Conversation creates possibilities
- Hard on the problem; soft on the people
- Avoid side conversations

Things You Might Hear Facilitators Say.

- I'll be acting as your facilitator for the group. My job is to guide the meeting, not add ideas or judge yours. I will be acting as a neutral party and want to get your ideas down. Please correct me if I am not getting that done for you.
- The reason you are here today is to . . .
- When we are finished with our meeting we hope to have . . .
- Before we proceed, let's get to know each other a little better. Please introduce yourself by telling us your name, what your expectations are for this meeting, (and information that is germane to the discussion).
- To help our conversation go well, I have some ground rules for us to use here. Is there anyone who won't be able to live with this list?
- The purpose of today's meeting is . . .
- Thank you for your idea George.
- To narrow this list down a little, what if each of you voted for your top 3 picks?
- Sarah, you're shaking your head, what is it that is bothering you about this idea?
- Eric, we haven't heard from you yet. What do you think about X?
- Thanks, but I think we already have that idea on the list. Anything else?
- What will we need to do at our next meeting?
- You identified needs for further information. Who is willing to follow this up? ...
- During the meeting today we did X, Y, and Z . . .
- Before we go, can we please quickly evaluate how the meeting was for you?
- We're always interested in improvement. Do you have some ideas on how meetings like this can be better in the future?

The Role of Recorder. In some meetings, there is a facilitator and a recorder. This is optimal, as it frees up the facilitator to really focus on the process of the meeting, reading the faces, voices, body language, and interpersonal dynamics in the group while another person is charged with writing down lists of ideas and the sense of the group. This is usually done on newsprint and posted within sight of the group to act as a running journal of the work they are doing, sometimes referred to as "group memory."¹⁵ Group memory helps focus the group, allows people to feel that their ideas are legitimate, makes individual ideas the property of the group, prevents repetition and saves time, allows group members to focus on the idea and not the person who suggested it, and can be turned into group minutes. The recorder needs to be a true scribe for the group, capturing and using their key words and phrases, and offering phrasing when the group is struggling to frame a concept. The recorder must be neutral and is very helpful in keeping track of information.

Why You Want Facilitation. Meetings have a bad rap for being time-sinks that don't show any results. As magician and writer Robert Orben said, ". . . meetings tend to be like panda matings. The expectations are always high, and the results usually disappointing." Meetings, badly run, can result in lack of movement, frustration, and a waste of precious time. On the other hand, well-run meetings can result in rich discussion, exciting ideas, new momentum, and real action toward the goals you want to accomplish. Facilitation can make the difference. With facilitation, the brainpower of all participants is unleashed as the facilitator takes care of the process. The facilitator can help:

- bring an issue to a head that has been simmering for a while but doesn't seem to get anywhere,
- help a group reach decisions,
- work with a group to help them see new solutions to old, tired problems,
- move from idea to a gameplan and timeline for implementation,
- provide an outside perspective that can keep communication going and result in some conclusions,
- manage competing agendas in a group that are keeping the group from moving forward or gaining buy-in for a plan,
- introduce controversial issues that other group members are afraid of approaching,
- ensure that all participants can be heard,
- prevent one or more group members from dominating the meeting,
- bring weight and meaning to a meeting by being an outside "consultant" and
- stimulate new thinking and excitement around your mission or goals.

Where Can You Find Facilitation? There are many sources for facilitation. Some are expensive and others are not. There numerous consulting businesses that offer facilitation (a 0.13 second Google search on "facilitation" returned 17,400,000 hits.) There are also many web-based handouts, guides, and other sources of helpful information on facilitation, some of which are in the last chapter of this book. Certainly, most people could benefit from learning about good facilitation, because those skills carry over into being good meeting participants. But, where can you find good, low-cost facilitation services?

Institutional Sources. The USDA Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service and Schools of Social Work around the country are good places to look for facilitation. There are Extension specialists involved in family education, community development, school-based programs and other areas who have skills in facilitation. The on-line *Journal of Extension* chronicles an impressive amount of Extension involvement in community organizing, board development and other work (www.joe.org). Surely within the Extension system in your state there are people who can facilitate meetings for sustainable agriculture efforts.

Schools of Social Work are another good source of facilitators. People with or earning their Master's degrees in Social Work (MSWs) are typically very good at group processes and can work with any group once they understand some background about who you are and what you are trying to accomplish as a group. To find a School of Social Work in your area, you can go to the Council on Social Work Education webpage (www.cswe.org), click on "Accredited Programs" and then search by state. If there are no schools in your area, another option is to look for social workers through local agencies such as community mental health centers, schools, the United Way, and others. If you think your facilitation needs will be ongoing, it is helpful to find a local person who will work with you over time, rather than hiring someone from far away which could prove to be expensive and more complicated. Further, understanding some of your community's culture and background can be a real benefit.

Help One Another. Another good option for facilitation is to trade services with another group, county, region, etc. For example, if you have a colleague in another, relatively close-by community, you could arrange with that person to trade facilitation services.

Facilitation is a good idea for almost all meetings, but for many, especially recurring, regular meetings, you will do fine with someone with fair to moderate facilitation skills. If you are planning a more critical event that happens just once or infrequently (such as conference or a strategic planning session), you may want to spend the time and some money to find someone with good to excellent skills.



Going Fishing . . . Planning Facilitation for *Reaping Our Rewards* . . .

Recruiting Facilitation Expertise. The conference committee knew that good meeting process would be critical to getting the information they needed out of *Reaping Our Rewards*. Further, they wanted to be sure that farmers and ranchers would have the freedom and comfort to talk. To achieve these ends, they asked Julia Kleinschmit Rembert, BJ, MSW to assist with the process

planning and head up facilitation for the conference. Kleinschmit Rembert is a Clinical Assistant Professor for the University of Iowa's School of Social Work in their Sioux City part-time MSW program. She specializes in policy, community organizing, and program development, with an emphasis on grant writing and facilitation. She is also a past NCR-SARE Producer grant recipient (for raising and marketing heirloom poultry) and served on the NCR-SARE Technical committee for approximately seven years, reviewing Research and Education and Producer grant proposals. Kleinschmit Rembert recruited three other social workers as facilitators, including Sylvia Kuennen, long-time professor of Social Work for Briar Cliff University in Sioux City, Iowa, and two then-University of Iowa MSW graduate students.

Planning and Preparation. Starting with the Committee's stated goals for the conference, Kleinschmit Rembert worked with them to develop the flow for the two days of work, areas of interest to be addressed in each session, and questions and data-gathering strategies that would be used to get the information and create the "feel" that the committee wanted for the conference. A few days before the conference, Kleinschmit Rembert met with the three other facilitators to give them a bit of NCR-SARE background, instruct them on the particular processes and tools they would be using for this conference, walk them through the sequence of events, and review some concepts about good facilitation.

Facilitators as Instruments. The two student facilitators were apprehensive as the conference drew nearer. They thought their lack of knowledge about sustainable agriculture practices would negatively impact their ability to facilitate farmer and rancher-focused discussions. However, as the conference unfolded and they worked through the sessions, they found that they didn't need to know about the content: Their jobs were to manage the process, encourage discussion, monitor boundaries, and ensure a successful meeting that achieved the Committee's goal. The farmers, ranchers, researchers, and educators had more than enough content. In fact, one student remarked in a reflection after the conference, "I was worried going into this because I didn't know that much about farming. Now, after it's done, I think it was better that I didn't have any pre-existing knowledge. It allowed me to be truly neutral with no risk of injecting my own opinion. I could just act as the group's instrument."

The Harvest . . . What Farmers/Ranchers Need to Be Involved . . .

Conference organizers recognized that farmers and ranchers can be great resources in advancing sustainable agriculture research and education efforts. They used the facilitated discussion to identify barriers and incentives for farmers and ranchers to attend and speak at workshops, hold field days, participate in on-farm research, etc.



We're No Experts. *Reaping Our Rewards* participants were very reluctant to be considered experts of any kind. One farmer said, quite energetically, *"We are not experts! We are learning! We want the opportunity to get together with other farmers. We don't want to claim expertise, we just want to say we are willing to share information."*

Interesting Workshop Topics for Sustainable Farmers/Ranchers: A-K

In less than 20 minutes, Reaping Our Rewards participants identified these topics (in alphabetical order) as being of interest:

- Alternative veterinary treatments
- Applying for SARE grants
- Barriers to institutional markets
- Beginning farmer programs
- Community Supported Agriculture
- Companion crops
- Connecting with new immigrants to help them create businesses
- Crop rotation
- Culturally competent food
- Customer service
- Cut flowers
- Direct marketing meat distribution
- Eating locally and cooking with your family
- Educating bankers
- Educating health professionals
- Farm show and tell
- Garden to school or to hospital initiatives
- Gardening with children and schools
- Green manures
- Home brewing
- Home wine making
- How to build relationships with markets
- How to start/run a farmer's market
- Identity marketing
- Insect identification

There was some concern about sharing information that could then lead to competition for markets, but overall, there was a sense that openness is vitally characteristic of sustainable agriculture. One farmer said, *"There is a question of sharing leading to personal loss. But that's the philosophical difference between conventional agriculture and sustainable agriculture, a 180 degree difference."* And from another, *"Sustainable agriculture information is meant to be given away, because when someone gives it away, there is an obligation for the next person to share it. This kind of agriculture is about economics AND relationships."*

Respect and Relationship. Participants said that educators and researchers needed to develop mutually respectful and helpful relationships with farmers and ranchers. That could mean researchers explore questions valuable to sustainable farmers. Educators can poll sustainable farmers and ranchers to discern topics of interest to them, and then plan workshops around those interests. In less than 20 minutes, *Reaping Our Rewards* participants identified 53 topics as being of interest. See the full list on this and the following page.

