

Topic 11

EMERGE
Supporting Farmer Led Groups

A collaborative project between
TAS FARM INNOVATION HUB
RMCG

Communicating and Advocating

Good communication helps people understand who your group is, what you do and why it matters. Whether you are talking with members, potential partners, funders or the wider community, clear and consistent messages can help build awareness, trust and support.

Advocacy takes this a step further, helping your group speak up for its interests, share its experience and influence the people or decisions that matter to your purpose and goals.

Communication

Good communication is at the heart of a well-functioning group. It helps members share information and ideas, listen to and understand different perspectives, participate in discussions and work together respectfully.

People communicate and process information in different ways, so creating opportunities for everyone to contribute can lead to stronger discussions and better outcomes.

Communication is also about how a group connects with people outside the group - sharing what you do, building relationships, engaging stakeholders and advocating for the things that matter to your members.

For emerging groups, communication does not need to be complicated. You can start by agreeing on some simple ways of working together. Consider:

Communicating within the group – how members keep in touch, share information and stay informed.

Good group discussions – listening, asking questions, sharing different views and disagreeing respectfully.

Different ways people communicate and contribute – recognising that some people think before speaking while others develop their ideas through discussion and making space for both.

Making sure everyone can contribute – using facilitation and simple techniques to encourage participation and prevent a few voices dominating.

Asking good questions – using curiosity, active listening and constructive questions to build understanding and explore ideas (see Table 1).

Communicating outside the group – identifying who you need to communicate with, what they need to know and the best way to reach them.

Advocating for your group – clearly explaining your group's purpose, priorities and experience to build understanding, support or influence.

How to guide group discussions

Guiding the discussion process for your group is crucial. Nominate a person to facilitate the discussion. Also nominate someone to take notes and help keeping the discussion focussed on the agreed purpose and rules so that discussion points and decisions are captured and don't need to be revisited.

The group should agree on ground rules, for instance:

- Listen actively and allow others to finish speaking.
- Speak respectfully and disagree respectfully, keep comments concise.
- Challenge ideas with evidence, not personalities.
- Encourage participation from everyone.
- Stay focused on the agenda and meeting objective.
- Keep discussions confidential where appropriate.
- Agree to support and implement the group's final decision.

Table 1 - Asking good questions

Examples of Questions	Characteristic	Description
Can you tell me more about...? What did you mean by...?	Reflect active listening and grasps the perspective of the receiver of the question.	Like paraphrasing, powerful questions illustrate that you actively listen to and understand what the receiver of the question is saying. All powerful questions should reflect that you listen, so this section will overlap with other characteristics.
What are you planning to...? How are you going to...? What could you/we start soon...? What could you/we trial or investigate...?	Presume positive intent.	Powerful questions should always affirm effort, skills, integrity, competence, caring and commitment.
What would you/we do if...? What were you thinking when...? How can you/we apply...?	Encourage discovery, insight, commitment, or action on behalf of the receiver of the question.	Powerful questions can give the receiver of the question insight into their own patterns, thinking, or encourage them to take action.
How else might you/we...? What is stopping you/us from...? What is the barrier to...? What would happen if...? What's missing?	Challenge current assumptions.	Powerful questions can push the receiver of the question to consider their own patterns or assumptions and help them understand what blocks them or holds them back.
What do you think it means...? Help me understand what you mean by...? What will you/we learn from this...?	Create greater clarity, possibility of new learning.	Powerful questions can help the receiver of the question find greater clarity about their own learning, their own behaviour, or push them to look at something in a new way.
What do you/we want to learn? What have you/we tried so far? What kind of help will you/we need?	Move the receiver of the question toward what they want.	Powerful questions can help the receiver of the question move forward and learn how to take action, set goals, and get the help they need.

Adapted from: Kee, K., Anderson, K., Dearing, V., Harris, E., Shuster, F. (2010). Results Coaching: The New Essential For School Leaders. Corwin: Thousand Oaks, CA. and
Rhode Island Department of Education (2014). Data Use Professional Development Series, Day 10: Participant Resources. Available here: https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Instruction-and-Assessment-World-Class-Standards/Instructional-Resources/Data-Use-PD/Day_10_Participant_Resources.pdf.

Other questions:

"What evidence contradicts this?"

"What risks are we overlooking?"

"If this fails, why might that happen?"

None of these questions start with 'why'

Asking a 'why' question is known to potentially put someone on the defensive - they may feel judged or the need to rationalise or be defensive with their response – which might shut down more open discussions and conversations.

Generally, groups make better decisions when they include people with different:

- Expertise
- Experiences
- Roles
- Ways of thinking.

Having a diversity in the group, while it can be challenging if not facilitated well, will help with stronger decision-making. In some cases, an external facilitator may be a good choice to guide the conversation.

Good discussions distinguish between:

Verified evidence – information or facts that can be checked or supported.

Assumptions – things we believe to be true but have not confirmed.

Personal preferences – what an individual would like or favour.

Speculation – ideas about what might happen or be true without enough information to know.

All can have a place in discussion but being clear about which is which helps the group understand different viewpoints, identify where more information may be needed and avoid treating assumptions or opinions as facts.

