

Communication in animal health and welfare planning.

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Introduction

The project 'Minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds through animal health and welfare promotion' is focused on animal welfare assessment and its role in the active use of animal health plans in order to improve animal health and welfare on organic farms. To be active, a health plan requires dialogue between the farmer and those who are able to view the farm from the outside e.g. vets and advisors. The importance of this communication is the focus of this paper.

Across Europe we see highly diverse farming systems and similarly diversity in advisory systems and their approaches to communicating with farmers. One of the objectives of the AniPlan project is to develop approaches to health planning that are robust yet sufficiently adaptable to be applied across these various conditions. This will involve utilising knowledge of current approaches to communication between farmer and advisor, but also the opportunity for new ways of communication that contribute to the process of animal health and welfare promotion. Relevance to the farmer is paramount.

In this paper, three current approaches are summarised, focusing on the dialogue between farmer and 'external persons'. These are the Danish Stable Schools, the Dutch farmer study groups (where farmers participate in doing animal welfare assessment in a fellow-farmer's herd) and the Swiss pro-Q project, where there is a very active dialogue between advisors and farmers in a continuous feed-back system. Further to these descriptions, the paper summarises the results of discussions between participants at the first AniPlan workshop in Hellevad, Denmark on the subject of communication in the animal health planning process.

The Danish Stable Schools

The concept of Stable Schools

The Farmer Stable School concept developed when a large group of Danish organic dairy farmers faced a situation of having a common goal to phase out antibiotics from their herds. This was a complex goal which could be reached in several ways, but with very little experience of how best to achieve this through participatory means in a Danish context. In order to establish a good common learning environment the concept of Farmer Field Schools (FFS) was adjusted to Danish organic farmer conditions. Farmer Field Schools (FFS) is a concept for farmers' learning and empowerment through knowledge and experience exchange. The concept was developed and used in Indonesia as a sustainable way of learning and developing farming for small-scale rice farmers. This learning approach, which is based on innovative, participatory and interactive learning, has been adopted in many 'developing country' situations (Gallagher, 1999).

In the Danish project, ideas were built from experiential learning and action research. In Denmark, the so-called 'Farmer Experience Exchange Groups' have been used for decades. These are often groups of 10-15 farmers from similar farms (e.g. dairy farms with a certain housing system and/or breed), which meet on regular basis on each others private farms. The group would normally be run by an agricultural advisor, who acts as a form of coordinator and professional expert in the field. Often, an external specialist expert (e.g. in farm economy, buildings, feeding etc.) will be invited and give a lesson on a certain topic. This approach is very different from the FFS in that it involves

one or more ‘experts’, and because it focuses on a topic rather than the specific farm and identification of potential areas for improvement.

The results from the Danish experience of Stable Schools show that crucial changes took place during the project period and these successes can be partly attributed to the farmers’ ownership over the common goal and the advice from the group based on the articulated goals for each participating farm. The farmers’ change process towards a common goal may be viewed as an equal common learning process.

The Stable School meetings and the role of the facilitator

All meetings took place on a farm, and all 5-6 farms involved in a group were visited in turn. Meetings were organised by the facilitator and host farmer approximately 2 weeks before a meeting took place and the agenda for the proposed meeting was discussed at this time. This agenda was then circulated to other participating farmers. One success story and two perceived problem areas were identified by the host farmer as a focus for the meeting. Key data from the herd (from the Danish central cattle data base) were also sent to participants as preparatory material and in order to provide an insight to the herd in focus. Group meetings typically involved ½-1 hours farm walk with free discussions followed by an indoor ‘round-table’ session of 1½-2 hours. Crucial to the process was that the facilitator does not offer advice. Apart from facilitating the discussion and the process in the group, the facilitator minutes the mutual advice and conclusions from the farmer participants.

