

dairying

Getting the most from your discussion group

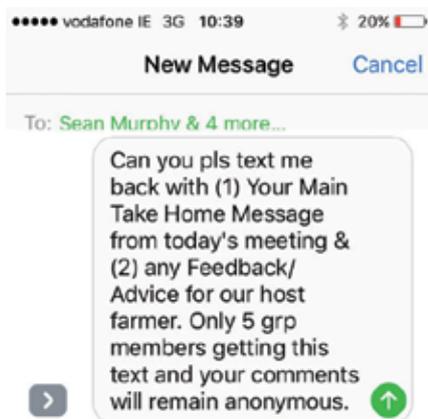
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Teagasc dairy advisor, Tullamore

What key messages did you take home from your most recent discussion group meeting? What feedback did the host farmer get? These questions are a healthcheck for your group.

Feedback from fellow group members is something discussion group host farmers value most. At all well-established, high-performing groups there is open, honest, debate around how the host farmer is performing, e.g. the condition of his/her cows, the quality of grass on the farm, adequacy of farmyard facilities and labour input.

In Co Offaly, we have an added twist to how discussion group members formulate and convey their take-home messages and how the host farmer gets feedback from his/her peers. It simply involves group members texting the group facilitator with their key message(s)/host feedback on the evening after the discussion group meeting.



On the evening of the meeting a single group text is sent to five members, chosen at random, seeking their comments on the group meeting they attended earlier that day.

How does it work?

On the evening of the meeting a single group text is sent to five members, chosen at random, seeking their comments on the group meeting they attended earlier that day.

Members of each of the five dairy discussion groups across Offaly have embraced this method of giving their views on that day's meeting. Typically, all five responses would be received by lunchtime the following day. These feedback texts are then simply copied and pasted into a feedback sheet that is emailed to the entire group.

The names of the group members providing the feedback are not included. Only the group facilitator knows who has given what feedback.

What advantages does this system of feedback offer?

- Members have time to reflect on what they saw during the entire course of the group meeting, rather than being "put on the spot" to give feedback at the end of meeting.
- It helps reinforce the messages from the meeting for all group members.
- The system helps to avoid group members repeating another farmer's response when asked to provide feedback for host at the end of a meeting.
- Members can be more honest with their feedback. In a group setting they may hold back, concerned that they may offend the host farmer or another member.
- Due to the anonymity of the feedback, host farmers place more value on it as they know that the person giving the feedback is free to be entirely honest.
- Farmers, in my opinion, are more likely to act on feedback from their peers than if the advice comes solely from their advisor.
- The feedback sheet can be very useful for the next monthly group meeting to get comments from the host on the feedback they received and enquire if there were any follow-up actions taken based on it.



- It is a good record for when you return to the same farm for subsequent group or advisory visits.
- You can ensure you get full group participation, by keeping a record of who you send feedback request texts to, rather than more vocal members giving all the feedback.
- Group facilitator/advisor can establish if he/she was successful in getting his/her message across and, more importantly, take a different approach to the topic the next time if necessary.

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Timing is everything

The text which goes out to the five group members should be timed to maximise the response rate. What works for me, is sometime between 8pm and 9.30pm on the night of the meeting. You want to try to ensure that the text recipients are likely to be finished their day's work but you don't want to be texting people too

DISCUSSION GROUP MEMBERS HAVE THEIR SAY

Aidan Kenny, (West Offaly DG)

"Meetings can be very busy, some days with lots to discuss and limited time. More often than not, it's when you get home and have time to reflect on what you saw that you come up with ideas, solutions and comments for the host farmer. This is where the feedback system comes into its own."

Brendan McAuliffe (South Offaly DG)

"It can be easier to tell a fella something you know he doesn't want to hear, when you know you don't have to put your name beside it."

Thomas Muldoon (North Offaly Graziers DG)

"For farmers giving feedback that night through the text system, they can elaborate on points that were brought up on the day and also give the reasoning behind their feedback, which is something I particularly like. I feel that the take-home messages are good, no matter how big or small, as it helps lads to implement changes on their own farms."

Paddy Whyte (South Offaly DG)

"I hosted a meeting last summer; I got feedback saying that there looked to be a lot of children on the farm and to be aware of safety. I took this on board and have since restricted access from my house to the farmyard and am far more conscious of child safety on my farm. I appreciated this feedback as I know whoever gave it, had the safety of my family at heart."



Members of each of the five dairy discussion groups across Offaly have embraced the text method to give their views on that day's meeting.

late. It's a balance; you need to give group members time to digest what they saw on the day, while ensuring the meeting and group discussion is still fresh in their minds.

My target is to have this sheet returned to the group including the host, by lunchtime the day after the meeting. As some of the feedback may relate to time-critical actions such as grassland management, cow supplementation, etc, it is essential that there is minimum delay.

Adding extra vibrancy to your group

The longer a discussion group is together, the greater the risk that things can become stale. Working closely with different group chairs and group-steering committees, I find that we are constantly looking for new ideas to freshen things up and add extra vibrancy into our groups.

This is done with the end goal of ensuring that not only are members learning every day they attend a meeting, but just as importantly they continue to get enjoyment from meetings. Maybe this feedback process has something to offer on both these fronts. There is no massive extra workload in it for anyone, just a small bit of discipline in making the time to answer a text message. Why not trial it for your next group meeting? You have nothing to lose.

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