

Muchas Gracias

What makes our grower group tick

Muchas Gracias is a small grower group based in the medium rainfall zone near Arthur River, Western Australia. The group was established in June 2013 as a pilot Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring program funded by the South West Catchments Council (SWCC), with assistance from Evergreen Farming and Paul Omodei.

Initially the group consisted of 5 farmers with similar skill levels, who farmed within 50 kms of each other, but ran very different operations with varying personal and business goals. The pilot program had originally planned to replicate the traditional “mentee and mentor” model that most farmer mentoring programs employ, however this idea was thrown out very early on by the Muchas Gracias group. The group preferred to have a structure where members were all mentoring each other, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, and creating a level playing field where hierarchical structures did not interfere with open communication and learning. A structure was decided whereby face to face meetings would be held 3-4 times per year, with the venue rotating between group members' farms, and an experienced facilitator/ technical

advisor (Paul Omodei from Planfarm) present to coordinate the meetings, guide discussions and answer technical, financial or production related questions as they arose. In between the meetings, members would keep in regular contact via a closed online blog, which only invited members could view and contribute content. An informal set of ‘rules of engagement’ was discussed and decided upon, with confidentiality, honesty and trust being central values. Group goals were set together from the beginning, as were the individual goals for each farming business.

The pilot program was very successful, and Muchas Gracias has continued to function as an independent grower group. The membership has broadened to 8 farm businesses, and has increased its realm to include industry funded trials and projects, including Grain and Graze 3 and a Meat and Livestock Australia Producer Research Site. It is seen as an innovative group with a high technical capacity, and many of the members are involved with other larger grower groups, which provides links to a broader grower base and industry.

Given the ongoing success of the

group, there is a significant opportunity to replicate this grower group model in other areas; however in order to do this, we must first identify the essence of what makes the Muchas Gracias group really ‘tick’. This can be loosely summarised by the following characteristics:

PROXIMITY – all members located within the same region, making regular farm visits practical

DIVERSITY – a range of enterprise mixes and farming methods allows for a diversity of ideas

SMALL GROUP SIZE – trust and openness are fostered when the group is small and every member is expected to contribute and be engaged in discussions

RELATIONSHIPS – good relationships between members and the facilitator are vital to the group’s success

TRUST – Members must trust each other and the facilitator to keep discussions confidential

RELEVANCE – The topics discussed must be relevant to the members; guided by production, management or

Members of the Muchas Gracias Grower Group trialling the new pasture biomass App in 2015.



financial issues that the members are facing in their own farming businesses at a particular time.

HONESTY and OPENNESS – Honesty and openness regarding production and financial figures, as well as challenges being faced, will take time to foster but is critical to members gaining real value from the group.

REGULARITY – The regularity of group meetings (3-4 times per year) and interaction via the blog (ongoing, usually weekly) builds group cohesion and relevance.

FACILITATION – An experienced and knowledgeable facilitator / advisor who is trusted and respected by group members will keep the group functioning well and provide invaluable technical input to discussions

Provided below are a selection of comments from members of the Muchas Gracias group about what it is that makes their group work so well:

“The key component to the group success of Muchas Gracias is the complete business confidentiality and trust between members. In the early days of forming the group we discussed a code of conduct and even looked into a number of different ones from business plans that some members had completed in the past. This evidently didn't get done but the code of conduct basically formed itself and I think a key factor in this was the private internal Blog. Members could blog opinions, questions, photos, ideas, statements, results and sometimes bad jokes without fear of judgement by others in the group. This has simply built confidence within the group and as a group to challenge each other and keep moving forward in their businesses. The group has also formed good personal relationships whereby it is not only business that we are interested in or concerned about but also the health and wellbeing of each other. 2015 was a very tough year seasonally for members of Muchas and I would be comfortable to say that the group is stronger now than it has ever been”.
[Paul Omodei, group facilitator and advisor.](#)

“I appreciate the trust and fellowship the group has for sharing ideas and our properties, it is what makes the group work. Muchas also has a holistic approach to pasture management with cropping, people and almost all aspects of farm business included in the discussion. Finally the group participates in trials that are at the “pointy end” and “new” and will make a difference.” [Graydn Wilcox](#)

“The confidentiality of the group is very important to me. The group works well, with the combination of the Blog and property visits. The Blog allows us to discuss all sorts of issues as they arise. I feel we all have our strengths and interest's which combine to form a strong group with great respect to each other. There is a large and varied subject matter.” [Bryan Kilpatrick](#)

“Muchas is a very supportive peer group made up of a wide diversity of members, all of whom have always run trials / held field days and generally pushed the limits to find answers to their questions. There is no sole common theme bar farming sustainably and making a profit, but they are all prepared to listen and give honest feedback and share methodology and results from ideas they are trialling. The meetings are an opportunity to discuss current challenges and share information so that the whole of the group can benefit from outcomes. It aids in forming clarity in the decision making process. The group allows members to pursue projects under the group name and the blog is an information sharing platform that allows findings from projects and general reading to be shared and for group input / interest in projects to be obtained.” [Brad Wooldridge](#)

“I was invited into the group well after they had started, but I get so much out of it. I love that it is a small group and everyone is open and willing to divulge their figures, their successes and failures. You would think that the group wouldn't work so well with such diverse farming methods and management systems (from Holistic to pushing the envelope with production,

to mainstream conventional) but it does. We are all keen on learning and improving. Because of the diversity, questions are discussed from all different angles and we are challenged by different opinions and solutions. Personally I wouldn't mind if we didn't run trials. I would just be happy to meet regularly with hot topics for discussion. The success of the group is significantly due to Paul and his skill in catching the ideas and thoughts that fly around the room and formatting them into key questions and then facilitating discussion. Then there is his amazing knowledge and ‘rules of thumb’! The blog is great for discussion between meetings, and I agree about the research we do being all exciting pointy end stuff.” [Lynley Anderson](#)

“As a newcomer to the group I am impressed by the openness with which production and financial information is shared. It really is an atmosphere of collaboration not competition. The topics discussed are often based around tactical decision making which seems to put these farmers ahead of the game, especially in a tight season like 2015.” [Alana Starkie](#)

More information

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