A common goal as a crucial basis for common learning

We suggest that the many changes which took place in the participating herds during the project may have been consequential of the consistent, continuous and common learning processes and exchange of experience and knowledge between farmers, based on the identification and ownership of a common goal in combination with individual farm-based analyses and goals (see Box 1). This process demands more than listening and thinking, and the aim to reach the common goals stimulates changed practices. This is perhaps the main difference between Farmer Stable Schools and the well-established concept of Danish Farmer Experience Exchange Groups. At all meetings, cases of success at the host farm were presented to the farmer group and this always gave a good, positive and encouraging perspective at the meetings. The focus on both success cases and problem areas encouraged all participants and gave farmers innovative ideas that could be applied to their own farm.

- Mutual respect
- Mutual trust and openness based on insight into each others’ farm situations
- Common goal
- All solutions should fit to the goals and framework of each herd
- Equality in the group
- Democratic responsibility for a process
- Common learning
- Common building up and exchange of knowledge and experience, including success cases
- Ownership: sets the agenda and point to OWN perceived challenges
- Ownership: Make the conclusions and commitment

Box 1. Key values and features of the Stable Schools, which were identified through interviews with farmers and were considered crucial for the successful dialogue in the groups.

The collaboration and dialogue in the Dutch Farmer Study Groups

In the Dutch network programme since 2004, each year about 50 farmers groups are active in increasing the innovative capability to solve specific business problems (Wielinga et al, 2006)¹. These networks are based on farmers initiative (of at least 3 farmers) to improve the medium or long term sustainable farming practice with tangible results within one year and with knowledge as an essential ingredient. In these networks the facilitator is not a professional facilitator but more an expert on the subject with affinity with networking and with facilitating groups.

Caring dairy checklist

One of the network groups focussed on caring dairy and developed a checklist for animal welfare. The checklist has a 'kitchen table' component, a stable component whereby the farm and cows are assessed, a summarizing part and a part covering points to improve.

- In the kitchen table part, existing figures for the farm are summarized and commented upon. Disease incidences, culling reasons, percentage of stillborn calves, milk yield, fat and protein content and fat:protein ratio, somatic cell counts, fertility indicators, longevity and life production and contact with animals of other farms are included. The items are discussed and compared with the goals of the visited farm.
- The stable part of the checklist assesses animal welfare based on performance parameters (BCC, locomotion, skin damages, cleanliness of the cows, ease of laying down and getting up in the cubicles, slipperiness of the walking area,) and based on design parameters (dead ends, overcrowding, obstacles, ventilation). Special attention is paid to the group of dry cows. Also quality (moulds, ground, mow burn) and availability of feed, hygiene and neatness of the housing, the yard and the silage clamps are assessed.
- In the summary of the assessment protocol, for each part the total number of points and the scored points are collated along with an overall total score.
- The assessment ends with the identification of three points to improve on the farm.

Assessing each others farms

The caring dairy group consists of 11 dairy farmers and one facilitator. The dairy farmers assess in groups of three farmers the farm of a colleague. The composition of the assessing group constantly changes so that finally all farmers assessed at least three other farms and all farms are assessed by different groups. Everyone involved is convinced that even the most critical remarks and the weak points of the farm detected in the assessment are used for the best of the animals, the farm and the farmer. During the process, the host farmer opens up the farm completely and the assessors adopt an open mind to the good and the weak points of the farm. The group is considered reliable and members have an implicit trust in each other. Farmers are trained in two training sessions by an expert and accompanied by the expert at the first assessment with the group on a farm of a colleague.

The host farmer organises the assessment on his/her farm, which involves coordinating a date for the assessment, providing the assessors with data for the kitchen table part and acting as host in providing coffee and lunch. The host farmer identifies specific goals, provides data clarification if

¹ Wielinga, HE, Geerling-Eiff, FA, Hoogerwerf, EC, Hubeek, FB, Wijk, van – Janssen, E. en Zaalmlink, BW. (2006). Facilitating networks for sustainable animal husbandry. 7th European IFSA Symposium , Wageningen, May 2006.

needed, provides farm clothing and boots and guides the assessors on the farm tour and herd assessment. The host does not interfere during the assessment in the stable unless asked. At the end, the host farmer takes part in the discussion about the improvement points, comments on these and gives an indication if and when suggested improvements may be realized.

