

Using experience groups to share knowledge and reduce pesticide use

Rolf Thostrup Poulsen, Poul Henning Petersen
Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, Denmark



© Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, Denmark



Food Quality and Safety



Objectives

Experience groups, where farmers share knowledge together with an adviser, have been used with success for more than 20 years in Denmark. This leaflet not only provides information about the historical development of this concept, but also gives information about how you can establish your own experience group.

Background

The concept of experience groups was developed among Danish farmers and advisers in the early 1980s. In the late 1980s the concept was improved in response to a political demand to reduce pesticide inputs in agriculture. This political demand resulted in the first National Action Plan, in which one of the objectives was to develop intensive advising on plant protection, thus assisting the farmer to reduce pesticide use, while maintaining profitable production.

An experience group consists of five to eight farmers and an adviser which meets during the growing season to discuss subjects of relevance. These subjects may concern anything from soil cultivation and fertilisation to crop protection and harvest strategy. The groups developed in response to the first National Action Plan are, however, still the most common ones and here the central focus is on plant protection strategy and how to optimise this.

Currently there are 428 registered experience groups in Denmark, with a total of more than 3,000 members. Though the groups include both part-time and professional farmers, the majority of the groups are for professional farmers. This means a large proportion of farmers (covering the majority of the production types) are therefore involved in experience groups, and this membership has some advantages:

- The uncertainty the farmers feel can be removed by sharing them with colleagues and the adviser
- Advice is presented regularly during the growing season when weeds, pests and diseases have to be controlled
- It is more efficient to advise seven farmers once rather than seven farmers individually
- The farmer experiences how strategies work out at similar farms
- Farmers challenge each other to solve problems in the best possible way
- The cost of an adviser can be split between members of the group

A major advantage of experience groups is that it allows farmers to share the cost of expert advice.
© Danish Agricultural Advisory service, Denmark.



The latter point is of particular interest to farmers. During the growing season, farmers usually have a meeting in their group every 14 days, and one meeting before harvest to discuss the effect of the chosen crop protection strategies and plan for the coming season (since timing is essential). This can entail up to eight visits by an adviser, which is much more than an ordinary farmer can afford or is willing to pay. Usually the venue of the visit is shifted among the farmers, so the group sees how the crop protection strategies work in different situations.

Establishing a group

There are several ways to establish an experience group. The most common is that the farmer contacts his adviser, who uses the local media (the weekly newsletter or local newspaper etc) to announce that an experience group is going to be formed and that anyone interested should contact the adviser. Following up these contacts by telephone is very efficient. If the number of applications is too high, several groups may be formed.

When establishing a group, it is important that the farmers have a common professional interest and a desire to give and receive inspiration from each other. The level of ambition of the individual farmers should also be balanced.

Experiences have shown that the most important selection criterion is the type of production (pigs, dairy or crop production, for example). The age of the members is not a huge problem, although the problems experienced by a newly started farmer are different from those experienced by a farmer on the verge of retirement.

Make sure that the farmers in the group do not know each other too closely before starting up the group. If the members are neighbours or friends, they already have certain relations with each other - good as well as bad. These relations may very well set the agenda for the rest of the group.

Commitment to the group

During the first meeting in the new group, it is important to emphasise that the success of an experience group depends on the commitment of each member. This commitment goes further than just showing up at the meetings, hosting a meeting etc. It is a question of being willing to share stories from the farm, regardless of whether they are good or bad. Very often the best learning originates from the bad stories. One of the mottos that emerged from the groups at an early stage is 'openness internally, confidence externally'.



This means that the life in the group originates from the sharing of experiences in the group. No one outside the group should be informed about the stories told inside the group if members agree to keep things confidential.

In some groups a written agreement forms the basis of the group. This has the advantage that everyone knows what is expected (including the size of the necessary payments), and that new members in the group are easily integrated. Some groups, however, prefer a more informal format without a formal agreement.



Sharing experiences – both good and bad – is key to a successful group. © Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, Denmark.

Setting the goals

Together with writing the agreement, it is natural to discuss the goals of the group. The goals are used to steer the work in the group. It should not be considered as a strict agenda for the group, but rather as a common understanding of why this group is together. Discussing the different goals will also give the participants a better understanding of each other, and what they individually want to gain from the group. Examples of goals could be:

- We should visit each other at least once every year
- We should feel confident around each other, so that we can present our financial accounts to each other for discussion and critical remarks
- We should give each other professional feedback and ask challenging questions so that we ultimately become better at taking decisions
- We should care for the social aspects of the group, for example having at least one social gathering with family each year
- We should arrange at least one course together each year

In this process, the adviser should function as a facilitator, responsible for collecting viewpoints and subjects from all the participants.

