

AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING GROUPS

COORDINATING A NEIGHBORHOOD ACTION GROUP

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This purpose of this summary is to provide information to aid in establishing and coordinating a neighborhood action group. That is, what to expect, what steps to take, common challenges and how to overcome them.

The information is derived from interviews with 12 coordinators of 9 peer knowledge networking groups operating in Napa County and Lodi, and a survey of 77 group members.

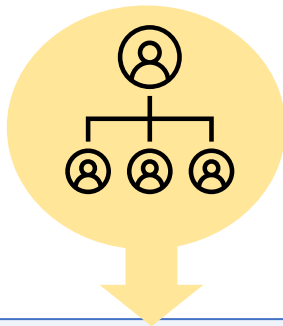
GENERAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SUCCESS

- 1. Shared history of positive relationships between members** will facilitate the formation and coordination of a group. In the absence of this shared history, a neighborhood group can improve relationships between members, but it will take more time to build trust.
- 2. Clear articulation of group goals** which have a “unique purpose”, providing members advantages that they cannot easily obtain alone.
- 3. Committed coordinators** support retention and active participation of members.
- 4. Agreement on the need for collective action** to address a shared threat. Initial knowledge sharing may be required to promote positive attitudes towards the group.
- 5. Effective group facilitation** creates a safe space to share information, encourages member commitment, and fosters mutual respect and trust. Members should feel invested in the group and its processes.
- 6. Clear and productive communication** increases member satisfaction and participation. This leads to more interaction, resource mobilization, and implementation of practices aligned with the group’s goals. Communication should be transparent, frequent, and clear.
- 7. Availability of resources for the group to achieve its goals.** Although the need for shared resources is minimal, aside from space and leadership, individual members commit resources to participate, share knowledge, implement practices, and align their practices with group goals.

STEP 1: SELECT A GROUP COORDINATOR

“All these groups are good, it’s just who has the time and who wants to step up and become a leader or actor in the group”

- **Coordinators are self-selected or nominated volunteers.**
- **A committed coordinator is essential** to the success of a neighborhood action group as they are associated with greater retention and the active participation of members.
- **Dual coordinators can be beneficial** to split duties and make it more likely that the group will continue when a coordinator is unable to remain in the role.
- **Coordinators need time to run the group**, strong relationship building skills and the ability to facilitate meetings effectively.



COORDINATOR DUTIES	APPROX. TIME COMMITMENT
Member recruitment	Multiple hours initially required to contact and recruit first members
Member communication (<i>develop & maintain member roster; send meeting invites; facilitate email discussions</i>) Meeting logistics (<i>set meetings schedule and agenda, organize the meeting space</i>)	Variable, typically 30 minutes to 1 hour per month
Facilitate discussions at meetings	Up to 9 hours per year depending on intensity of group activity (<i>2 to 6 annual meetings, 50 min to 1.5 hour in duration</i>)
Coordinate group projects (if applicable)	Possible lengthy time commitment depending on project

STEP 2: RECRUIT GROUP MEMBERS

“We used the pesticide use report map with the phone numbers and then I just cold called people, ‘hey, I’m your neighbor and we have this concern. Another neighbor and I are going to be making this group, and we’d like for you to come and talk”.

Clearly define the geographical boundaries of the group. Existing groups range in size from less than 1 mile² to 5 miles².



Target key neighbors:

- (a) engaged growers with large networks
- (b) influential or respected individuals
- (c) knowledgeable individuals



Begin recruiting with direct one-on-one communication. This will be the most effective way to persuade people to join.



Ask members to use their social connections to expand membership with further direct communication.



Do not expect every neighbor to participate immediately. You may need to begin with a small group and gradually expand membership.

- **Use public resources** (e.g., agricultural operations permit holder maps) to identify potential members and access contact information.
- **Recruit “boots on the ground” staff dealing directly with the issue(s)**, specifically viticulturists, vineyard managers, consultants, and winemakers. Collective action requires commitment from other decision-makers, but these individuals are unlikely to participate directly.
- **Invite individuals from adjacent organizations**, including extension professionals.
- **Be inclusive and open** to diverse approaches to farming.

- Neighbors with a shared history of collaborating have built trust that will facilitate group formation.
- When neighbors are strangers, it takes time to build relationships and trust through group meetings.
- Where relationships are strained, select an individual viewed as positive or neutral to approach those neighbors to join the group.

STEP 3: DETERMINE THE PURPOSE OF THE GROUP

“Our first meeting was mainly to figure out what we are, what we want to do, what is the purpose. When you are going to build a group it’s good to get everyone’s buy-in and build it together”

- **Jointly design** the purpose of the group rather than pre-determining the outcome. This will build commitment, consensus, and buy-in from members.
- **Rally around a shared threat or crisis** to identify and build investment in the purpose.
- **Many groups initially focus on one issue** which gives clarity of purpose and helps formulate realistic goals. Groups may expand, switch to other topics, or disband temporarily in the absence of a shared purpose.
- **Establish measurable and achievable goals** that may be very specific or more generally focused on sharing information.
- **Clearly articulate those goals to members.** Write a brief mission statement or list of goals.

“There needs to be a crisis that brings everybody together and for us it was leafroll...the reason we're having more interest again in the group is red blotch is another crisis”

“This group is really just about vine mealybug, but our meeting conversations have broadened, so we talk about powdery mildew pressure, or

Specific Goal:

“The main goal was to try to get everyone to use mating disruption”

General goal:

“To foster good communication, education, and coordination across different growers. Recognizing that it is not an insular issue, supporting that community aspect as opposed to the finger pointing”.

“A lot of communication went out to describe what our goals were...to have everyone on board with what the threat was and how serious it is”.

STEP 4: GROUP MEETINGS

*“Nobody thinks about how hard it is to get everybody to agree on a day just to come meet”
“I think it would be beneficial if the group committed to a regular cadence”*

MEETING SCHEDULE & FORMAT

- **It can be challenging to identify a date when all members are available to meet.** Agreeing upon a regular, predictable schedule can help address this.
- **Agree upon meeting frequency.** Existing groups hold 3 to 6 meetings per year (50 min to 1.5 hours per meeting).
- **Agree upon meeting format.** Most groups have informal meetings, where members share concerns, observations, experiences and knowledge. Some meetings may be dedicated to invited local speakers to demonstrate the practical applications of new technology or knowledge.

FACILITATING MEETINGS

Avoid excessive formality. Semi-structured, loose agendas create an open forum. Encourage member participation.

Guide the discussion if required. Encourage members to share their observations and experiences.

Promote open conversations and create a safe space to share information. Consider the following:

- **Communicate** the jointly designed purpose of the group.
- **Lead** by example and share information willingly.
- **Practice** effective communication, including:
 - *Raise and explore difficult issues* but do not cast blame or make assumptions about other members' vineyards or actions.
 - *Be transparent.* Explain your reasoning and intent when you make a statement.
 - *Ask genuine questions* to understand other members' practices, reasoning, experiences. This will help you check your assumptions and uncover opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration.
 - *Demonstrate compassion for other members;* be aware that others may be struggling and have their own concerns, needs, and challenges.

“I’ll have 3 or 4 topics to discuss to start, and then we’ll move to whatever, and there is no structure”

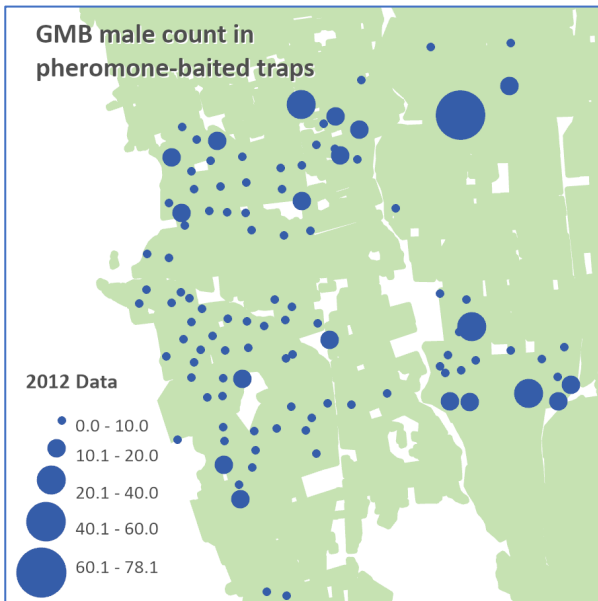
“One pitfall is being too strict with an agenda. In the beginning you need some structure, but really you want it to be a place where people look forward to chatting with their neighbors”

“We tend to ask curious questions. If someone says they are doing mating disruptions we will ask – tell us more, are you doing it year-round? Which application method do you use, and why? We try to dive into the details that help us learn and maybe alter our own plans”

DISCRETIONARY NEXT STEP: GROUP PROJECTS

Groups may organize data collection projects that can:

- Be an effective communication tool demonstrating the presence of a threat.
- Help members coordinate practices (e.g., deployment of mating disruption) and demonstrate efficacy.
- Provide clear goals for the group and help monitor success.
- Engage hesitant members to adopt management practices that support group aims.



Project map displaying grape mealybug trap counts. Members used the shared data to understand regional risks and coordinate practices.

Trapping projects are ambitious and can be challenging for volunteer-based groups. They require commitment from members and significant resources and skill. They are successful when one or more of the following occurs:

- (1) the system or process for contributing data is user-friendly, accessible and ensures anonymity outside the group.
- (2) the project is in collaboration with another organization.
- (3) a few members do the bulk of the work and secure resources.

“We were able to show everyone in the neighborhood, hey here’s a block that has really high trap counts...so, [the vineyard] did a contact spray and started using pheromones. And then essentially our trap count went to zero”

LESSONS from SUCCESSFUL TRAPPING PROJECTS

Rutherford Central:

- The results were [published](#) in collaboration with local scientists affiliated with University of California, Cooperative Extension (UCCE).
- Members supplied, installed and monitored pheromone-baited traps on their properties.
- UCCE staff had the requisite skills and resources to analyze trap data and create maps for the group.

