



# Facilitating Farmer Cohorts for Peer-to-Peer Learning

By Becky Maden

UVM Extension Assistant Research Professor

UVM Institute for Agroecology

It is well documented that farmers trust information learned from other farmers and are most willing to adopt a practice if they see it working on a farm. An effective and emerging method to facilitate learning for farmers is peer-to-peer cohorts in which the same group of farmers come together on multiple occasions to share and compare their experiences around a specific issue or practice, creating an information network that leads to deeper understanding. Farmer cohorts are dedicated to co-learning, sharing ideas, and relying on peers for information and inspiration. Unlike single educational meetings, or series of meetings attended by different farmers, cohorts can build a high level of trust and sharing among participants as a result of ongoing, facilitated gatherings of the same farmers over the course of at least one year.



## Setting the stage for cohort groups:

1. **DEFINE THE GOALS.** What information needs have been identified by farmers that the cohort will address, and how will the cohort subject matter be described? The focus could be broad, for example “soil health” or narrow, for example “reduced tillage on organic vegetable farms.”
2. **SET THE MEETING DETAILS.** What will be the frequency and length of gatherings? What is the duration of the cohort? Will farmers gather in person or remotely, or both? What are the expectations for attendance? Will a stipend be provided to compensate farmers for their time and/or travel?
3. **GROUP SIZE.** It is reasonable to begin with 10 to 18 farmers, with the expectation that 2–3 participants will either participate lightly or not at all. It is important to have enough farmers to have different perspectives but a small enough group to allow space for all to participate in conversation. It can be effective to have on-line cohort meetings in winter, for about an hour each, and then gather in person for several hours at cohort member farms, typically monthly, during the growing season. A high level of attendance should be the expectation. Stipends are often appreciated by farmers, as a token of appreciation for taking the time to be a part of the group.
4. **SET PARAMETERS FOR PARTICIPATION.** These should consider how differences among farmers can strengthen learning or get in the way of productive conversations. For example, what level of overlap should growers have in scale, products (dairy vs vegetables), or production methods (organic, no-till, etc.). Diversity of perspectives can strengthen a cohort, but growers need commonalities for productive co-learning.
5. **CONSIDER GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES.** If meeting in person, it may make sense to limit farmers to a specific region to ease the burden of long travel, especially during the growing season. Proximity may also support lasting relationships among farmers, after the cohort.

6. **FORMALIZE THE RECRUITMENT AND APPLICATION PROCESS.** To succeed, a cohort needs earnest engagement from participants. Personalized invitations to participate should come from a trusted community member (a service provider or respected farmer) that provides details about the cohort purpose, operation, and participant selection process. This invitation primes the cohort for success by inviting farmers with sufficient experience and a known willingness to share information (versus a generic solicitation to a large group of farmers). The initial invitation should include a short application with targeted questions related to the cohort topic (e.g., describe current practices, problem solving approach, what they hope to learn in a cohort). Thoughtfully constructing the group is important to include a diversity of perspectives but with enough commonality to have deep conversations and ensure that participants are willing to interact in mindful way.
7. **BE REALISTIC ABOUT DELIVERABLES.** In addition to information sharing and learning, is there an expectation from farmers, or funders, that cohort members will complete something by the end of their time together, like writing plans or adopting new practices? Make sure any expectations are achievable and don't distort the intent of the cohort. Be explicit about expectations with applicants. If a report or summary of cohort activities or learning is needed or wanted, determine ahead of time how it will be produced.
8. **SCHEDULE COHORT GATHERINGS FAR IN ADVANCE AND STAGGER DAYS OF THE WEEK.** It is unlikely that farmers can make every meeting but having meetings scheduled far in advance helps with planning. Alternating days of the week that the group meets means that people with regular weekly commitments—like farmers' markets or kids' activities—can attend more meetings.
9. **DEVELOP GROUP AGREEMENTS AND REVIEW THEM BEFORE EACH MEETING.** Group agreements are central to setting the tone for cohort gatherings, describing learning behaviors and focus of the group. These can be co-created with farmers during the first meeting or drafted by the facilitators. Reviewing these before each gathering provides important reminders to both the participants and the facilitators.

## Meeting facilitation and structure:

1. **CLEAR ROLES OF THE GROUP FACILITATORS.** One person is designated as the “gathering facilitator” with the role of scheduling, building agendas, taking notes, communicating with host farms, and organizing refreshments. This person should have a strong familiarity with farming and the subject matters covered in cohort meetings. The second person is designated as a “content facilitator” with the role of supporting the transfer of technical information during and between meetings. This person provides expertise as requested by the cohort members. It is useful for this person to have familiarity with the cohort farms and their practices prior to the start of the cohort.
2. **INTRODUCTORY MEETING(S) FOR GOAL SETTING.** It is important to quickly familiarize farmers with each other. Winter meetings are an excellent opportunity to ask farmers to share their approach to farming, their specific practices, and to articulate their hopes for cohort learning. This can be done in person or online. Facilitators have a follow up meeting shortly thereafter to discern shared learning goals, common themes, and co-learning opportunities that emerged from the cohort.
3. **CO-CREATED AGENDAS FOR ON-FARM COHORT MEETINGS** enable the host farmer to clearly identify what they want to share with the group and aspects of their production they seek input on. Prompting the host farmer(s) to think about what they want to gain from the group visit can reframe the visit from one that showcases their farm into a meeting that is productive and generative for the host.



4. **LIGHTLY FACILITATED GATHERINGS** create a balance of production-oriented conversation with opportunities for farmers to connect on a personal basis. Prior to the farm walk, the group circles up for brief introductions and comments on what they hope to learn at this gathering. The facilitators review the “agenda” for the evening, emphasizing that the conversation should not be restricted. During the farm walk, farmer-led conversation allows interests and observations to emerge from the group, while the content facilitator summarizes or clarifies when necessary.
5. **MAKE TIME FOR A CLOSING CIRCLE.** It is important to take time at the end of the meeting to articulate the value of the gathering, allowing each person to state 1) what they learned and will take with them and 2) what they offer back to the host farmer—an affirmation and/or an insight about their operation. This is not critical feedback; the intention is to leave the farmer with positive energy from the group.
6. **FOOD AND SOCIALIZING** at the end of the gathering invites people to relax, stay longer, and build lasting social connections. The gathering facilitator provides hearty, enjoyable food that meets a variety of dietary restrictions. Inviting the partners of cohort members and kids to join after the cohort session enables farm families to get a break from the farm, together.

## Follow up to meetings

1. **FACILITATOR DEBRIEF.** Within a couple of days after the gathering, the content facilitator reviews the notes taken by the meeting facilitator and adds/adjusts technical content.
2. **PROVIDE COHORT MEMBERS WITH MEETING NOTES, PHOTOS, AND A REMINDER ABOUT THE NEXT MEETING WITHIN A WEEK AFTER EACH GATHERING.** This quick communication maintains steady engagement with the group, allows time for follow up questions, and helps the farmers who couldn't attend feel included.

## Summary

A deliberate but responsive process to cohort development and facilitation is critical to positive farmer experience and success of the group. As no two farms or farmers are alike, no two cohort groups are alike. Facilitators can utilize the flexibility of the cohort model to adapt and adjust to the unique dynamics of each group and topic. Sharing successes and lessons learned between facilitators will further strengthen the power of this model and benefit farmers across many regions.

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