Preparation is essential

Having established the group, it is important that the first meeting is planned quite quickly, so the participants can see that the group is now operative. For all meetings the preparation is essential. There is nothing worse for a farmer than if he feels he is wasting his time. The preparation is usually done by the farmer hosting the next meeting (a proper tour in the field for example), and the adviser (all the theoretical material). It is also a good idea to have a rough idea of the content of the individual meetings to be held during the growing season. This helps the other members of the group to focus their questions etc. A rough plan for a Danish group can be seen in the accompanying table.

Typical schedule for a Danish group

Date	Meeting	Typical subjects
Before March	1 st meeting	Overwintering of cereals, effect of weed control in autumn, weed control in spring
Early April	2 nd meeting	Growth regulation, monitoring of Eyespot, weeds
Mid April	3 rd meeting	Weeds, thresholds for diseases, chemical disease control, fertilisation
Early May	4 th meeting	Chemical disease control
Mid May	5 th meeting	Pests, diseases and remaining weeds
Mid June	6 th meeting	Pests and diseases, strategy for next season, choice of varieties
Early October	7 th meeting	Chemical weed control in winter cereals
Mid November	8 th meeting	What have we learnt from the growing season?

A typical meeting takes two hours with the adviser present. At the end of each meeting, a summary is often made and the date of the next meeting is set. This may be done during coffee, but be careful to separate the professional part of the meeting and the social activities.

Maintaining motivation

Having started the group, it is important that the motivation levels are kept high. In the beginning, the adviser can make sure that this is happening, for example by suggesting subjects for discussion, arranging courses and small trips and so forth. Another way could be to include external experts, who could come for a meeting and give a small lecture on a subject of relevance. This will give the participants a chance to increase their knowledge and provide them with tools they can use in their everyday life.



Arranging courses and trips helps maintain motivation.

© Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, Denmark

The use of experience groups offers many advantages to members of the groups as well as the advisers involved. Used appropriately, it can become one of the places where sensitive subjects can be discussed openly, giving farmers more confidence in themselves and their business. Used wrongly, however, it may lead to conflicts between farmers. It is therefore important for the farmers to realise that being a member of an experience

group requires responsibility, honesty, commitment and motivation. If the group agrees on this, they have a good chance of succeeding.

Five steps to a successful experience group

- Establish the group around a common professional interest
- Ensure each member shares a commitment to the group
 - Set the goals after discussion with the group
 - Thoroughly prepare for meetings
- Maintain motivation by arranging trips or inviting external experts

Summary

Experience groups have been a feature of Danish agriculture since the 1980s and have been a proven success in reducing pesticide use by the country's farmers. The groups involve up to eight farmers sharing knowledge with an adviser, making it cost-efficient and effective for both farmers and advisers.

This leaflet explains how to run a successful experience group, from forming the group, through to setting the goals, maintaining motivation and creating a timetable. It has been written by advisers from the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DAAS), an ENDURE partner which can trace its roots back to around 1875 when the country's farmers' organisations first started to employ their own advisers. Owned and used by Danish farmers, DAAS now employs some 3,500 professionals spread across 36 local advisory centres and a national centre in northern Aarhus.

For further information please contact:

Rolf Thostrup Poulsen (email: rtp@landscentret.dk)
or Poul Henning Petersen (email: php@landscentret.dk)
The Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, The National Centre,
Crop Production Udkaersvej 15, DK-8200 Aarhus N, Denmark.

About ENDURE

ENDURE is the European Network for the Durable Exploitation of Crop Protection Strategies. ENDURE is a Network of Excellence (NoE) with two key objectives: restructuring European research and development on the use of plant protection products, and establishing ENDURE as a world leader in the development and implementation of sustainable pest control strategies through:

- > Building a lasting crop protection research community
- > Providing end-users with a broader range of short-term solutions
- > Developing a holistic approach to sustainable pest management
- > Taking stock of and informing plant protection policy changes.

Eighteen organisations in 10 European countries are committed to ENDURE for four years (2007-2010), with financial support from the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme, priority 5: Food Quality and Security.

Website and ENDURE Information Centre

www.endure-network.eu

This publication was funded by EU grant (Project number: 031499), and is catalogued by the ENDURE Executive Committee as ENDURE Training in Integrated Pest Management, published in August, 2009.

© Photos, from top to bottom: JKI, B. Hommel; INRA, J.F. Picard; JKI, B. Hommel; INRA, J. Weber; A.S. Walker; INRA, C. Slagmulder; JKI, B. Hommel; Agroscope ART; SZIE; INRA, N. Bertrand; Vitropic; INRA, F. Carreras