Beyond topics, farmers and ranchers wanted workshops to be more hands on, use panels, and provide generous socialization and networking time. It was clear that these farmers and ranchers find spending time together very valuable, as they have difficulty relating to most of their geographic neighbors.

The group felt educators should invest resources in having farmers and ranchers share information with each other. This can serve the needs of Extension agents and others as well. By developing a contact list or directory of area sustainable farmers and ranchers, educators can refer other information seekers to people who can offer insight and concrete information and experience. Along these lines, some conference participants

suggested that agriculture educators should facilitate the development and support of a sustainable/organic farmer/rancher support group.

Farmer Feedback About the Process . . . *comments gleaned from the Reaping Our Rewards evaluation form . . .*

- Awesome!
- Excellent opportunity to network and dialogue: Re-energized and committed to the principles of sustainability.
- Farmer involvement was good
- Good process
- Hoped to find one or two new ideas to adapt and I believe I did that. Thanks.
- I came to this knowing very little and now feel like I could start a farm up tomorrow.
- I have hope that positive change will result from our collective thoughts and ideas.
- I learned a lot of information on sustainable farming.
- I really enjoyed having the ability to share and to hear what others were doing and how they feel.
- It was really productive
- Keep this going – extend to consumers and urban people who have interest
- New way to approach information sharing
- Refreshing to talk to others “down in the trenches.”
- Very unique in being able to share with like-minded people.

How the Fishbowl and Facilitation Worked for Me . . . *reflection by Beth Nelson, State SARE Coordinator for Minnesota and Associate Program Director, Information Exchange, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture*

About fishbowls and listening. (Before we began the fishbowl), I heard a little bit of mumbling. We are always trying to be inclusive and this divided people to make some exclusivity. There was some feeling about “Why do I have to sit on the outside?” I knew it was coming, so I wasn’t surprised by that, and was interested in what it was going to be like. . . .

It worked liked sitting around your kitchen table and talking about your farm operation. It was informal and comfortable. Not that everyone agreed --there wasn’t unanimity or anything like that. I think whether it was taking the turns or that there was someone there to help the discussion, everybody spoke. . . . I can’t speak as a farmer, but here it looked like you would feel free to say what you think and not worrying about what people might jump in. In sustainable ag, we are blessed with strong farmers so we do get to hear them a fair amount. But they are the same voices, but here we could hear them all, and they were all experts in their grant project, so they all had expertise to share.

I think part of the frustration from not being able to participate (as a researcher or educator) is that our training is to be critical thinkers, and that involves listening to what’s said, thinking about your reaction to that, and then critiquing it. I was surprised that (while) really listening is one of my strengths, I found myself

Interesting Workshop Topics for Sustainable Farmers/Ranchers: L-W

A continuation of the list of topics (in alphabetical order) as being of interest:

- Legislative issues pertinent to sustainable agriculture
- Linking farmers and workers
- Local food at local dinners/meals
- Marketing field trips
- Marketing through the media
- Marketing to friends and relatives
- Microdairy: cream, cheese, ice cream
- Mobile farm processing
- Mom and Pop grocery stores
- Nutritional/health value of sustainably-grown food
- Organic certification
- Parasite management
- Parent/kid farm tours
- Peer teaching
- Permits and regulations
- Rotational grazing
- School as the center of the community
- Small to medium-scale egg production
- Soil building
- The (insert your state’s name) Department of Agriculture: What do they do?
- Transfer and sale of sustainable operations
- Transitioning cropland to pastureland
- Using interns.
- Weed management
- Wineries
- Working as a group to market a product
- Working with chefs

thinking "I want to say this" or "I want to ask this question." At first I scribbled things down for later, and then after a while, I was able to relax out of the mode of thinking "what's not right or is right about that" and then I could really take it in. I think because of that I could listen better. This exercise takes the pressure off you to have the answers so you can listen to others. We are so colored by our experiences and positions. When you really listen you can be surprised by something that you did not expect and it catches you off-guard.

For the longer term, it gave me new ideas that had not occurred to me before. I'm thinking more about that. This technique (might be useful) to look at state SARE plans of work, including issues to be addressed. And then on some of the tried and true things we do, understanding the barriers and things that work could be applicable to many SARE programs.

Facilitation. For me, who is often in the role of coordinator to run a meeting,, it allows you to be a participant. If you are going to facilitate well, you can't participate or have an opinion. Otherwise, you end up shaping the meeting a certain way. Even if you are trying to get information and feedback, it is hard to hear information opposite to the direction that you want it to go.

From my perspective, I think that people are often missing important pieces in the meeting. I am often in meetings where people are talking too much, too little, or it is going in the wrong direction. It was fun to watch these students do simple things to keep discussion moving, and people on point, having someone just to attend to the group – that's the huge difference: It is somebody's job just to attend to the group, with neutrality.

One thing I walked away with was: Let's try this. There is a lot of resistance to trying something new. You have to be very brave because it may fall flat. You have to be pretty confident and push hard to do this kind of thing . . . Start out small. Find people who can serve as facilitators who don't cost so much so that you can't afford it. Find a safe place to try it, either at a conference or a planning group so that if it doesn't work it's okay. This document (*Fishbowl in the Field*) might be helpful in that.

Things to think about . . . Using third-party facilitation . . .

- What facilitation resources might you have?
 - Do you have other staff in your organization?
 - Can you trade with another organization with which you work?
 - Do you have a School of Social Work in the area?
 - Have you explored referrals and leads from facilitators you know?
- What do you want the facilitator to accomplish?
 - What are the goals of the meeting(s)?
 - What is the time frame (short session, all day, multiple days, series of meetings)?
 - Are there issues that might be lurking in the background that you want to address?
- How many facilitators do you need?
- What resources/limitations are there in terms of:
 - Space (Break-out rooms? Wheelchair accessibility?)
 - Facilities (Will food be included? Are there movable chairs and tables? Will you have newsprint, tape, markers?, etc.), and
 - Rules (Can you tape paper to the walls? Do you need to re-arrange the room once you're done?)

5 - Questions

Crafting your questions: How do your learning goals translate into the questions you ask?

Richard Krueger, noted expert in conducting focus groups and other types of research relates this story in his 1994 book, *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*:

The mother thought her daughter should have a comprehensive checkup before starting kindergarten. To be on the safe side, she made an appointment with an eminent psychologist to examine the youngster for any possible abnormal tendencies. Among the questions, the man of science asked: "Are you a boy or a girl?" "A boy," the little girl answered. Somewhat startled, the psychologist tried again. "When you grow up, are you going to be a woman or a man?" "A man," the little girls answered. On the way home, the mother asked, "Why did you make such strange replies to what the psychologist asked you?" In a serious tone of voice, the little girl replied, "Since he asked such silly questions, I thought he wanted silly answers!" (p.53)

Krueger's point, of course, is that to get quality information, we have to ask quality questions. Focus group research has been around since the 1930s, and has provided very good guidance in question development¹⁶. This chapter will draw from the focus group tradition as we cover deriving questions from the goal, following a structure, considering types of questions, mixing up methods, and avoiding certain pitfalls.

Deriving Questions from the Goal. A meeting to gather information or generate ideas will probably last one to a maximum of two hours at a stretch, and should deal with three or fewer topic areas. Therefore, though this may seem like review, it is a good idea to ask *yourself* a series of questions before you write your questions, including¹⁷:

- What is the specific purpose of this meeting?
- What information am I hoping to find here?
- What is the issue we are examining?
- In what context is this meeting (is it a stand-alone meeting, part of a conference, one of an ongoing series)?
- Who wants the information we are seeking?
- Is this the only way we can get this information or are there other methods?

Another important aspect of planning is to ask, "Who will make up the audience for this group?" Group characteristics will affect the kinds of words you use in questions, background you (don't) assume they have, expertise you can expect, and methods you can use to get the data you want.

Once you have answered all these questions for yourself, perhaps referring to the Goal Statement and Logic Model discussed earlier, you can start drafting questions. This is a good time to just start writing. Create a big list of questions that occur to you. Don't worry

about the form, the order of the questions, grammar, or anything else that can get in the way of creating a healthy list. You can fix all those things later. After you think you have exhausted all potential questions, it's a good idea to put it down for a few days so you can get some distance from it before you move into editing and structuring the questions.

