

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social
Sciences
Team

Social and Professional Skills to be Effective with Small Farmers

Background

Working effectively with small farmers requires social skills, specialized knowledge, understanding, and experience. Generalizations in this fact sheet have come from a variety of researchers in the field of diffusion of information and the adoption of agricultural practices. Additional observations are based upon personal experiences working with small farmers in four different countries. However, it would be a mistake to treat these generalizations as road maps for all situations. Rather, these ideas are meant to add to your own experiences and successes in working with small farmers. Some of these ideas may not appeal to people who like to follow a prescribed program orientation.

In order to add “life” to this fact sheet, a fictitious character, “Fred Hunter”, will be used to portray the typical small farmer.

Understand Fred’s Situation:

Let’s assume that Fred is like thousands of other small farmers. He is a bit hesitant and skeptical in accepting most changes, which can be attributed to Fred himself and also to the situation in which he finds himself. He and his predecessors have developed traditional ways of doing things, and have really done satisfactory so far. The mere fact that he is still farming his

land means that he has not made too many costly mistakes. He farmed for many years without receiving help from government agencies. Perhaps this is the first step in understanding Fred.

Fred has a wife and four children and a definite position in relation to other family members. What he can and cannot do is partly a function of this position. As the head of the family, he has certain obligations. Because of such obligations he may not be able to take certain risks that might threaten his and his family’s future. He also does not live in a vacuum. He lives in a community surrounded by friends, relatives, and neighbors. This means he cannot behave or act in any way he pleases. Obviously, any natural resource advice should take into account Fred, his farm, his family, and his community.

Help Fred to See That Change Can Be Beneficial For Him and His Family: For initial contacts with Fred, it may be difficult for him to see that he can address resource issues on his farm. It should be remembered that Fred has lived for years without the likelihood of improving his family’s way of life through agriculture. Part of your challenge is to raise Fred’s expectations that resource protection and conservation can lead to personal and community benefits. A personal philosophy or ethic about conservation needs to be instilled in Fred’s way of thinking.

It is important to arouse his interest to listen to radio programs that discuss the benefits of conservation. Encouraging him to visit the field office or making available simple program information brochures will help him to become aware of available technology and /or technical assistance from the agency. Visual technologies such as videos or slide shows can effectively show conservation benefits. You can convey the message of what other small farmers in different locations are doing and of the successes they are achieving. Field tours to neighboring areas where other small farmers are successfully trying conservation practices should be recommended. This essentially would increase Fred's contacts with other small farmers in locations or communities where changes are taking place.

Adapt Conservation Recommendations To Fred's Norms and Traditions:

Perhaps it is common to find that small farmers like Fred are often reluctant to change. His behavior, however stubborn and unreasoned it may appear to an outsider, is the product of years of past experiences. But Fred is pragmatic; he is not going to give up his habitual ways of doing things until he is convinced that he will benefit by doing so. You may stimulate him to see that the future holds new things for him, while respecting the importance of his past experiences.

Be mindful of the fact that wisdom and tradition carry more weight with Fred and with other small farmers as well. Therefore, proposing conservation technology is likely to set Fred in a defensive posture. He knows that his individual productive capacities, with traditional means, will provide a bare subsistence, but his margin of survival and/or resources are so slim that he may feel that he cannot take the risk with something that is new and untested or that he cannot afford. Hence, the conservation solution for Fred must be flexible enough to tailor to his pre-existing norms and traditions to enhance the likelihood of adoption.



Identify A Few Who Seem to Have an Interest in Conservation:

It is often possible to encounter small farmers, unlike Fred, who would be more inclined than others to try new things. Try to identify such individuals who are sympathetic to conservation ideas, and solicit their cooperation for introducing changes to others. It is also likely that you may know some small farm leaders who others consult in relation to farm problems. These people are respected for good judgment and successful experiences. It is important to know who these farmers are and start working with them. Obviously, these farmers are likely to function as good demonstrators. When such farmers adopt and start using a new conservation practice, others are likely to follow.

Conduct Result Demonstrations and Ensure Success:

Research shows that demonstration or model farms are one of the most effective ways of communicating with small farmers, like Fred, about a new idea or practice. Research also indicates that the agricultural professional is the most respected information sources during the trial stage of the individual decision-making process. Therefore, by virtue of the agricultural professional's position among small farmers, he or she must know the technicalities involved to help the demonstrator farmer have a successful experience. When a demonstration is a success other small farmers will be more receptive to similar recommendations.