The assessors are provided with the data and compare these with the farm specific goals and judge them with their expert opinion. They can ask the host farmer for clarification if needed. In the stable environment, they only judge what is seen without interpretation or value. During assessment training separating judgement from value can be difficult. The assessors attempt to reach consensus on the assessed parameters and discuss differences. Scores are calculated and for the total assessment it is possible to identify the strong and the weak points of the farm. Together with the host farmer, the assessors discuss and prioritise the points they think requires improvement and listen to the responses of the host farmer. To keep balance, particularly at the start of the assessment process, it is advised that strong and positive points are also emphasised.

The facilitator in the caring dairy group organises the process and the groups, co-ordinates the provision of data, organises the training session and a session for evaluation of the results and the experiences at the assessments. If necessary, the facilitator requests a specialist to join the evaluation in order to provide explanation, background or additional specific information on a relevant topic. The facilitator joins meetings with facilitators of other network groups and learns also from those experiences.

The collaboration and dialogue in the advisory process of the pro-Q project

The swiss pro-Q-project was created in 2003 in cooperation with one large Swiss national retailer (COOP) as main sponsor. The project will last until at least 2009. The aim of the project is to minimize the therapeutic and prophylactic antibiotic treatment of mastitis (during lactation and for drying off), to improve udder health and longevity of dairy cows via prophylactic measures and improvement of management and the use of non-antibiotic therapy.

In a first step data of potential mastitis causing factors were collected on each individual farm, including: general conditions, housing, feeding, human-animal interaction, milking technology and milking hygiene. Beside this an intensive diagnosis of the mastitis status of the herd based on quarter milk samples and milk recording data was conducted. During a period of at least 2 years participating farms were intensively advised by the project team and, if there was an interest, also by their own veterinarians. Therapies were primarily based on homeopathic remedies. The development of mastitis causing factors and the mastitis status of the farms were followed up at regular intervals (at least yearly).

Each farm is allocated its own main responsible advisor from the pro-Q-team. This enables the development a trustful personal relationship between advisor and farmer. Farmers receive a monthly analysis of the actual milk recording including a retrospective analysis over the previous twelve months. Furthermore, results of quarter milk samples are transmitted via an animal-based protocol including milk recording data, results of earlier quarter milk samples and treatment data of the individual cow for one year back. All results are normally send via e-mail accompanied with a comment from the advisor. Further questions are answered via direct contact between farmer and advisor by phone call or e-mail.

The core activity involves 4-6 regular farm visits per year by the advisor, accompanied by the veterinary practitioner if required. During each farm visit a walkabout through the main living areas of the dairy cows (laying, walking, feeding, and milking area) is made and each individual cow is assessed with regard to body condition score, claw trimming status, cleanliness and technopathies. The findings are discussed in relation to the results of actual milk recording. Furthermore, therapeutic recommendations for individual cows are given.

Group discussion report: Adjusting the approaches to fit with farming and country conditions

Three related themes were chosen for group discussion. These were:

- 1) In which situations and how are person-to-person advisory service / animal health and welfare planning best made?
- 2) In which situations and how are farmer group advisory service / animal health and welfare planning best made?
- 3) How to ensure farmer ownership?

A main points raised in the discussion groups are summarised below.

Person-to-person animal health and welfare planning

In this group, the basic principles of dialogue were raised and discussed, as well as the practicalities of what the advisory dialogue should contain. Points raised in relation to the basic dialogue principles were:

- The dialogue should depend on the challenges at the individual farm;
- There should be sufficient flexibility:
 - o Meetings and a framework should be arranged in accordance with specific needs and relevance,
 - o The dialogue should be focused both on action ('tell me what you want from me' / 'tell me what to do') and reaction ('answer my questions');
- Advisors should be well prepared and create their own good possibilities for a good advisory situation;
- Respect is crucial both ways. Both dialogue partners should be ready to learn from each other;
- Advisors should take responsibility for their part in the process i.e.
 - o Keep promises; and
 - o React quickly to farmers requests.