Follow a Structure. After letting your list “rest,” revisit it, checking it against the purpose of the meeting. In one to two hours, you will have time to address a maximum of twelve questions, of which perhaps four to seven will be key questions. It is very important that you ruthlessly edit your list of questions so that you focus in on what will most likely get you the information you want. It could be that you have some very interesting questions on the list, but they don't fit the purpose that well. Delete those questions. It is often helpful to ask a colleague or friend to help you with this, as they will likely be more objective and not find it as hard to cross off questions they did not write.

At this point you can start editing the questions, fixing grammar, etc. You will also arrange them in a specific structure, or *discussion guide*, by moving from general to specific, and then to closure, also known as a funnel, as illustrated below:

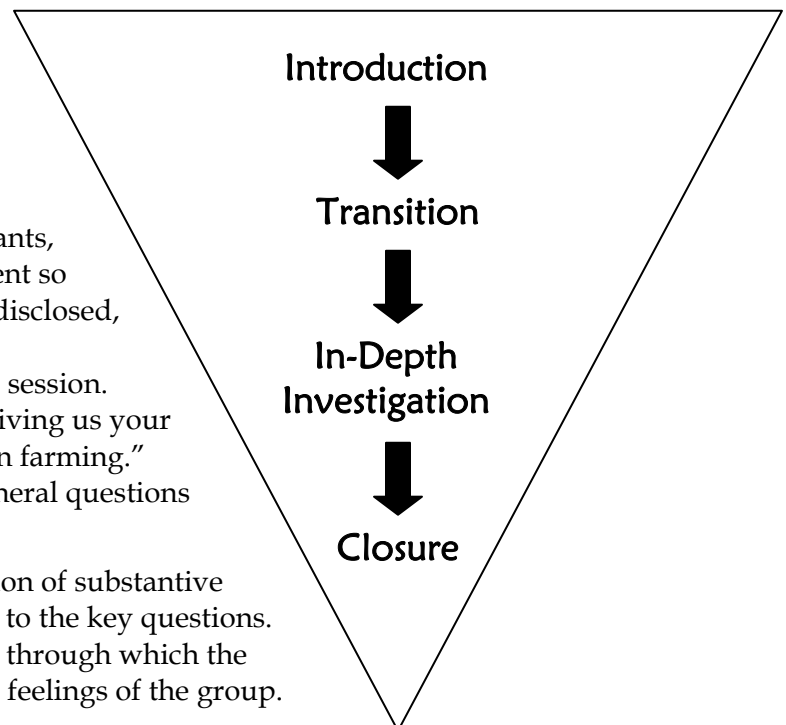
Each of the stages has a particular job and types of questions that are helpful, described here in some detail:¹⁸

Stage 1: Introduction is to establish rapport with the meeting participants, establish a comfortable environment so that opinions and feelings can be disclosed, and provide information on what participants can expect during the session. “Please introduce yourselves by giving us your name and how long you have been farming.” The facilitator then moves into general questions to set up the topic at hand.

Stage 2: Transition is the continuation of substantive questions getting the group closer to the key questions. There is a logical link of questions through which the facilitator brings out opinions and feelings of the group.

Stage 3: In-Depth Investigation narrows down the topic into a concrete discussion of issues and ideas. Questions reveal participants' beliefs, attitudes and feelings. Facilitator uses follow-up questions and probes to clarify opinions and responses. The facilitator uses points from the earlier discussion so that the conversation is smooth across a variety of topics, and adapts the discussion guide to related issues that have arisen during the discussion.

Stage 4: Closure is used to get final positions on the concept discussed, to create a clear picture of the group's opinions. This does not mean the group needs to come to consensus, as there may be different opinions present in one group. Instead, it is to clearly understand opinions and responses raised during the meeting. The facilitator



also asks the group a “clean up” question such as “Have we missed anything?” After this is finished, the facilitator thanks participants and only then asks for feedback about how the group worked for all involved.

I never learn anything talking. I only learn things when I ask questions.

~ Lou Holtz,
US football coach

Once your questions are arranged in funnel order (some people write each question on a large Post-It and then actually arrange and re-arrange them on a wall or table so they can get a visual perspective), write them into an actual script, listing each question in order and then potential “probes” or follow up questions that could help you get more information. Probes focus the attention on the information being presented and help

clarify a participant’s ideas. See the sidebar for examples of probes. A completed discussion guide, while a lot of work, should only be about two pages long. At this point, it is a very good idea to ask colleagues to read it over and give you feedback. An even better idea is to give it a test drive with a group of people similar to those from whom you want to gather information. You can make corrections or improvements based on the feedback you get.

Mixing Up Methods. Some questions work best asked in a straightforward verbal way.

However, to break up the conversation, get at a different kind of response, or bring out a quiet participant, it’s a good idea to employ a number of question methods. Some of those might include having participants:

- Rank-order a list on a prepared handout;
- Write down a word, phrase, or short list in response to a question (“When I say the word “manure” what word or phrase do you think of?”);
- Prioritize responses that have been shared by choosing the top three most meaningful to them;
- Provide a numeric level of degree for a process, product, or interest (“On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being incredibly boring, and 10 being wildly exciting, what score would you give field days?”)

Introducing these kinds of methods can insure that everyone has an answer to the question (because it’s a quick response and/or is written down) and the pace is variable. They also help in transitioning from one topic to another during the meeting.

Avoiding Pitfalls. Most questions used to gather information are open-ended (followed by probes) so that participants are not restricted to a limited group of answers. Other types of questions include dichotomous (answered yes or no) and specific

Probes from *Customers in Focus*

- What is it about _____ that causes you to feel that way?
- Help me understand . . .
- How so?
- In what way?
- What else?
- How does _____ apply to you? To others?
- What does (descriptive word) mean for you?
- How would you describe (the feeling or thought) to someone who didn’t know?
- Please tell me more about . . .
- Please give me an example of . . .
- What can someone else tell me about this?
- What ideas/reactions have I/we missed? . . . not heard yet?
- Can someone help _____ out?
- When was the last time you saw/felt/thought . . .
- Does anyone feel differently about this issue?

(requiring an exact answer). However, these plus a few other types of questions can lead to problems and should be used sparingly, and in some cases, not at all. Descriptions of problematic questions follow:

- *Dichotomous*. A dichotomous question has only a yes or no answer. It can clarify concepts later in the discussion, but early on, it discourages conversation. However, it can be handy to manage someone who is dominating the discussion so that everyone can answer the question succinctly, allowing the facilitator to change gears.
- *Specific*. A specific question needs an exact answer. These are also helpful in the latter part of a meeting to clarify particular concepts but also limit the dialogue.
- *Double-barreled questions*. Double-barreled questions are really two questions in one, such as “How do you feel about sustainable agriculture and what are you going to do to advance it?” Break these questions apart into two, and see if the two components stand on their own. If not, delete one or both.
- *Why questions*. Questions that begin with “why” don’t work well because they:
 - lead people to start out with “Because,” which puts them on the defensive and results in less information
 - create pressure for people to come up with the one right answer
 - sound whiney – think about a child you’ve known during their “why” phase
 - discourage spontaneous responses.
- *Leading questions*. Leading questions have the answer already embedded in them which can make the question-writer’s intention or opinion evident. This may prejudice participants in one direction or alienate the group against that perspective. Most of these questions can be rewritten so that the leading information is stripped out and the question is asked more generally. If the discussion stalls, the facilitator can offer some subtle cues as part of the probe process.
- *Questions about the future*. Joan Baez said, “Hypothetical questions get hypothetical answers.” These questions result in unreliable information and speculation at best.
- *“Pecking order” questions*. Questions that ask about levels of income, education, expertise, etc. can create a hierarchical order in the group which will suppress information sharing by setting up some as “experts.”



Going Fishing . . . Developing questions and the discussion guide . . . instruments and lessons learned

Constructing the Guide. The Conference committee and Kleinschmit Rembert developed a list of questions by first reviewing elements of the program logic model. Next, through e-mail, they generated a long list of questions. Kleinschmit Rembert sorted through them and put them in a suggested order. She asked the committee to review the draft order and then developed a discussion guide

with probes and other guidance to the facilitators. Some of the discussion guide has already been presented in previous chapters. This is another section, including questions, probes, and a rank-ordering exercise. What you will find is that not all the questions conformed to the guidelines above. Overall the process worked well, though there is some room for improvement.

BREAKOUT 2:9:00 – 10:30 AM, SATURDAY, MARCH 5

9:10 – 9:30 Question 1: Try to smoothly get answers out of everyone, but don't press . . .

Yesterday, as part of the introduction, you talked about your SARE grants and gave us an idea of what you learned. Now the question is: What led you to do the work of developing your idea, applying for funding, and carrying it out?

- Probe/Followup: What was important about your research question and wanting to know the answer?
- Probe/Followup: What difference did this research mean to you? Other farmers and ranchers?

9:30 – 9:35 Question 2: All farmers answer, rapid-fire

On a scale of 1 to 10, how well did the NCR SARE Farmer Grant process work for you, 1 being incredibly difficult and totally not worth it, and 10 being smooth-sailing and very fulfilling?

9:35 – 9:55 Question 3:

Some say that they do farm-based research because the information they need just isn't out there in the usual places, Extension, farm publications, etc. Others are curious to try something they've seen or heard about someplace else. What was missing for you that caused you to pursue your project?

