



Farmer-Led Learning Groups to Mentor Beginning Farmers

SARE Project
Project Leader
Affiliation
Reports at
Follow-up to

ONE04-020 (completed in 2005)
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<http://www.farmandfood.org/programs>

Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring: Building Sustainable Farms Through Peer Relationships (completed in 2001)

OUR ORIGINAL PLAN

- We thought farmer group mentoring would be more efficient and less expensive than one-on-one farmer-to-farmer mentoring.
- Farmer mentors (paid a \$600 stipend) were responsible for developing a curriculum, assembling a group, creating documents, managing paperwork, producing learning sessions, group communications and evaluations, plus one-on-one relationships with group members.
- A skills and experience checklist was developed by each mentor to structure the group's curriculum. Checklist was to serve both as program evaluation tool and to help individuals track their progress.
- We signed up 6 mentors, each to work with 4 to 8 farmers, in structured groups expected to meet for several hours 10 months a year.
- Groups combined hands-on activities with conceptual learning. Each had a pastured livestock focus (e.g., small ruminants or grass-based dairy), and a geographic orientation (50 mile radius from mentor).
- To expose participants to additional farmers and expertise we presented 3 one-day seminars.
- After one year, the expectation was that learning groups might decide to reconfigure as farmer networks.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Our concept was too much pressure on the farmer mentors (who were all fulltime farmers) as it required substantial time and energy — emotional and physical energy.
- As leaders, farmer mentors struggled with group dynamics.
- Group approach was not necessarily a time savings for mentors as participants still wanted individual attention.
- All participants rejected the structured approach to curriculum, the paperwork processes, checklists, and evaluations tools, in favor of more informal, experiential learning followed by group discussion and food.
- All but one formal group disintegrated, but new networks were born.
- **FARMERS WANT FARMER NETWORKING GROUPS**
Participants most valued face-time with other farmers: social networking with peers, knowledge trading, resource sharing, group problem solving, group therapy, support group.
- **FARMERS WANT FARMER -TO-FARMER EDUCATION**
Presented 3 very successful day-long on-farm workshops: *Low Stress Animal Handling*, *Direct Marketing Your Farm Raised Meats*, and *Slaughterhouse Tour & Meat Quality Workshop*

The Regional Farm & Food Project is a member supported, farmer focused, nonprofit serving the Northeast's greater Hudson-Mohawk Valley food shed. We work to promote earth-friendly agriculture and community food systems through educational programs that build supply and demand for local foods.