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Conflict-Laden Issues: A Learning Opportunity

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Conflict-Laden Issues: A Learning Opportunity

Abstract
Extension faculty has opportunities to bring people together to solve problems. A simple process finds solutions to a problem with herbicide drift. The process provided five key "findings:" 1) Finding balance between reason and emotion is crucial; 2) Having a participatory process facilitates buy-in; 3) Learning to solve conflicts provides long term benefit(s); 4) Facilitating is a role Extension is uniquely suited to fill; and 5) Extension staff should be trained in facilitation. The authors argue that Extension faculty should play a role in developing this capacity to resolve conflicts.

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Introduction

Increasingly complex and controversial issues are challenging Extension faculty, agriculturists, and support industries/agencies. One issue is the development of a more diverse agricultural base in areas that have a long history of limited cropping diversity. We present preliminary results of conflict resolution efforts related to the development of vineyards in wheat country. The following sections provide a background to the issue, the process used to address it, and some observations about what is working.

Conflict-laden issues are likely to increase as agriculture focuses less on commodity-type crops and moves towards higher value specialty crops and products. We believe additional training in facilitation and group process will position Extension faculty to create learning environments in which conflicts can be successfully resolved.

Background

Growers introducing newer, higher value crops may have conflicts with growers of traditional crops. In the Walla Walla River Valley, located in southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon, conflicts between wine grape growers and dry-land wheat farmers are increasing. Historically, the valley's irrigated crops have been treefruits, alfalfa, alfalfa seed, row crops, pasture, green peas, wheat, and miscellaneous crops surrounded by the vast dryland wheat-producing region of the Columbia Plateau. Crop diversity in the valley has increased with the introduction of over 1,100 acres of wine grape plantings. Conflict stems from the sensitivity of grapes to synthetic auxin-type herbicides used on cereal crops, pastures, right-of-ways, and rangeland for weed control throughout the valley and surrounding area.

The use of agricultural herbicides and various application methods, such as ground and aerial applications, has been practiced for decades in ways that are usually acceptable for the traditional mix of crops. However, the neighboring farmer with the new "valuable" and sensitive crop can view the same practices as controversial and irresponsible. Auxin-type herbicides can move off-target

by physical drift and/or by volatizing and moving off target with air currents. Research has shown measurable damage to vineyards due to reduced foliage development and fruit set from auxin-type herbicides.

Conflict is compounded by the fact that adjacent producers —the wheat farmer and the wine grape grower—may not know each other and see the other as impeding their right to earn a living. Furthermore, one party has a long history in the community and is simply following traditional practices; the other party may be a newcomer expecting others to change their farming practices. The underlying cultures—the values, beliefs and norms—are sufficiently dissimilar to create distrust. The support industries of traditional producers and wineries are sufficiently different that they do not build connections.

In this type of conflict-laden situation, all individuals involved have self-interests and are struggling to apply what they know to influence a favorable outcome. It is a situation rich with opportunities for learning and behavioral change(s) that could result in improvements for the individual and the community (Cooley, 1994). While conflict is a difficult and controversial topic in our culture, it is the lack of understanding of the conflict process, as well as a lack of training in ways of handling interpersonal confrontations effectively, that needs to be addressed. (Whetten, 1991.)

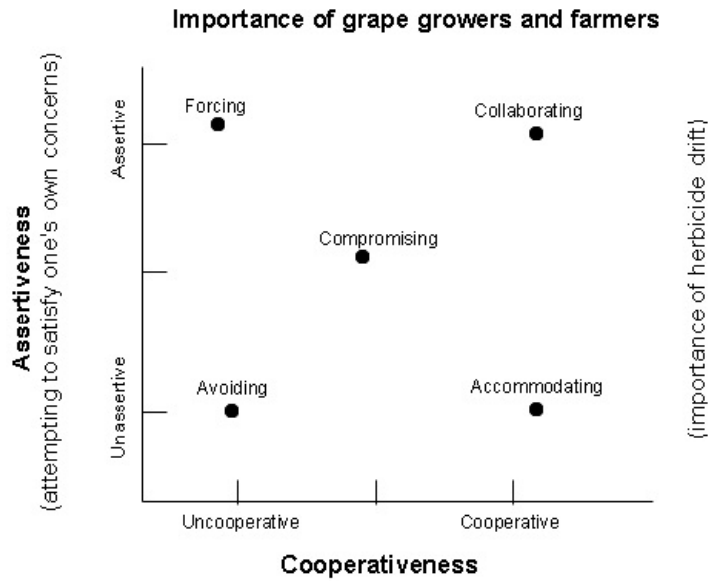
Collaborative Process Utilized

Whetten (1991) proposes that people's responses to interpersonal confrontations tend to fall into five categories:

- Forcing,
- Accommodating,
- Avoiding,
- Compromising, and
- Collaborating (Figure 1).