- Probe/Followup: How is farm-based research different from that done on an experimental station?

9:55 – 10:15 Question 4:

As a farmer-researcher, what do you think is necessary to move sustainable agriculture along?

- Probe/Followup: What is hindering others from farming sustainably?
- Probe/Followup: What keeps you from making your operation even more sustainable?

BREAKOUT 3: 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM, SATURDAY, MARCH 5

Fishbowl has concluded and educators and researchers join farmers and ranchers in discussion.

10:30 – 10:35 Facilitator welcomes group back, goes over purpose of this meeting.

The purpose of this session is to talk about how farmers get information, what works best for them, who they go to when they get stuck, and what they need and what they think other farmers need to be more involved in sustainable agriculture.

10:35 – 10:55 Question 1: Try to smoothly get answers out of everyone, but don't press . . .

In the last session, we touched on places some farmers look for information. Where do you go for information when you are looking to make changes to your operation?

10:55 – 11:00 Question 2: Ranking on paper

Please look at the handout listing ways you might get information. Please rank these in order, 1 being the method that you use most or works best for you, and 10 being the one you use least or think is not very helpful:

- Handout w/categories: Internet search, Talking to a neighbor, Going to a conference, Reading farm magazines (which ones), Coffeebreak, the radio, Extension agents, Television, other . . .

11:00 – 11:20 Question 3:

There's a lot of information out there – how do you decide what's valuable and something you might follow up on, and what do you put to the side?

- Probe/Followup: How is farm-based research different from that done on an experimental station?

11:20 – 11:40 Question 4:

Many of you are leaders in sustainable agriculture in your communities. Imagine yourself in the middle of changing things on your farm or ranch and you get stuck. Things are going wrong or you're confused and don't know what to do next. Where do you go for help?

- Probe/Followup: Who do you call?
- Probe/Followup: How do you know who to contact?

11:40 – 12:00 Question 5:

Sustainable farmer/rancher researchers like yourselves are often in high demand to help other folks who are thinking about transitioning to sustainable agriculture or run into bumps in the road. You get calls from educators like these here, asking you to host field days, try something out on your farm, talk to somebody, present at a workshop, whatever. What do you think needs to happen for farmers and ranchers to be able to be involved in the education and research effort to help others become more sustainable?

- Probe/Followup: What are barriers for you?
- Probe/Followup: What could help in overcoming those barriers?

12:00 – Thank everyone for their participation and encourage them to have a nice lunch and be ready for their state groups later.



The Harvest . . . Ways Farmers/Ranchers Get Information . . .

Ways I Get Information. *Reaping Our Rewards* organizers were very interested in learning how farmers and ranchers get their information. Group facilitators instructed farmer and rancher participants to use a form (see below) to rank in order ways they get their information. This form was a late addition to the process, and could have used some improvement, including: directions on the form such that participants used each number only once, explanation of what rank order means, spaces to indicate which state they were from and what track (animal production, crop production, horticulture, or marketing) they were attending. Because the form was used as part of the group discussion, to switch gears and get

information from all participants, group leaders were able to catch these mistakes and make some quick adjustments, keeping the data sound, and the information separated by state and conference track. Another recommendation from a participant was to split up the questions such that participants might rank what they use most and then what they find

Ways I get information

Rank in order:
 1 = works best for me/I use it most
 10 = not very helpful/I use it least

_____	Internet	
_____	Talking to a neighbor	
_____	Going to workshops/conferences	
_____	Attending field days	
_____	Reading farm magazines	
_____	Coffeebreak	
_____	Listening to the radio	
_____	Talking to extension agents	
_____	Watching TV	
_____	Other _____	

Are you a farmer? (check one) _____ Yes _____ No

most helpful, noting that the two concepts are not the same.

Facilitators followed up the use of the form to move into more discussion about information use and preferences. Data from the form, an example of an improved form, and themes from the discussion follow:

Results from the Instrument.

Reaping Our Rewards participants found conferences the best way to get information, followed by the Internet, neighbors and field days. Farm magazines, Extension and other methods made up the middle, while listening to the radio, coffee breaks, and television were the least used or helpful.

In each category there were slight differences between

farmers/ranchers and those who are not. The only notable distinction was that farmers/ranchers felt conferences were a better way of getting information than the Internet, while the non-farmer/ranchers reversed those two methods..

Discussion. After participants completed and handed in their ranking forms, facilitators followed up with this question: *There's a lot of information out there – how do you decide what's valuable and something you might follow up on, and what do you put to the side?* Below is a summary of that discussion, with quotations from farmers/ranchers in italics:

"(Look) anywhere and everywhere – hunt it down!" Individuals found information from lots of sources including (not in order of importance): the Internet, publications, neighbors (based on philosophy, not necessarily geography), conferences and workshops, radio and television, and the Extension service.

The group discussed that farmers and ranchers be discerning about what's good information. Good information, they felt, needed to have a basis in science and philosophy, and would pass the test of *"being run by another set of eyes and ears."* Farmers and ranchers should remember that most University industry-sponsored research is conducted in controlled environments, while farmers live and work in uncontrolled environments. Regardless of the venue, they felt that on-farm research should be reported using stories, including subjective, emotion-based aspects. More feedback and reactions to specific information sources follow:

Method	Overall Ranking (N = 53)	Farmers/Ranchers (N = 35)	Non-Farmers/Ranchers (n = 18)
Conferences	2.8	2.7	3.0
Internet	3.3	3.7	2.7
Neighbors	4.0	3.9	4.2
Field Days	4.5	4.3	4.8
Farm Magazines	5.0	4.8	5.5
Extension	5.7	5.6	5.8
Other*	5.8	5.6	6.3
Radio	7.0	7.2	6.7
Coffee Break	7.8	8.2	7.1
TV	8.6	8.9	8.2

*Specified others included:

- *Personal interaction* (13) – with significant others, coworkers, other farmers, people on the Internet, customers, and networking through organizations such as the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society (NSAS) and Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA).
- *Reading* (9) – books, journal articles, publications from sustainable agriculture organizations, specific publications such as the Stockman Grass Farmer.
- *Classes* (4) – college and other
- *On-farm observation* (3) – crop and animal feedback, experimentation, intuition and meditation.

“Farmer/Rancher Friendly” Websites*

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center -
www.AGMRC.org
ATTRA - www.attra.org
Center for Rural Affairs - www.cfra.org
Land Stewardship Project
www.landstewardshipproject.org
Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture -
www.leopold.iastate.edu
Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture –
www.misa.umn.edu
Natural Resources Conservation Service –
www.nrcs.usda.gov
New Farm - www.newfarm.org
Practical Farmers of Iowa –
www.practicalfarmers.org
SARE - www.sare.org
Sustainable Alternatives Network –
www.sustainablealternatives.net
University of Michigan Center for
Sustainable Systems -
<http://css.snre.umich.edu/>

**as identified by Reaping Our Rewards participants.*

- *Internet* – almost all *Reaping Our Rewards* participants had Internet access and found it to be a good source of information – if they were careful in “*The garden of misinformation.*” Too much information was a problem, making it difficult to find what they wanted, and in the end, overwhelmed. Google and other search engines were mentioned, but specific on-line journals, list-servs, and websites with “readable” reports were most useful (see sidebar at left for more on this.) Archives for these sites were helpful, but farmers/ranchers would like to see sites easier to navigate.
- *Publications* – participants were leery of “freebies,” feeling that they were advertising in disguise. They preferred to pay for reliable information from sources such as *The New Farm*, *ATTRA*, *SARE*, *Acres USA*, *The Stockman Grass Farmer*, and *Small Farm Today*.
- *Neighbors* – many participants spoke of having no or few geographical neighbors who shared their philosophy regarding agriculture. Instead, they spoke of redefining “neighbor” to work for them: *Rethink who is*

your neighbor – consider instead select neighbors – people of like mind in the city or other regions.

Connecting with people from other nations in person or via Internet to see a different way of doing things was helpful for some. Farmers spoke of finding a mentor either locally or in another location to help them think through farm and ranch decisions. In some cases, those people didn't need to farm or ranch themselves: *Talk with friends or family who don't know that much about farming but have a very objective opinion – they have nothing to gain OR lose.* Outside opinions from customers and brokers were also valuable.

- *Farmer's learning circles* – were introduced by some participants as a preferred or possible way to exchange information and create local support for sustainable farmers/ranchers. In general, this model (used with success by several sustainable agriculture organizations) involves a group (~6-12) of farmers/ranchers meeting every month for discussion and feedback. In some learning circles, each month, one farmer in the group could host at his/her farm and present all the farm's farm production and economic information to the others who then provide their ideas and impressions. The group could also bring in specialists to give them information.
- *Conferences & Workshops* – were very important to participants (indeed, they ranked the highest in the earlier exercise.) Conferences and workshops built relationships over the long term, helped farmers and ranchers become re-energized about their operations and ideas, and connected them with expertise in the field via phone or e-mail after the event. “Break time” was seen as very valuable for informal information sharing and needed to be expanded, in the opinion of most. Also, they wanted to see more time built in for discussion: *Workshops full of presentations are not good for information sharing. There needs to be follow-up and (some) workshops seem one-sided with information just from speakers to audience – it's better to exchange it both ways.* This fishbowl model seems to work well.
- *Radio & Television* – participants agreed that agricultural radio stations are well-listened to, but there were not very many sustainable agriculture-oriented programs on them (*this has changed in some areas since the Conference*). They discussed making connections with the people who work for

6 - Evaluating

How was the process, what did you learn, and what good did you do?

In this country, there is an ever-increasing emphasis on evaluation and accountability, from the requirements of No Child Left Behind to those of various funders, including NCR SARE. Why is evaluation so important? Just ask a farmer or rancher: If you don't know what worked and what didn't, what sold at market and what stayed in your bin, what your cows ate or left alone, and in the end, the difference it made for yourself, your farm or ranch, your family, your community, and your pocketbook, you don't know much. You don't know much about what you did, and you sure don't know much about what you should do again. That is the crux of evaluation: What did we do, how did it work, what difference did it make, and would we do it again. And, for an organization promoting Research and Education, what can we share about what we learned?

What Did We Do and How Did It Work? Process evaluation is determining whether or not you actually implemented your program as planned. Revisiting your original plans and how they were carried out can help you, funders, and others understand what led to the outcomes for your program (so they can be replicated or adapted). It can also help you improve future work and realize more fully the kinds of resources you need to carry them out.

Everybody's got
plans...until they get hit.
~ Mike Tyson

"Outputs" are the services, education, or program you delivered and to whom. They can indicate how much of your program was implemented as planned. Of particular interest are:

- How many people attended? Were they the ones you invited?
- What was presented in the program? What happened there? How did people participate? How often did you deliver the program? In what manner? (You might hear this called "the dose.")
- What resources did you use to deliver the program?¹⁹

To find the answers to these questions, you can gather process evaluation evidence from a variety of sources including notes, meeting minutes, e-mails, newsletters, event brochures, participant evaluations of the workshop, scribbles on a calendar or planner, bank transactions, media coverage of your event, photos, etc. One of the best (and easiest) evidence gathering methods is to reconvene your planning group shortly after the event and debrief. Some suggested categories for evidence-gathering are on the next page, followed by sample questions for your planning group. You can use the categories that make sense for you as topic headings, and then provide some description below, either as notes to guide your own future event planning and/or as a summary of your process evaluation for your funder, depending on their requirements.

Categories to Consider for Process Evaluation

Category*	Sample Question
Activities	How did the workshop/session flow? Did we break it up with enough breaks, would we change what we did?
Adequacy of Training	Was our facilitator good enough? Did we have our act together?
Communication Methods	How about our planning – was e-mail the best way to do this or should we meet in person?
Content	Did we cover the right material, ask the right questions?
Delivery Methods	Is a speaker the best way to get at this topic? Would a panel have worked better? How about film or another method?
Distribution of Resources	How close were our estimates for budget categories? \Did we make money? Could we have done it cheaper, or was the budget too generous?
Division of Responsibilities	How were tasks distributed? Would we change that in the future?
Facilities	How was the room’s size, climate, atmosphere, ease of use?
Marketing	How well did we get the invitation distributed? Should we have followed up with other methods?
Participation by the Target Audience	How engaged was our group? Did we have enough folks there? How interested were they in what was happening? What kind of role did they play?
Participation by Volunteers or Paraprofessionals	How did we use volunteers? How did we appreciate volunteers?
Programming Procedures	Were fishbowls the right approach for this? How did your breakout session work?
Receptivity of the Program by the Target Audience	How interested were the participants in the message? Were they glad they came to this event? Do they seem as if they learned something?
Staffing Arrangements and Assignments	Were there enough or too few staff? How was the workload for this event? Is there a way to improve that in future?
Timeline	Were we crunched for time, doing everything at the last minute? How did our timeline affect our program? How would we do that differently?

*from Penn State Cooperative Extension’s Program Evaluation Tipsheet #3

Just a few words about changes in plans. Plans are often just that: plans. As such, they will change to reflect unexpected occurrences, serendipitous opportunities, unforeseen complications, etc. It is in the process evaluation that you will tell the story, laying out why you did what you did, given the circumstances in which you found yourself. Analyzing and reporting those changes are very valuable, and give others permission to ‘fess up about when THEY needed to change their plans --- and most importantly, what happened as a result.

What Difference Did It Make? Outcome or impact evaluation answers the “So what?” question. So what that you went to all this work and expense to have this event. What in the world (in the lives or on the farms of your participants or other people or organizations) changed because of the experience/knowledge/activity/discussion at your event? Of course, outcome evaluation is much easier to do if you start with the end in mind, basing your methods and questions in what you want your plan to achieve with your program (See Chapter 2). Outcome evaluation can examine those changes in the short-, intermediate-, and long-term. *Short-term outcomes* are a change in knowledge or skills, *intermediate*, a change in behaviors, and *long-term* a change in conditions,

Measure not the work until the day's out and the labor done.

~ Elizabeth Barrett Browning

values, and status. It's also helpful to understand the difference between outcome targets and outcome indicators. Outcome targets involve the number and percent of participants you want to achieve the outcome, number of acres that will be managed

differently, number of SARE state plans that will reflect farmer/rancher input, etc. Outcome indicators are things that you could observe that would mean you are getting toward your outcome target. They might include things you can observe, hear, scientifically measure, read, etc.

Evaluation can seem overwhelming, especially with all these "outs," that is:

- Outputs: numbers and statements about the program you delivered
- Outcomes: real change in the world (in thought, deed, and condition)
- Outcome targets: a measure of how much of that outcome you want to have happen
- Outcome indicators: how you know you are making some progress.²⁰

However, outcome evaluation is really just about asking what you want to achieve, figuring out what would help you know you've achieved that goal, and then collecting information that helps you know you're getting there – or not. Examples of all of these regarding *Reaping Our Rewards* will be covered in the next two sections.

Would We Do It Again? (Or, Would We Recommend Someone Else Do This?)

You can answer this question after examining how things went in the process evaluation, and then looking at the impact you have had in the outcome evaluation. It might be that you had a bumpy implementation with a variety of setbacks and change orders. But, the impact you had was considerable. So, you would recommend someone else try what you did, with the changes you made and the lessons you learned.

Conversely, you might have had an incredibly smooth implementation with all budget figures right on target, all deadlines met, and all participants in attendance. Yet, you didn't get the impact you were looking for.

Regardless of how things turn out, you have learned something and can now do even better, and share what you've done with others so they can do better too. Farmer and rancher research is valuable because it shares real-life success and not-so-much success stories. Isaac Newton said, "*If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.*" This may be your opportunity to be a giant.



Going Fishing . . . Evaluating the Conference

Immediate evaluation . . . web-based follow-up . . . some next steps

A Three Stage Strategy. Conference organizers created evaluation processes to gather data for process and outcome evaluation including: a form for participants to complete at the end of the conference, a meeting of the conference planning committee to process the conference and decide on next

steps, a web-based survey customized for *Reaping Our Rewards* audiences (farmers and ranchers, educators, students, and state SARE coordinators), and then follow-up phone calls and interviews to some

participants for inclusion in this manual. We include the conference's exit evaluation form and portions of the web-based survey here, and reports of results from all evaluation processes in the following Harvest section.

Exit Evaluation. The Exit Evaluation was developed from the outcome goals detailed in the conference logic model. It was completed by conference participants at the end of *Reaping Our Rewards*. All participants were to complete the top portion of the form and then select other sections as applicable. We did not use an instrument to measure some of the indicators (e.g., ability to influence research and education priorities) before the conference) which would have allowed us to see the change resulting from the conference, though that would have been a good addition. Also, there was some confusion, as many people experienced role overlap. There were participants who belonged to multiple categories: agricultural educators who also farmed, farmers taking graduate courses, etc. It would have been good to spend some time introducing this instrument and have participants indicate what they thought was their *primary* role, or make some other form or process improvement.

EVALUATION

Reaping the Rewards of Our SARE Investment: The Multi-State Farmer Linkage Program

What state are you representing during this weekend's program? (Circle one)

Nebraska Iowa Minnesota North Dakota South Dakota

Other _____

What Track did you follow this weekend?

___ Crop Production ___ Animal Production ___ Horticulture ___ Marketing

What research and education priorities do you think are important for the future in sustainable agriculture? _____

What other comments or suggestions do you have about this weekend's program? _____

Please fill in the section below which best describes your role in this weekend's conference: Farmers/Ranchers: Section 1, Educators: Section 2, Students: Section 3

Section 1: Farmers and Ranchers

Have you received a SARE Producer Grant? If so, in what year? _____

How valuable was this weekend's program to you?

___ Very Valuable
___ Somewhat Valuable
___ Not Very Valuable
___ Not at All Valuable

How would you rate your level of involvement during this program?

___ Very High
___ Somewhat High
___ Not at All
___ Somewhat Low
___ Very Low

How would you rate your ability to influence the research and education priorities for sustainable agriculture?