Jahant Area Vineyard Alliance:

- Traps are donated by an affiliated organization that manufactures and supplies mating disruption products.
- Group members were vocal about their support of the project, and one member had the skills to create initial maps.
- The group coordinator is highly committed to the project, and is also a company owner who:
 - is willing to commit staff to install and monitor the traps with other members’ permission.
 - employed staff with the skills to continue analyzing the data and creating the maps.
 - covers most project costs because they believe the investment is offset in the long-term by a reduction in community pest pressure.
- The number of traps has been reduced over time to save costs as most members are reluctant or unable to make financial and labor commitments to the project.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

- **Sustaining membership.**

- Time commitment is a common barrier to attendance; expect participation to naturally ebb and flow. Regular communication by the coordinator maintains continuity. Establish flexible meeting schedules that account for busy periods.
- (Potential) members may need to be convinced that participation is worthwhile. It may take time to build relationships and trust.
- Staff turnover: When members move on, their replacements will need to be invited to participate.

- **Engaging group members.**

- Members may lack the authority or be reluctant to share sensitive or confidential information about their operations.
- Inability to perceive a positive impact of a group may demotivate members. Highlighting a simple metric, such as how many members have adopted a practice, may increase engagement. Group longevity can be a metric of success.

- **Transferring the coordinator role.** When a coordinator can no longer fulfill the role, if it is not passed to someone else, the group may disband. Finding another person or having dual coordinators will support continuity.

“The biggest challenge that prevents success is people not finding it a valuable use of their time – I’m busy and I’m going to lose an hour right in peak busy season. It’s hard to convince someone that’s worthwhile”

“Another thing that makes this group challenging – is that you establish rapport with a contact and then they leave, and you are left without a connection at that company anymore”

“A lot of our members are viticulturists, and not owners or stakeholders to the degree they can make calls like sharing information, compromising information about your operation”

*What would success look like to your group?
“Continual meetings. I am a part of other groups and every year I get that email, this group is meeting in April, here are topics, you know it’s always going to meet. This is what this group needs to become because there hasn’t been that. The longer term goal is let’s keep this rolling 5, 10 years beyond. If I’m ever too busy someone else can run it”*

“I believe there are a lot of invisible success stories we’ll never find out about”.

COUNTY LEVEL PEER KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING GROUPS

Several groups in Napa County fulfill similar functions as neighborhood action groups in terms of sharing knowledge and promoting collaboration but operate at a broader geographic extent.

Group Details	Past & Current Activities
<p>Neighborhood Alliance for Vineyard Protection (NAViP) Formed 2018 (in present form) 154 members <i>Topics: General viticultural challenges with emphasis on pest and disease management</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to connect viticultural professionals to share professional advice and create opportunities for collaboration on pest and disease challenges. • 3 to 5 meetings per year; typical duration is 1 to 2 hours. • Website: www.navip.org. Includes interactive map with publicly sourced contact details for member vineyards. • Facilitates and supports smaller neighborhood action groups in Napa County. • Group data-sharing includes powdery mildew spore counts and treehopper girdling.
<p>Vit Women Formed ~2005 200+ members <i>Topics: Any viticultural farming challenge</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to create a safe space for women working in viticulture to share information, ask questions about farming, and network with each other. Primarily based in Napa County but includes members elsewhere in California. • The primary activity is an email-based discussion group (listserv). Members can ask for advice or share information. Members must be nominated and vetted to join the list. • Social events are occasionally and sporadically organized.
<p>Napa Farmer’s Guild Formed 2023 <i>Topics: Any specialty crop, diversified farming or gardening challenge</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to support the community of specialty crop, diversified farmers and gardeners in Napa by networking members, sharing information, and providing opportunities for collaboration. • Members include culinary and landscape gardeners, cut flower farmers, fruit and vegetable farmers, beekeepers, and adjacent organizations (e.g., seed producers). • Up to 6 events per year; Members host farm tours and organize potluck social events. • An email discussion group has been established to allow members to share information and resources and pose questions.

GROWING PAINS: THE CHALLENGES OF LARGER GROUPS

- **Shifting aims.** Expanding a group can inadvertently shift the purpose or focus. Coordinators may want to take the group in a different direction. This can create confusion and a need to reassess aims and how to achieve them. Jointly designing group purpose builds commitment.
- **Membership.** As a group expands, it can diversify. This may compromise the perception of a safe meeting space, or a group may end up with members it was not meant to serve. Coordinators may have to address this or manage who is accepted into the group.
- **Managing conflict.** The common experience of neighborhood action groups has been that they reduce conflict. However, larger groups with more limited personal relationships that lack intra-member trust may experience conflict. A coordinator may step in to moderate the discussion. Developing guidelines for participation and creating shared agreement around expected behavior and conduct can reduce and diffuse conflict.

“When [the group] got bigger you’re naturally discussing things regionally and you lose the power of right across the fence, you’ve lost that whole purpose, but you still network, it’s more eclectic and diverse”

“As we’ve grown private companies have started to participate. I do feel when they have full access to our meetings it limits the ability to share openly and honestly with some of the challenges we face”