Collaboration is the only response that attempts to fully address the concerns of all parties involved and is an appropriate strategy for Extension to support. We developed a process using collaboration with the goal to achieve resolution of the important concerns and to achieve quality outcomes.

Figure 1.
Two-Dimensional Model of Conflict Behavior



SOURCE: Adapted from Whetten and Cameron. 1991, p. 400.

The process was designed to engage participants so that they felt they had an active role and shared control. County-based Extension faculty facilitated the process, acting in the dual role of mediator/coach. Extension faculty facilitators were impartial although they had worked with some participants far more than they had worked with others. Major steps in the process were:

- Set rules of conduct,
- Identify issues,
- Develop a coordinated action plan to address issues,
- Implement the plan, and
- Evaluate the outcomes.

While these steps appear linear, there was opportunity for feedback between the steps.

Our first step in the collaborative process was to organize a meeting of the essential players. The meeting included vineyard representatives, traditional producers from the area, commercial pesticide applicators, and crop consultants. The 19 participants were selected so that diverse and often outspoken voices could be heard. We wanted all critical voices in the meeting, not on the outside looking in.

The first meeting was a half-day session at a local community center. The setting chosen for the meeting was an informal circle where all participants could easily see and hear each other. Participants were given nametags so they could easily call each other by name.

Rules-of-Conduct Established

At the start of the meeting, participants introduced themselves and explained their connection to the issue. Participants then established rules-of-conduct for the meeting and overall process. Participants' rules were:

- No side conversations,
- Each person would listen without interruptions and
- Participate in good faith to resolve differences between the groups.

These rules were adopted and followed.

Issues Identified

The next step was the identification of the issues. The facilitators were successful in keeping the discussion focused on the issues instead of personalities, a critical strategy recommended by Fisher (1991). To ensure that one side did not dominate the discussion, the Extension facilitators directed questions to different participants, asked follow-up questions for clarification, maintained eye contact with the speakers, and gently kept the discussion on track.

As part of this step, the facilitators guided the group in exploring the "why's" behind the conflicts. As participants increased their understanding of the "why's," they were able to see commonalties between their goals and values. The participants experienced a moderation of attitudes as expected due to exposure of contrasting viewpoints. (Goodwin, 1993.)

It was during this stage that traditional producers came to appreciate the substantial financial commitments required by the wine grape grower to produce grapes and the need for the highest quality standards. They also recognized that herbicide drift from traditional crops onto vineyards created a serious threat to the economic success of the grape grower and winery owner(s). Similarly, vineyard managers became more familiar with the challenges faced by the traditional producer, who has narrow "windows" for herbicide applications, a limited array of herbicide alternatives, and narrow profit margins.

Major issues identified were:

- The window of greatest susceptibility to herbicide damage in grapes is during the canopy development to fruit set period (May-June).
- The period of greatest concern is the month of May because auxin-type herbicides are applied on spring grains, pastures, range, and roadsides.
- Most of the wheat acreage is planted in the winter, and herbicides are applied in late winter and early spring. This is before the period when grapes are the most susceptible.
- The Walla Walla River Valley has natural physical features that create inversion conditions that could bring suspended, vaporized herbicides in from upper canyons and a related web of side canyons.
- Vineyards are likely experiencing drift attributable to a combination of direct particle drift and vapor drift.
- Various types of applications could be contributing to the problem, including aerial, pull-type ground sprayers, and roadside applicators.

Coordinated Action Plan to Address Issues Developed

The facilitation team then guided the participants through the process of developing a coordinated action plan to manage the conflict for the 2000 growing season. This plan was developed at two early spring meetings. The plan included:

- Increase awareness through educational presentations and targeted mailings.
- Improve awareness of vineyard locations in Walla Walla Valley.
- Investigate the feasibility of weather forecasting for the valley and surrounding areas.
- Increase communication among growers, applicators, and consultants.
- Post informational publications on the Umatilla County Dryland Cropping Web page for easy access.