___ Very High
___ Somewhat High
___ Not at All
___ Somewhat Low
___ Very Low

(see next page for Sections 2 and 3)

EVALUATION, cont.

Section 2: Educators

How valuable was this program in identifying priorities for research and education in your state?

- Very Valuable
- Somewhat Valuable
- Not Very Valuable
- Not at All Valuable

How likely are you to adopt research and education priorities that were identified this weekend?

- Very Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Somewhat Unlikely
- Very Unlikely
- Not at All Likely

How likely is a change in the research and education priorities, in your state, as a result of this program?

- Very Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Somewhat Unlikely
- Very Unlikely
- Not at All Likely

Has your awareness of farmers and ranchers in your state who have received SARE Producer grants increased?

- Very Much
- Somewhat
- Not Very Much
- Not at All

Section 3: Students

Has your awareness of farmers and ranchers in your state who have received SARE Producer grants increased?

- Very Much
- Somewhat
- Not Very Much
- Not at All

Has your understanding of how farmers, ranchers and educators work together increased?

- Very Much
- Somewhat
- Not Very Much
- Not at All

How valuable was this weekend's program to you?

- Very Valuable
- Somewhat Valuable
- Not Very Valuable
- Not at All Valuable

Thank You!

Post-Conference Process Evaluation.

From March through June 2005, ISU graduate students, conference committee members and others, compiled information from fishbowls, exit evaluations, and other *Reaping Our Rewards* data collection tools. In July of 2005, the conference committee gathered in Nebraska in person and by conference call to discuss next steps, including how to do additional outcome evaluation. The group reviewed the process of organizing the conference, conference data, and comments and other feedback they received from participants.

Some of the feedback led to this manual, as some *Reaping Our Rewards* participants were interested in having a fishbowl how-to book that they could use in their own work. Funding for that project was found in some underutilized budget items, including travel funding for Conference participants.

Other discussion has been or will be presented in this manual, including positive responses to the conference's Briar Cliff University setting, the decision to move the conference from the

originally scheduled November 2004 dates to March 2005, the usefulness of third-party facilitators, etc. The group also decided to use web-based surveys to reach participants to understand sustained changes that the conference might have influenced.

Web-Based Outcome Survey. The committee chose to use the Zoomerang program (www.zoomerang.com) for follow-up evaluation. Separate surveys were constructed for farmers and ranchers, educators, students, and SARE state coordinators who attend *Reaping Our Rewards*. In February 2006, links to the survey were sent via e-mail to participants. We learned some information from this, but the time between the conference and the survey distribution was too long, affecting data. Also, some of the farmer/rancher participants did not have e-mail access and by this time, some students were no longer available at the e-mail addresses they had provided.

It is not possible to provide the surveys here in the Zoomerang format, but the text for the Educators' survey is presented. As you consider this survey, imagine it on the web, with every response either a quick click on a button or a space to type in a short answer. Results from the surveys are presented in the Harvest section.

NCR SARE Reaping Our Rewards Survey for Educators

(Welcome, Directions, and Refresher)

Thank you for participating in our "Reaping Our Rewards Educators Survey." It consists of only -11 questions and two pages. It should take you 5-7 minutes to complete.

The information you give us will be invaluable in determining the worth of the 2005 Reaping Our Rewards Conference, planning similar events in the future, and in shaping the North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NCR SARE) program.

As a reminder, here are the priorities identified at the Conference:

Research & Education

1. Youth: Elementary, Middle, High School, and College Students need to learn about sustainable agriculture. Develop curriculum which includes field days.
2. Farmer & Rancher Outreach: Increase information sharing between farmers. Increase volume of information available. Create a platform for sharing (i.e. learning communities, mentorship, online, network opportunities).
3. Public Outreach: Educate people on the environmental, social, economic, and health benefits of sustainable agriculture systems.
4. Financing: Create economic indicators for loans. Develop a system for FNA and FSA to value land that is not conventional corn/bean rotation.
5. Farmer Input: Farmer and Rancher input needs to be incorporated into University research. More University based research that supports sustainable agriculture. (Micro-processing, local food systems, finding markets, economic comparison: Sus. Ag vs. Conventional)

- Instrument continues on the next page -

NCR SARE Reaping Our Rewards Survey for Educators, cont.

	Strongly Agree 1	Agree 2	Disagree 3	Strongly Disagree 4	Don't Know 5
1. Since participating in the NCR SARE Reaping Our Reward conference in Sioux City in March 2005 . . .					
a. My knowledge of sustainable agriculture resources has increased.	1	2	3	4	5
b. My awareness of the farmers and ranchers in my state who are practicing sustainable farming/ranching methods has increased.	1	2	3	4	5
c. My awareness of the farmers and ranchers in my state who are practicing sustainable farming/ranching methods has increased.	1	2	3	4	5
d. I am more interested than I was before, in providing assistance to farmers and ranchers practicing sustainable farming/ranching methods.	1	2	3	4	5
e. I have contacted farmer(s) or rancher(s) who practice sustainable agriculture methods.	1	2	3	4	5
f. I have contacted another agricultural educator (SARE, Extension, University, NGO, etc.) about sustainable agriculture methods.	1	2	3	4	5
g. I believe farmers/ranchers and educators can work collaboratively	1	2	3	4	5
h. I will keep priorities identified at the Reaping Our Rewards conference in mind when I am planning events or workshops.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The 2005 Reaping Our Rewards conference was useful in identifying priorities for research and education in my state	1	2	3	4	5
3. I will keep priorities identified at the Reaping Our Rewards conference in mind when I am planning events or workshops.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I would recommend a conference like Reaping Our Rewards to other educators.	1	2	3	4	5
5. In the past year, have there been changes in agricultural education programs in your state? Yes No					
6. If YES, what changes are you aware of? (room for short answer)					
7. If NO, why do you think there haven't been any? (room for short answer)					
8. In the past year, have you used farmers/ranchers in workshops/educational programs you have organized? Yes No					
9. If YES, please describe, including the event/topic and the name(s) of farmer(s)/rancher(s) you involved. (room for short answer)					
10. If NO, why not? (room for short answer)					
11. Any other comments you have about the 2005 Reaping Our Rewards Conference . . . (room for short answer)					
12. Provide contact information (if desired)					

The Harvest . . . Immediate-Intermediate Results . . .

Overall – Revisiting Short-Term Logic Model Outcomes. Responses to both the paper and web-based surveys allow us to conclude that:

- Educators did become more aware of SARE producer grant recipients.
- In terms of knowing the impact and effectiveness of SARE producer grants, educators found the program involving the SARE recipients and other sustainable farmers and ranchers valuable in identifying priorities for research and education in their states and that said priorities were likely to change based on the conference. Further, they indicated a likelihood of adopting research and education priorities identified at the conference.
- In follow-up evaluation through Zoomerang, some educators indicated using farmers and ranchers in current or future education work. More detail follows below:



Post-Conference Paper Evaluation. Seventy registered for the *Reaping Our Rewards* Conference, including seven speakers/conference facilitators. Twenty-seven paper evaluations were returned at the end of the conference, for a return rate of 43%, a bit low. Of those, two were returned from Iowa, six from Minnesota, 16 from Nebraska, and three from South Dakota. Twenty-three respondents indicated they were farmers. Ten of those who answered as farmers also identified as students and/or educators, reflecting the multiple roles many in sustainable agriculture manage. Ten respondents indicated receiving SARE Farmer grants, with five having had more than one. Themes from questions about priorities and other conference comments were presented in previous chapters. More data from the paper evaluation is presented below:

RATING OF CONFERENCE VALUE, PARTICIPATION, AND CHANGES IN THOUGHT

percentages rounded to nearest tenth of a percent

Farmers & Ranchers, N = 23*					
How valuable was this weekend's program to you?	Very Valuable 15 (65.2%)	Somewhat Valuable 8 (34.8%)	Not Very Valuable 0 (0%)	Not at All Valuable 0 (0%)	
How would you rate your level of involvement during this program?	Very High 10 (43.5%)	Somewhat High 12 (52.2%)	Not At All 0 (0%)	Somewhat Low 1 (4.3%)	Very Low 0 (0%)
How would you rate your ability to influence the research and education priorities for sustainable agriculture?	Very High 6 (26.1%)	Somewhat High 16 (69.6%)	Not At All 1 (4.3%)	Somewhat Low 0 (0%)	Very Low 0 (0%)

Educators, N = 12*

How valuable was this program in identifying priorities for research and education in your state?	Very Valuable 7 (58.3%)	Somewhat Valuable 5 (41.7%)	Not Very Valuable 0 (0%)	Not at All Valuable 0 (0%)	
How likely are you to adopt research and education priorities that were identified this weekend?	Very Likely 9 (75.0%)	Somewhat Likely 2 (16.7%)	Somewhat Unlikely 1 (8.3%)	Very Unlikely 0 (0%)	Not at All Likely (0%)
How likely is a change in the research and education priorities, in your state, as a result of this program?	Very Likely 2 (16.7%)	Somewhat Likely 8 (66.6%)	Somewhat Unlikely 2 (16.7%)	Very Unlikely 0 (0%)	Not at All Likely (0%)
Has your awareness of farmers and ranchers in your state who have received SARE Producer grants increased?	Very Much 5 (41.7%)	Somewhat 5 (41.7%)	Not Very Much 2 (16.7%)	Not at All 0 (0%)	

Students, N = 11*

Has your awareness of farmers and ranchers in your state who have received SARE Producer grants increased?	Very Much 6 (54.5%)	Somewhat 5 (45.5%)	Not Very Much 0 (0%)	Not At All 0 (0%)	
Has your understanding of how farmers, ranchers, and educators work together increased?	Very Much 5 (45.5%)	Somewhat 6 (54.5%)	Not Very Much 0 (0%)	Not At All 0 (0%)	
How valuable was this weekend's program to you?	Very Valuable 9 (81.8%)	Somewhat Valuable 2 (18.2%)	Not Very Valuable 0 (0%)	Not at All Valuable 0 (0%)	

*Number of responses equals more than the number of completed evaluations because some respondents fit more than one role.

