

Technology Transfer Through Small Networking Groups

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Executive Summary

To achieve effective technology transfers among manufacturing companies within the state of Missouri, the University of Missouri Outreach and Extension faculty has organized networking groups throughout the state. These groups, which are made up of manufacturing business owners, CEOs, and plant managers, began simply as forums for exchanging ideas on a wide variety of topics such as improved environmental practices, production operations, employee relations, and employment issues. As the networks develop, the topics of the network become more technical. The discussion topics, ideas and practices that can be taken back to each individual company and applied.

Benefits to Participants

Sharing ideas has always been an important part of the problem-solving process. Working together to solve problems is a powerful and meaningful tool. As participants join groups, they develop a common bond that gives rise to working with and helping one another. Most CEOs and managers feel they have a responsibility to their peers, and having the opportunity to help one another is a very rewarding experience.

The combined talents of a team of managers and CEOs can be immense. Obtaining ideas from others, especially in an operation, where you may have a one-person management staff, is very beneficial. These managers ordinarily do not have the opportunity to seek advice from others and usually feel that they are very alone in their own operations.

The opportunity to meet once a month, and sometimes more often, becomes very important to the participants. Frequently team members will bring their own questions to the table and seek input from other team members on specific problems.

What Makes Interesting Network Sessions

The makeup of the network group is very critical for a successful network group. Participants must realize that the network meetings are intended to benefit them and their companies. The exchange of ideas and information is a traditional a means of successfully solving problems which will improve one's success.

Having regular meetings with all members present is very important. If a participant is absent from several network meetings, other participants may request that the facilitator not invite that person back, or that a representative from another firm be asked to join the group.

Networking groups want members who are actively involved and willing to participate within these network discussions.

Positive interaction is an important benefit of any network meeting, even when one participant has many problems within his or her operation. Therefore, it is essential to keep the network meetings moving forward in an upbeat fashion. The discussions with network members who have experienced similar situations can help a participant work through his or her problems.

After the general topics are covered and bonding within the group occurs, topics will soon become more technical, and specific decision-making discussions will occur. Sharing technical information and personal opinions helps reduce the stress involved in making decisions. The opinions and ideas of others are very important to the network participants.

The participants set the agenda for the discussion groups and must decide what topics are important and of interest to them. Request participants to bring their ideas, success stories or a topic that they would like to share with the group during the next meeting. The facilitator may suggest ways to add interest to these discussions by inviting an expert in a particular field to join the group's discussions or by arranging a field trip. The possibilities for enriching activities are essentially unlimited.

The Role of Facilitator

The facilitator role is important, but it must be one of an elicitor. The greatest challenges for the facilitator are maintaining strong participant commitment to the networking groups and keeping the interest of the participants. The participants must feel that they are obtaining and providing valuable information in these discussion groups, which is why their input and confidence in one another are so important.

Most of us are educators who are accustomed to giving lectures, but it is essential that we do not lecture to these discussion groups. For a facilitator, it is much more important to listen. Network members want to talk and interact; this is what makes networks more meaningful than having a large conference and seminar.

One role of the facilitator is to arrange a meeting place. The networking group must meet regularly, generally monthly, which is necessary to maintain the interest of the group. An early morning meeting works best and should be held at approximately the same time each month. The network group individuals are busy; they want you as a facilitator to take care of details.

During the meeting, the facilitator must keep the group focused on the agenda. The facilitator should not inject his or her ideas into the discussions but should keep seeking the ideas of the group. The facilitator must always make sure that the group has selected an agenda for the next meeting. The facilitator has an additional important role in maintaining a positive attitude during meetings, even when times are difficult. When one member is discouraged, others can provide support and encouragement by sharing similar experiences. Facilitators should try to arrange tours of group member and non-member plants. When a new plant opens in the area, arranging a field trip to the facility would be an ideal activity and an opportunity to view new

technology. At other times you will be requested to provide information. By responding quickly to these requests you will increase your credibility and respect within the group.

Being a facilitator for these groups is a rewarding experience that makes you aware of the latest issues and challenges facing small manufacturers in your area. A great deal of satisfaction can be derived from assisting companies in meaningful ways.

What Makes Networks Successful

To make a network successful, members need to have a strong commitment to one another, which involves a great degree of trust and respect among group members. Generally trust and respect are not difficult to obtain if members of the group are on the same professional level, such as CEOs of operations. In rural communities, many of the participants will be plant managers. However, we have found that owner-operators of small manufacturing plants often have the same goals and problems as plant managers. Each can learn and share from each other.

All CEOs have ample opportunity to attend meetings, conferences, and trade shows; however, these large gatherings rarely provide the opportunity to interact and discuss issues. Conferences and seminars really provide only one-way communication. In contrast, network groups are made up of only five or six firms that interact by asking questions, sharing ideas, etc.

How to Establish Networks

A phone call followed up by a letter explaining the networks concept, goals, objectives, and other information has proven to be the most successful method of forming these network discussion groups. Speaking directly with the plant manager, owner-operator, or CEO of manufacturing plants within a community provides an instant indication of their interest and an opportunity to respond to any questions they may have. The date and time of the first network organizational meeting, as well as a list of potential group members, should be determined before initial contact is made with potential participants.

The first meeting should outline the group's concept, explain how the network will operate, and express the importance of confidentiality with regard to the meetings. During this first meeting, have each member tell about his or her operation and about themselves. This is the first step towards building confidence among the group. Even though these people are from the same area, they usually know very little about one another or each other's operations. Make sure each participant has this opportunity to tell his or her story. You should also provide the group with an opportunity for questions or suggestions. Make every effort to keep the meetings no longer than one to one-and-a-half hours. This will allow group members to visit with each other after the meeting. Generally, a small group of representatives from five or six firms is really ideal, so do not invite more; managing a group any larger becomes much more difficult. Also, some firms like to invite other members of their staff as a reward. Thus, overall, the network meeting generally will have ten or more people.

Small firms usually believe that their problems are different from those of large firms. Network firms must be similar in size; that is, they should have similar numbers of employees

and sales. It is critical group's firms are about the same size to maximize participants' comfort levels. A network group can be formed for any industry group with a common interest. These groups could be made up of manufactures, wholesalers, or retailers.

At times, other companies may request to join the network group. They may have heard that the meetings have been beneficial, and they may want to participate. However, it is important that these groups remain small and that the trust developed between these companies does not deteriorate. Trust is much easier to develop among groups with fewer members.

Also, some service providers will want gain access to your group. It is best to decline any offers of their services because the purpose of the group is to discuss ways to solve common problems, not to listen to someone present a program or read information in which the group has no interest. Group members tend to become wary of outsiders; when outsiders are present, the group usually does the opposite of what you are trying to accomplish, that is, they will not speak openly about their concerns but will refrain from any meaningful dialog.