Sometimes a discussion will veer off from the central question. Rather than ignore these useful nuggets, say we can note that topic to the 'parking lot' and come back to it later once you've made your decision. It is good to record these useful ideas as they come up but then continue to focus on the purpose of the meeting. The 'parking lot' should be included in meeting minutes.

Different ways people communicate and contribute

People take in information, develop ideas and contribute to discussions in different ways. Some people prefer time to think and reflect before sharing their views, while others work through their thinking by talking and discussing ideas with others.

Understanding these differences can help groups create discussions where everyone has a meaningful opportunity to contribute. Recognising different styles of communicating that people have can help a group draw on the strengths, ideas and perspectives of all its members.

Introverts and extroverts

There are many ways to group different personality types. One of the enduring, but often misunderstood ones, is the introvert / extrovert difference. Neither personality trait is better, they just process information differently. They both have valuable contributions to make, which can be deeply complementary.

The two types are also not clearly either/or but fall across a spectrum from introverted to extroverted. Table 2 details the differences in how they process information and express it.

Table 2 - Introvert and extrovert characteristics relevant to meetings and decision making

Introverts	Extroverts
▪ Reflect (often deeply) before making decisions ▪ Solve problems using research and critical thinking ▪ Listen more ▪ Often need quiet time to be able to think things through ▪ Thoughtful, independent, attention to detail ▪ May not be comfortable with perceived unnecessary change or risks	▪ Make decisions quickly ▪ Solve problems through discussion ▪ Speak more ▪ Often need to talk things through ▪ Social, talkative, can be overbearing for introverts ▪ May be more receptive to new challenges and may be comfortable with some risks

Adapted from: Blevins, D.P., Stackhouse, M.R.D. & Dionne, S.D. (2022) Righting the balance: Understanding introverts (and extroverts) in the workplace. International Journal of Management Reviews. 24: 78–98. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12268

What does good communication look like?

Good communication helps people feel informed, heard and able to contribute. It is clear, respectful and suited to the people you are communicating with. Within a group, it creates space for different perspectives, encourages questions and active listening, and makes it clear what has been agreed and what happens next. Outside the group, it helps build understanding, relationships and trust.

Tools to support good communication

Communication does not need to be complicated. Choose tools and approaches that suit your members, purpose and audience. These might include:

Regular meetings and check-ins to share information and discuss issues.

Agendas, minutes and action lists to keep everyone informed and provide a record of what was agreed.

Email, messaging groups and shared online spaces for updates, documents and ongoing communication.

Ground rules to establish how members will listen, contribute and respectfully disagree.

Facilitation techniques to make sure different voices and communication styles are included.

Good questions and active listening to explore ideas, clarify understanding and encourage constructive discussion.

Surveys, polls and feedback to hear from people who may not contribute readily in meetings.

Newsletters, social media, websites and events to communicate with members and wider audiences.

Stakeholder and communication plans to identify who you need to reach, what you want them to know and how best to engage them.

Keep it simple: Good communication is not about using every available tool. It is about choosing the right way to communicate for the people, purpose and situation - and checking that your message has been understood.

Advocating for your group

Advocacy is about speaking up for the interests, needs and priorities of your group and the people it represents. It can help others understand why an issue matters, build support for your group's work and, where appropriate, influence decisions, policies or investment.

Advocacy does not need to be formal. It might be a conversation with another organisation, inviting a decision maker to an event, sharing members' experiences, responding to a consultation, writing a letter, or working with other groups on a shared issue.

Before you advocate

Be clear about what you want to achieve and who you need to reach. Consider:

What is the issue? Be able to explain it simply and why it matters.

What are you asking for? Have a clear and realistic outcome or action in mind.

Who needs to hear from you? Identify the people or organisations that can help, influence or make the decision.

What evidence do you have? Use facts, local knowledge, member experiences and examples to support your message.

Who are you speaking for? Make sure your position reflects the views and authority of the group, particularly when speaking publicly on its behalf.

Who could work with you? Partners and other groups with similar interests can strengthen your message.

What is the best way to communicate? This might be a meeting, phone call, letter, submission, event, media story or other approach.

Keep your message simple

A useful advocacy message should be easy for someone outside the group to understand. Be ready to explain:

- Who we are
- What matters to us
- Why it matters
- What we would like to see happen
- How you can help.

Having a short, agreed "elevator pitch" can help members confidently and consistently explain the group and its priorities.

Build relationships, not just messages

Effective advocacy is often built over time. Get to know the people and organisations relevant to your group, listen to their perspectives, share useful information and keep them informed about your activities and achievements. Advocacy is generally more effective when there is already trust, understanding and a constructive relationship.

Tip: Keep a simple record of who your group has spoken with, the key issues discussed, any commitments made and when you should follow up. This helps maintain relationships when people or roles within the group change.



How this resource came about

The Emerge project was funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund to support new, emerging and informal farmer groups to develop their skills and knowledge, and to create this set of resources for use by groups into the future. Groups participating in 2026 received coaching and additional learning opportunities to supplement the content of these resources.

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