Points raised in relation to the practicalities of the advisory process were:

- Focus on the milking situation in dairy herds, as many of the challenges and daily contact occur there. It is a good idea, if possible, for an advisor to be present during milking;
- Include the barn (cattle housing), the fields and the feeding resources;
- Look at individual animals and spend time with animals;
- In 'the kitchen':
 - o Go through documentation; and
 - o Write down all agreements and all decisions.

Farmer group animal health and welfare planning

- The most crucial element is that subjects are identified by farmers.
- A very powerful and fruitful approach is when farmers are closely involved in each others' farms, e.g. assessing each others situation.

- Benchmarking can be a good driving force for the discussions and the improvements. Farmers can see that they have good and bad elements in their herds.
- Which farmers should be included in farmer groups? There was consensus that only farmers who really explicitly wanted collaboration should go into this kind of process. Reluctance would result in resistance and lack of motivation and commitment.
- There should be a common interest among farmers in the farmer group.
- In the groups, discussions with experts can have benefit for everybody.
- In the group, all farms should be well introduced so that the other farmers understand the specific challenges of a particular farm, and the facilitator or discussion leader should ensure that sufficient information is gathered before a meeting takes place at a farm.
- All problem solving should be based on a continuous review of the situation.
- Certain elements, such as the feeding routines and mastitis situation, should always be included in the discussion when focusing on minimising medicine use / improving animal welfare, at least at the first farmer meeting at a farm.

How to ensure farmer ownership

- A framework cannot completely ensure the feeling of ownership, but this can encourage it – it is at all times up to the persons involved to ensure ownership.
- Set ground rules, and agree to them with all involved committing to these equally.
- For everybody involved in visiting a farm: LISTEN. The farmer should explain problems. Never dictate.
- Small detail can be important:
 - o The advisor should always ask where to sit, instead of running the risk of taking the farmer's place,
 - o ask the farmer where they prefer to start (outdoor or indoor?),
 - o explain all the steps in the process and gather all viewpoints,
 - o if using assessment, make sure that the host farmer understands all of the parameters and judgements.
- Motivation is important; often it is very good to underline the positive elements on the farm and what the farmer feels proud of rather than focusing on the problems and the mistakes.
- Focus on the advantages and benefits of all the improvements and efforts.
- The host farmer, advisor and fellow-farmers should be very conscious that the host farmer is the driving force for all improvements on the host farm.
- As advisor or facilitator should be aware of farmer silence and other signs that the farmer is not engaged in, or has to leave, the process.
- An advisory service that is paid for, will probably result in greater commitment and motivation by the farmer.
- In a farmer group everybody should be involved and give their opinions, and the group size should be adjusted accordingly.

Future perspectives

The authors have drawn summary points that are not necessarily those made during discussion, although some of these reflect remarks made as a response to the group discussions.

- Farmer ownership is important in dialogue, no matter whether it is in farmer groups or in a person-to-person advisory situation.
- In the discussion, terms were often used indicating that farmers could be 'non-cooperative'. This may raise the following questions relevant to the issues about ownership:
 - o If the process of e.g. animal health and welfare planning is really owned by the farmer this lack of co-operation should not be evident? If the farmer is resistant to

the dialogue, it could very well be an indication of lacking feeling of ownership, and the question should then be put: 'What do you want from this process?'

- A common learning is stimulating for everybody. In a person-to-person dialogue, the advisor or the so-called expert is often not expected to learn but only to 'deliver knowledge and advice'. This can mean that the farmer is expected to change opinions and routines and learn, without the other person in the dialogue going through this process. This may not be a relevant and fair approach. There could be situations where the advisor/expert learns as much as the farmer? Should these situations be promoted?
- All farmers are experts: experts in running a farm and adjusting general advice to their own farm conditions.
- The dialogue should always take the starting point of the challenge areas on each specific farm, irrespective of the type of dialogue.
- Benchmarking can be stimulating for the discussion, but it should not move focus from the specific farm (including improvements on this farm) to comparisons between farms that are very different and maybe also be based on very different sets of thinking.