

Teagasc Notes for week ended Friday May 24th 2019

Information is so readily available now through so many different channels. But in reality how do any of us learn? In a farming context, how do we build the confidence to make changes to the way we do things to improve output and profitability on our farms? Is it through social media? Is it through education courses, through seminars, through books? Or is it through our peers?

There is considerable evidence that peer to peer learning i.e the discussion group model is the most effective way to get greater uptake of technologies at farm level. The discussion group is one of the most important knowledge transfer tools used by Teagasc to engage farmers in new technologies, resulting in improved output & efficiency and consequently profitability.

So what is a discussion group?

Discussion groups consist of a bunch of local farmers who meet regularly on farms to see, discuss and learn about technologies and practices that may be applied on their own farms. Typically discussion groups consist of 10 to 15 farmers, who meet between 6 and 12 times per year.

How can a Teagasc Discussion Group benefit you?

1. Make More Money!

Independent research has shown that farmers who are in discussion groups make more money than farmers who aren't, due to a more rapid adoption of technologies facilitated by enabling farmer learning and building farmer confidence

2. A Good Network

Farming can be a lonely occupation. Throw in difficult weather and market conditions and the going can get really tough at times. The social aspect of discussion groups is often the first benefit mentioned by group members. Groups get you out of your own working environment for a couple of hours each month and give you a chance to share your farming experiences, good or bad, with like-minded individuals.

3. Personal Development

Members of discussion groups learn how to interact with others, share information and gradually grow their self-confidence. Many farmers have contributed to the industry or community following their development in groups e.g. chairperson of local sports club, community group, committee or board members of the co-ops; speak at conferences.

4. Receive technical information at the right time

Discussion group members have a mix of experience and educational qualifications. Timely technical information at meetings from fellow discussion group members, facilitators, can help you and your group make the best decisions for what you face on your farm that month.

5. Implement more technology

Research has shown that members of established groups have adopted a greater number of new technologies than those who are not in groups.

6. You'll do more planning

Good discussion groups formulate an annual plan with scheduled meetings and topics for the year. These can be something as simple as selecting start date for the breeding season and committing within the group to have all herd breeding completed by a set date. This provides structure to your farming year and a better lifestyle.

7. Positivity

Progress made by members of discussion groups is underpinned by the positive support that members receive from others in the group. Farming constantly changes, being with a positive group will help you deal better with these changes.

8. Benchmarking Farm Performance

Members can benchmark their technical and financial performance. E.g. lambs reared per ewe, cost to produce one kg milk solids. On many dry-stock farms off-farm income acts as a cushion for the farm finances. However, completing the annual Teagasc Profit Monitor puts focus on farming finance and group members will tell you that the Teagasc Profit Monitor result's meeting is the most important of the year.

9. Problem Solving

Someone else in the group has seen it happen before and can point you in the right direction. This is crucial during a crisis.

As the DAFM Knowledge Transfer (KT) Programme comes to an end, there is the temptation to leave the group you are involved in but Teagasc would encourage all farmers to stay involved in groups. As long as you are farming commercially, then its better to be in the group than not and there will be potential for new members to get involved in groups also.

The evidence is clear. Research by Teagasc shows that on average beef discussion group members had higher output (€363/ha), higher costs (€268/ha), and an overall higher average gross margin per hectare (€174/ha) than nonmember farms (National Farm Survey). On average net margin was higher (€95/ha) on discussion group farms. For a 40 ha farm this equates to an additional net margin of €3,800.