Zoomerang. Responses to the web-based surveys a year after the conference were limited. Reasons included time between the conference and receiving the survey (though it was designed to measure longer-term impressions of and actions related to the conference), and the number of participants who did not have e-mail or had changed their e-mail address in the ensuing time. The following are descriptions of Zoomerang data for immediate and intermediate outcomes, first by themes they had in common, and then by response group where they differed either in questions answered or the answers they gave to common questions. We received 20 Zoomerang responses, 18 described below, and two more in the SARE Coordinator category. Their information, plus the longer-term outcome data is presented in Chapter 7.

Overall Themes. All respondents (but one farmer/rancher) agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of sustainable agriculture resources, awareness of farmers and ranchers in their states who received SARE grants and/or practiced sustainable methods had increased. They all would recommend a conference like *Reaping Our Rewards* to their colleagues, whether they were farmers/ranchers, students, or educators. And, they all felt that farmers, ranchers, researchers, and educators could work collaboratively. In fact, one educator commented that this was a silly question.

Farmers and Ranchers. Eight of those surveyed responded. Other findings included:

- Six felt their awareness of Extension resources had increased, while two did not, also true for SARE.
- Only two agreed that their awareness of university resources had increased, while six disagreed.
- The conference helped them become more willing to provide assistance to Extension educators and others who want to learn about sustainable agriculture.
- Six felt the Conference was useful in identifying research and education priorities in their states while two didn't know.
- When it came to influencing sustainable agriculture research and education priorities, six to seven participants felt that they could influence the systems, being more hopeful about their effect on NCR SARE than the university and Extension systems. One to three respondents in each case felt they could not influence the research and education agendas.

Students. Four students responded to the survey. Of those:

- They all agreed or strongly agreed that they are now more interested in providing assistance to farmers and ranchers practicing sustainable methods. One student remarked, *"It's great to actually interact with the farmers, instead of always just reading about them."*
- Overall, their awareness of Extension and university resources had increased.
- All had contacted sustainable farmers/ranchers since the Conference.
- They agreed that the Conference was helpful in setting state research and education priorities.

Educators. Six educators responded to the survey. Their results included:

- Four were more interested than before in providing assistance to farmers and ranchers practicing sustainable agriculture, while two disagreed.
- Four felt the conference was useful in identifying research and education priorities, two disagreed.
- When planning workshops, four said they would keep the conference-identified priorities in mind, with one disagreeing and another not committing to an answer.
- Five of the six educators had contacted another educator about sustainable agriculture methods.
- All had contacted farmers or ranchers who practice sustainable agriculture methods.
- However, only three had used farmers or ranchers in workshops they had organized. One of those because s/he did not have the responsibility to organize any. Another commented, *"We use farmers in discussion sections and on panels, but my experience is that information transfer often wallows in and propagates ignorance and misinformation."*

Why We Should Evaluate . . . *reflection by Linda Kleinschmit, organic farmer and prior NCR-SARE Farmer/Rancher Review Committee and Administrative Council member, Bow Valley, Nebraska*

If we don't evaluate, we can't tell what we've done and how we can do better. In farming and ranching, evaluating what has happened is a natural part of the process. If you don't, you don't stay in business very long. Anymore, that's the way it is for any kind of program, too. Evaluation is required for just about anything I can think of, and I think that's a good thing.

Making it easy. I think evaluation can be done so that it takes just a little time, yet we can learn so much from it. Even just an easy, one sheet exit survey can tell us what people learned from the meeting and what we didn't get across. Or, you can just find out from people how they felt about the meeting by taking a minute to ask them. It doesn't have to be complicated.

Respecting what you learn. Of course, it's important that the people who evaluate events are actually interested in the information they get back and use it, or else you just have wasted time and effort, and nobody likes that. If I am taking the time to give my opinion, I want someone to really use what I have done, because I didn't do it for myself.

Evaluating for yourself. I would think that people would want to evaluate so they know what kind of impact they are making. If they don't, from their own perspective they could think they are doing something good, but without asking their audience, they don't really know, do they? Maybe that's what makes evaluation kind of intimidating – you might get answers you didn't expect or want to hear. I would much rather have some kind of information saying I'm doing a good job, or some suggestions on how I can do a better one, than to just kind of go along and hope it's all working.

Things to think about . . .

Evaluating your fishbowl . . .

- What are your plans for process evaluation? Timeline? Participants? Materials needed?
- What were your outcomes for this work?
- How are you going to measure them?
- How are you going to reach your audience to get the information?
- What are you planning to do with it?
- How are you going to report it? Where?

7- Next steps

Now that you have all this great information and good feeling, what are you going to do with it?

The short answer is, “Use it. And soon.” Information IS really power, but only if you use it. Reports satisfy grant requirements and look great on a shelf, but without action just gather dust. Worse than that, unused information can disrespect the people who contributed to its creation. If this happens too often, grassroots people can grow weary and cynical about sharing their opinions, experience, and insight.²¹ There are some things you can do before, during and after you gather information to maximize the use of information and minimize its dust-gathering. They are: being realistic and straightforward about the purpose of the information-gathering and what it can realistically impact, putting it into a usable form, sharing the accumulated information with the people who gave it to you, being willing to get it to people who can make a difference, and translating it into action yourself.

What the Information Is For and What It Can Do. If you have done all your planning work as outlined in prior chapters of this book, you can tell your participants why they should share information with you. Be clear. Sometimes you will be looking for information about particular issues in which you are interested – for example, “What is good about field days and what could make them better?” with the intention of improving field days. Other times, you might be trying to understand the issues that are important for a particular region, area, or interest group, such as artisan goat cheese producers, to inform annual plans of research and education work. If you are asking the questions, you should have an idea of what you are going to do with the information. Tell the people what that is before they give it to you.

That said, be clear about what the information cannot do, and what systems it may or may not impact. In a 1991 article, Ruth Conone, then Assistant Director for Extension Home Economics for Ohio State University in Columbus wrote about an extensive data-gathering effort as part of a 1986 Strategic/Long-Range Planning Task Force. The Task Force, called “People Listening to People” was charged with recommending how the Extension Service should use its increasingly limited resources to meet the educational needs of Ohioans. It received data from 3,223 respondents to questions about the most pressing problems in a variety of areas of life. The most important problems included money and family relationships, supplemental income for farm families, child care, stress, loss of jobs, crime, and maintaining strong communities. The respondents were told that their input would inform Extension’s future staffing arrangements and program offerings.

After reviewing all the data, the Task Force decided to make classes in production agriculture practices Ohio Extension’s primary priority. Why is this? Because the decision-making structure of Extension and of the task force was unevenly weighted with College of Agriculture faculty and staff and county advisory committee members who were largely representatives of agricultural commodity groups.²² There was no way they were going to shift from workshops on raising corn and soybeans to those on family and community issues. It would have been more honest had the Task Force *not* asked for the

information and just gone ahead with the priorities it wanted all along. The result for people involved in this process, from Extension veterans, to each data respondent was the feeling summed up by Conone's article title, "*People listening to people . . . or are we really?*"

We have too many high sounding words, and too few actions that correspond with them.

~ Abigail Adams

Putting Data in a Usable Form. Many meetings, especially facilitated fishbowls and other data-gathering expeditions, end with everyone swimming in seas of paper: newsprint, legal pad pages, paper evaluations, etc. Someone needs to take it, summarize it, and put it into a workable format, typically a word processing document of some kind. Where it goes from there depends on what the data is and how the organization intends to use it. That might mean a list of points raised, grouped into categories or not, recommendations, or whatever works for the data. It could be a series of statements of belief, a ranked list of priorities, or a table presenting the spread of answers on particular questions. Regardless of form, it is ready to be shared whenever it is helpful and can make a difference in program planning, grant writing, policy setting, and so on.