Such demonstrations should be carefully carried out, because if they are carelessly done, it may actually prejudice the viewers and also constitute barriers to subsequent change. We need to realize that viewers are highly critical of new practices and perceive what actually happens and not what ought to happen.

(Continued on Next Page)

Communicate with Fred Simply and Precisely:

Often, when communication with people, even at home, we may get in the habit of talking in agency jargon. We carry over this tendency and use specialized words and expressions in communicating with small farmers like Fred. The small farmers are not likely to understand such terms, though they may be members of the same culture and speak the same basic language. It is for this reason that effective communication is so important in introducing conservation technology.

Communicating with Fred means that conservation ideas and techniques must be presented verbally, visually, and conceptually so that Fred perceives the potential advantages in much the same fashion as the field staff. In essence, the field staff must see that Fred does receive, understand, accept, and act upon the idea that has been communicated. It is Fred's action in the right direction that should guide you in all future communications with small farmers, not your perception that he agrees with you.

Create Group Pressure in Accepting Conservation Practices:

Most rural communities are organized in some fashion. Many of the groups are kinship groups, but cliques and other specialized groups are also prominent. Small farmers may organize in some fashion because they can accomplish certain things through group organization that they cannot otherwise achieve as individuals. It is important to identify some of these groups and also to know who belongs to which group.

Group discussions are one of the most effective teaching methods of adult learning. This method ensures that adults learn from one another. Many experienced professionals use this method to speed up the decision-making process and to create a social pressure within the group to accept new ideas or practices. Small farmers often tend to do what close associates expect them to do. The group method can create support for conservation ideas that can hasten the process for the entire community. This would allow Fred to compare the experiences of a neighbor and colleague with his own farm and family situations and would also help him to discuss the application of the practices with others who are in the same situation as himself. In fact, comparing situations is what small farmers are inclined to do in making up their minds when they have such an opportunity. Once a group opinion is formulated and expressed it acts as a compelling influence on members to live up to the group expectations.

Reinforce Fred's Decisions:

It is important to understand that if you have been able to convince Fred about all the merits of the conservation practice he will probably adopt it. But unfortunately, the acceptance of the new practice by Fred does not ensure that he will continue to use it. Research has shown that it has been a common practice with many farmers who had once adopted an innovation to discontinue the idea or practice for one reason or another.

Often, as professionals, we hardly realize that following the adoption stage the primary educational need is one of reinforcement. The question of reinforcement is to help Fred from changing his mind before something different is available to him. Fred may still need advice and support in some areas if he is to continue to use the practice on his farm. In order to continue providing support, help Fred assess his own results and get him acquainted with the results of other farmers or neighbors who have successfully adopted the same conservation practices.

Don't Forget to Sell Yourself:

You should try to create situations to demonstrate to small farmers that you are a sincere “well wisher” or friend. Try to develop a trusting relationship with Fred. This is important because among small farmers advice is not accepted until the person is accepted. There are no fixed steps to follow to be accepted by others but you can set a few guideposts to monitor your progress toward this desired goal.

While working with Fred or any other small farmer, you should always show respect for him and his work. This means that as a professional, you must demonstrate that you feel he is a competent and capable farmer. There does not need to be flattery in this attitude shown toward him, but rather to follow the advice of the late Dr. Lyman Bryson who often urged workers “not to look for excellent people but for excellence in all people.”

In spite of all individual differences, Fred represents a personal collection of experiences, wants, convictions, taboos, enthusiasms, and habits. You must show respect for all his ideas and beliefs and try to understand his way of life. This will probably mean you need to spend a sizable portion of your time listening and trying to understand Fred's situation.

It has often been suggested that as professionals we should think of ourselves as equals with our customers. It is not easy to predict how best you can gain acceptance among small farmers, but it is a proven fact that if you want to contribute to the knowledge and experience of small farmers, you must identify with Fred.

Voice Your Concerns:

When working with small farmers, be sure that your communication is not top down or one-way. Both you and the small farmer need to be allowed to make suggestions based on past experiences. A solution, recommendation or new practice, no matter how good, is usually not appropriate for everybody and may be downright wrong for some. It is likely that small farmers will be quick to detect these kinds of faults, and perhaps earlier than the professional person. Communicate such matters to your supervisor and invite criticisms and feedback from other field staff. In this way, field staff are aware of problems a particular practice and suitable actions can be taken or adjustments made.

In order to be effective in introducing change, we need to be able to understand, recognize and evaluate properly the motivation of the customer groups and the benefits that adoption of the conservation practices can have on these individuals and the community.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or a part of an individual's income derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider.