

EMPOWERING EXTENSION MANAGERS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY LEARNING APPROACH

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Organizational effectiveness depends largely on the people in the organization. Human resources are organic and complex and so is their development. While education is an instrument for the general development of the individual and his faculties, Human Resource Development in the context of an organization refers to the improvements in the capacities and capabilities of the personnel in relation to the needs of the organization. It creates a climate in which the flower of human knowledge, skills, capabilities and creativity can bloom. It involves the use of processes through which the personnel in organizations get prepared to give their best to meet the organization's objectives and achieve optimal effectiveness in their job roles. It sets up systems through which human capabilities and potential can be identified and tapped to the mutual satisfaction of the individual and organization.

People in any organization require information, knowledge, skill, vision, and mission to do their best for the organization. HRD seeks to provide a package of systems and processes through which these can be cultivated and enhanced among the people forming part of the network of roles in the organization. As a system for the development of personnel in an organization, HRD is generally brought about through a bunch of sub-systems, all of which are meant to focus on the development of individuals and groups constituting the social system of the organization, One of these sub-systems is training. Over the years, it has been viewed as the active arm of the top management for preparing personnel to upgrade their capabilities to meet new organizational challenges. It is not an exaggeration that in the future, the winning organizations will be those that respond quickly to changing conditions, increasing workforce diversity, and the critical issue of training related problems.

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Training thus assumes a lot of importance in organizations. It is a planned effort by organizations to facilitate employees' learning of job-related knowledge and skills for the purpose of improving their performance.

Even when a wide array of training methodologies are available, trainers tend to use the same old method of lectures followed by discussion that is passive in nature for the trainees. Since the personnel of organizations are all adults, they require an active mode of training that is found to be lacking in many of the training organizations. Training for adults need to be activity-based wherein their energies could be put to use in the learning process.

Development functionaries like agricultural extension managers who serve the farmers in rural areas by giving them technical guidance, require a high degree of motivation and complex skills to deal with farmers and influence their attitudes, habits and practices to adopt new agriculture technologies. MANAGE is an apex level national organization under the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, with a mission to develop the competencies of these agricultural extension functionaries (For more details about the organization, please visit the website www.manageagri.gov.in). The training methodology followed by MANAGE has been chosen for the study for its unique approach of learning by experience compared to the traditional training techniques followed by other organizations. The training programmes are designed and conducted to be highly interactive, participative, experiential and focus on self-learning for effective functioning as team members and team leaders in their respective organizations.

Importance of training

Training is the corner stone of sound management as it makes employees more effective and productive. Every organization needs to have well-trained and experienced people to perform the activities towards a common goal. In a rapidly changing society, employee training and development is a very important activity that an organization must concentrate to retain a viable and knowledgeable workforce.

Bernardin and Russell (1998) define training as any attempt to improve employee performance on a currently held job or one related to it. This usually

means changes in specific knowledge, skills, attitudes or behavior. To be effective, training should involve a learning experience, be a planned organizational activity, and be designed in response to identified needs. Ideally, training should be designed to meet the goals of the organization while simultaneously meeting the goals of individual employees.

Good educational and training programmes do not deluge the participants with enormous amounts of detailed information but help them to learn how to learn. Course curricula should be consciously designed to help the trainee to deal with new situations in a changing environment, from problem identification and analysis to the making and implementing of original solutions. This again calls for the use of participative methods, carefully chosen simulation exercises and models, case studies with a strong element of change, and various group assignments which build on the combined knowledge and expertise of all members of the group.

There is an enormous range of variations in delivery depending on the style and approach of the trainer and the context of the training. At one end of the spectrum, there are highly facilitative trainers who use very little formal input, relying instead on their experience to generate ideas within the group—they are output driven. At the other end are the more traditional skills trainers, those who may be more comfortable in a ‘tell’ environment; their natural style is to input information. Both could be described as trainers delivering training, but the learning experience of the delegates will be very different in each case. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages.