Sharing the Data with the People Who Provided It. Often overlooked, providing participants with copies of reports, summations of conversations, recommendations resulting from the meetings, etc. is best practice. As mentioned earlier, part of why we engage in listening, particularly using fishbowl and other facilitation techniques is to tap into the synergy that can happen when farmers, ranchers, and others get together and talk about ideas. By definition, each meeting participant can't create that on his/her own. If they were interested in talking to you about an issue, chances are they are interested in having a copy of the resulting work. This manual is serving a further "reporting back" function for the *Reaping Our Rewards* participants, albeit two years after the event. In your work, it needn't be that elaborate. A simple e-mail about what was learned, a copy of the meeting notes, a clipping from the organization's newsletter discussing the event are all much easier (and more expedient) ways of getting the data back to the people who generated it. This is an incredibly respectful and gracious thing to do, particularly because unfortunately, it doesn't happen that often. Even better if you can also provide information on what impact the information has had, if any at that point, or what additional plans you have for it.

Getting It to People Who Can Make a Difference. If your data is in a usable form, it can be ready for distribution to decision-makers, members of the media, educators, funders, researchers, and of course other farmers and ranchers. Depending on what the intentions for gathering the data were, what the information looks like, and what your goals are, you can use the information to affect change in your system or others. Agricultural educators are not supposed to have a personal agenda, but they are expected to bring the issues raised by farmers, ranchers, and others to the table.²³ By showing that there is a constituency or need/demand for what you are proposing, it is much easier to make advances in research and education. Data makes a case tougher to discount.

Translating Data Into Action - Yourself. During *Reaping Our Rewards*, farmers and ranchers made numerous suggestions. Some were far-reaching and ambitious, such as changing the research project funding system to balance it more evenly between sustainable and conventional practices. Others were more immediate and simple, such as having time in

workshops for farmers and ranchers to share what they're doing on their land and how that's working, or to extend the breaks during conferences and workshops to allow for more networking. You can make these kinds of changes immediately – or at least at the next opportunity. Scan your data to see what these opportunities are, and follow through on them, even if it's not how you usually conduct business or you're a little uncomfortable with the idea. Farmers and ranchers are frequently asked to try new approaches because someone in authority told them they should. This is your opportunity to grow. You will buy much good will among the people who shared their opinions with you (especially if you clearly tell them the change results from their input), increase your credibility as a partner in the process, and who knows? You might find out that these ideas really work!



Going Fishing . . . Compiling the data, getting some more, and making it available

What's It For? *Reaping Our Rewards* participants were told before, during, and after the conference, that their farmer-to-farmer exchanges and resulting information would be applied to future NCR-SARE planning in various ways, from the local to the regional level. Some of those (from the logic model, addressed previously) included the:

- *Short-term outcome* of educators and researchers knowing who the SARE-receiving, sustainable practice-using farmers and ranchers in their areas are. The hope was educators and researchers would utilize these local practitioners as teachers and mentors in future training.
- *Intermediate outcomes* addressed the use of Conference and later farmer/rancher data for creating NCR-SARE State plans of work, numerical targets for involving farmers/ranchers in NCR-SARE programs and activities, increased responsiveness from NCR-SARE to farmer/rancher needs and concerns, and establishing local support groups for farmers/ranchers and educators.
- *Long-term outcomes* include NCR-SARE adoption of two or more farmer/rancher research and education priorities, inclusion of farmers/ranchers in future Professional Development Program (PDP) training, and the designation and implementation of two *Reaping Our Rewards* priorities as funding areas in future Research and Education Requests for Proposals (RFPs).

There were multiple data streams from the conference. Facilitated groupwork created two boxes of *newsprint sheets* filled with group memory (see facilitation section for more on group memory) of data. Graduate students from Iowa State University transcribed the sheets into word processing documents which were then analyzed for priority themes, and further for the information found earlier in this book. Other exercises created stacks of completed paper instruments such as the information ranking form and the exit evaluation. Those were entered into spreadsheet programs and analyzed by the University of Nebraska Cooperative Development Center. Zoomerang surveys were developed, launched, and analyzed by Kleinschmit Rembert, who also did follow-up interviews with some conference participants.

Research and education priorities were released one to two months after the conference to state SARE Coordinators involved with the conference. Later, they were released to conference participants via the Zoomerang survey as a reminder of what was accomplished, and notification of information they had created. That plus the remaining data streams were used to write this manual, shared with conference participants and many others. All data were used, none wasted.

The Harvest . . . What We Learned About Application . . .

The Big So What. It may be too early to tell for some of the long-term outcomes, but *Reaping Our Rewards* has made an impact in the short and intermediate term. As mentioned earlier, all students and most educators who responded to the Zoomerang survey had already contacted farmers and ranchers. Half of the educators had included farmers/ranchers as presenters in workshops, with topics including soil microbiology, high tunnels, and organic production.



State SARE Coordinators spoke more to the intermediate outcomes for *Reaping Our Rewards*. Two of the four possible respondents indicated:

- Their 2006 SARE Plans of Work included programming directed toward priorities that were identified in the 2005 Conference.
- They were using input from the Conference to write their 2007 plans.
- They had shared the Conference results and priorities with their State PDP Advisory Committees.

Examples of changes they were making as a result of what they learned from the Conference include:

- *"Farmers wanted more time to interact with each other. As part of my state Plan of Work, I serve on program planning committees for several state conferences. I have advocated round table discussion format rather than lecture format for many of the topics."*
- *"I will emphasize facilitating the process of farmers sharing information with educators from their on-farm research projects, and establish better networking within areas."*
- *"I have some farmers on my Advisory Committee who help us identify priorities (for our state)."*
- *"(After the Conference) I wrote an update and we incorporated those suggestions from our state group into our proposed (2006) Plan of Work."*

Other applications of knowledge gained from this conference are evident throughout this manuscript, with many other opportunities waiting, from using the fishbowl technique to looking at the list of workshop ideas for inspiration. Really, there is no limit but that imposed by our own willingness, creativity, and initiative.

Things to think about . . .

Using your data to make change . . .

- Have you told your participants what the data may/may not affect?
- Are you clear about ways you can use it?
- How and when are you going to share it with your participants?
- Who might be interested in seeing the data, and what might they do with it?
- How can having this data make your life easier, or harder?
- From what you have seen in the data, what can you change:
 - Today?
 - By next Tuesday?
 - In your next workshop or event?
- How do you feel about making these changes?
- How are you going to evaluate the results from the changes you have made?

Helpful websites, other resources, and contact information.

Here is a limited assortment of websites and resources that you might find useful in your own work, divided into program planning and evaluation, facilitation, SARE, and miscellaneous resources. Another very helpful list of sustainable agriculture-focused websites, generated by *Reaping Our Rewards* participants, is on page 34.

Program Planning & Evaluation

- Evaluation, including process, outcome, and barnyard management; Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences Cooperative Extension and Outreach <http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/Evaluation.html>
- Free Management Library's Basic Guide to Outcomes-Based Evaluation for Nonprofit Organizations with Very Limited Resources -- <http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/outcomes.htm>
- Southern Region Extension Evaluation Collaborative -- <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/soregion.htm>
- The American Evaluation Association -- <http://www.eval.org/>
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation - Evaluation Handbook -- <http://www.wkkf.org/>
- United Way of America - Outcome Resource Measurement Network -- <http://www.unitedway.org/outcomes/>
- University of Wisconsin Program Planning and Evaluation -- <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluat.html>

Facilitation

- Free Management Library: A complete integrated online library for nonprofits and for-profits, includes many links to other facilitation resources, materials, books, etc. -- http://www.managementhelp.org/grp_skl/facitae/facitae.htm
- Grp-Facil, the electronic discussion on group facilitation: process expertise for group effectiveness. -- <http://www.albany.edu/cpr/gf/>
- Kraybill, R. (2005). *Group facilitation: Skills to facilitate meetings and training exercises to learn them* (paperback). Riverhouse ePress.
This little book (~\$5) gives a quick introduction to basic skills of meeting facilitation, and exercises anyone can use to practice them. A detailed section on additional resources will guide you to websites and books for further reading. Useful for: Individuals who want to practice basic group facilitation skills on their own, managers, team leaders, trainers, consultants, teachers, community group leaders, committee chairpeople, parents, anyone who leads meetings (publisher's description).
- U-Facilitate. University of Minnesota facilitation toolbox, full of helpful guides and instruction. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/U-Facilitate/>

SARE

- SARE homepage – www.sare.org
- Sustainable Agriculture Network
 - Publications page. Includes a link to http://www.sare.org/publications/all_pubs.htm
 - Bulletin page: Eight to 32 page bulletins on particular practices based on on-farm and other sustainable agriculture research, from production to marketing -- <http://www.sare.org/publications/bulletins.htm>
- North Central Region SARE homepage -- <http://www.sare.org/ncrsare>

Communicating Your Message

- Communicators Guide for Federal, State, Regional, and Local Communicators by the Federal Communicators Network* -- interactive website with downloadable book in .pdf format. -- <http://www.usda.gov/news/pubs/fcn/table.htm>
- Salzman, J. (2003). *Making the News: A Guide for Activists and Nonprofits* (Paperback) Perseus Books Group. *Written for activists, nonprofit organizations, or any concerned citizen, Making the News explains how to combine creativity with nuts-and-bolts media skills to score news coverage for important issues or nonprofit causes (publisher's description)*

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