The plan continues to be added to and modified as needs are identified. A statement of intent was developed by the group that states: "It is our intention to work together to resolve our local issues without outsider intervention (e.g., government regulators, lawyers, lawsuits, or the press)."

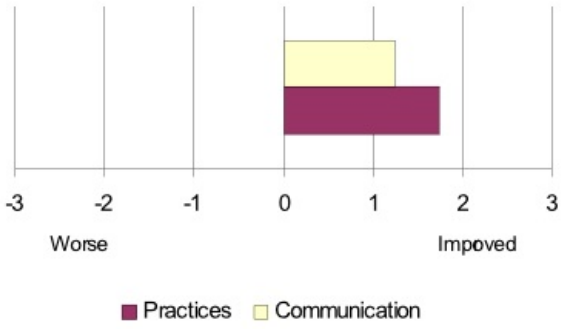
Plan Implemented

The participants and Extension faculty compiled an email list to keep participants informed about the plan, issues, and concerns. A fact sheet was developed and distributed to help educate traditional producers about grapes and their level of sensitivity at different periods of growth. A vineyard location map was compiled and made available. Educational presentations were made at grower meetings. Articles about the safe use of herbicides were included in Extension newsletters. Extension facilitated a summer vineyard tour to bring participants together to assess mid-season impacts of the plan.

Outcomes Evaluated

An evaluation program to assess the impact of the plan has begun and will continue. A mid-summer survey was sent to all task force participants asking for their opinions on the conflict resolution. The response rate was 26%. Forty percent of the respondents were vineyard owners, and 60% represented traditional growers and applicators.

Figure 2.
Focus Group Rates Initial Impacts of Efforts



All respondents believed that communication had improved between the two groups. Vineyard owners (+1.38) rated the improvement slightly better than the traditional respondents (+1.17) did.

The survey asked if growers and chemical applicators changed their practices because of the increased awareness. The overall response was that changes had been made. The traditional respondents (+1.83) believed the changes to be greater than the vineyard owners (+1.50) did.

Findings

Our observation of the process supports five "findings."

Finding Balance Between Reason and Emotion Is Crucial

Participants with substantially different views and concerns were able to come together. Each group was able to develop their ability to deal with differences. The process helped participants find a balance between reason and emotion in sorting out differences. Increased understanding and open communication helped to reduce suspicion between the two groups. Both groups used persuasion instead of forcing while working toward resolution of the conflict.

A Participatory Process Facilitates Buy-In

Participants bought into the process. Starting with this step, participants were able to set their own ground rules for the discussion. With participants "in control," Extension faculty were permitted to step back and guide the process, making suggestions only when needed and/or requested. Participants identified the issues and then fashioned the plan and its implementation. Once the plan was completed, participants were motivated to implement the plan and to work together to successfully resolve the issue. Participants are involved in evaluating the program.

Learning to Solve Conflicts Provides Long-Term Benefit(s)

Participants learned about solving conflicts. The two groups now have a new on-going process for addressing issues and resolving conflicts. Future conflicts will likely benefit from the skills learned.

Facilitating Is a Role Extension Is Uniquely Suited to Fill

Extension faculty is in a unique situation to help address these conflict-laden situations. Not only do faculty typically know people from "both sides," but they have a great deal of technical knowledge that can be inserted into the process. For example, although the participants identified

the issues, they often drew on Extension faculty and Extension Service information or its networks of contacts to explore solutions.

Extension Staff Should Be Trained in Facilitation

Extension faculty who are trained in a technical specialty, such as crop science or horticulture, may not be prepared to manage the process. Training in facilitation is very valuable in making the process work smoothly. In our case, one faculty member's background in business and non-profit management served well in designing the overall process. Many others, with additional training, would better understand the science behind the process and recognize the learning potential that conflict-laden situations provide. Fiske suggested this 10 years ago, and the need still remains.

In summary, conflict-laden problems are becoming more common in agriculture and the world in which Extension faculty work. The process to solve these problems need not be complex, but rather can be a set of simple steps that engages a key group of participants in setting their own ground rules, defining the issues and creating, and implementing a plan of action. As communities gain the capacity to address issues, they are more capable of helping themselves to achieve their own goals. Extension faculty can be a key player in developing this capacity.

The process in the Walla Walla River Valley is not complete, but taskforce members have developed skills that will allow them to work toward resolving issues as they arise.

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