Key considerations while designing training for adults (Justice and Jamieson, 1999) are

- ▶ For adults, learning occurs best when it is motivated, not co-erced or forced. The participant’s motivation comes from the context, relevance, and involvement level of the work.
- ▶ For adults, learning occurs best when it is conducted as a partnership. The facilitator’s work with the group, and participant’s work with one another, must be a partnership to which each party brings resources and expectations.

- ▶ For adults, learning occurs best when it involves their primary learning mode and is interactive and experiential. They need to stay engaged, use their senses, and utilize their knowledge and skills.
- ▶ For adults, learning occurs best when there is an understandable structure and reinforcement. It helps most people to see the whole and the parts, to know where they are going and where they have been. New ideas, new ways of thinking, and new skills need continuous and consistent reinforcement both within and outside the learning environment.
- ▶ Learning occurs best when people's attention and energy stay engaged and focussed, and this is possible if people feel comfortable in their surroundings.

There are two goals in the experiential learning process. One is to learn the specifics of a particular subject matter. The other is to learn about one's own strengths and weaknesses as a learner, i.e. learning how to learn from experience. When the process works, participants finish their educational experience not only with new intellectual insights, but also understand their own learning style. This understanding of learning strengths and weaknesses helps in the back-home application of what has been learned and provides a framework for continuous learning on the job. Day-to-day experience becomes a focus for testing and exploring new ideas. Learning is no longer a special activity reserved for the classroom, but becomes an integral and explicit part of work itself.

Facilitation is the design and management of structures and processes that help a group do its work and minimize the common problems of people working together. According to Justice and Jamieson (1999), facilitation is a neutral process that focuses on

- ▶ What needs to be accomplished
- ▶ Who needs to be involved
- ▶ Design, flow and sequence of tasks
- ▶ Communication patterns, effectiveness, and completeness

- ▶ Appropriate levels of participation and the use of resources
- ▶ Group energy, momentum, and capability
- ▶ The physical and psychological environment

Facilitation involves managing group processes and dynamics, influencing how members work together and the nature of that responsibility calls for a high degree of neutrality about content issues and a focus on group needs. The facilitators' role is to assist the team's efforts towards its objectives. According to Cook (1997), the roles and responsibilities of facilitator are:

- ▶ Is a neutral servant of the group: neutrality means that the facilitator is an impartial observer. Servant of the group means that the facilitator is working to the group's agenda, not his own
- ▶ Does not contribute or evaluate ideas: the facilitator's contribution concerns group processes and only very rarely the content
- ▶ Focuses the energy of the group on its task: the facilitator's role is to ensure that the group is working together well to achieve its objective
- ▶ Suggests alternative methods of working: helps the group by offering alternative ways of solving the problem/looking at the situation
- ▶ Protects individuals and their ideas from attack: acts as a referee in terms of conflict, disagreement or tension in the group
- ▶ Encourages everyone to participate: ensures that all team members are able and willing to make a contribution
- ▶ Helps the group to find win/win solutions: ensures that outcomes are beneficial to all parties
- ▶ Coordinates pre-and post-session logistics

It can be stated that training is a process through which employees learn the knowledge, skills and attitudes for the purpose of improving their performance in the job. Hence, the content and the methodology adopted should be suitable for the learning of employees who are adults. Adults learn best in experiential learning environment where the trainer acts as facilitator providing opportunities for the participants to interact with each other and with the facilitator.

Objective of the study

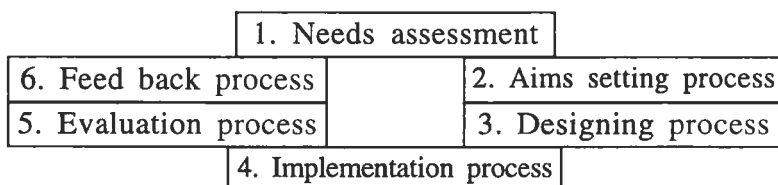
The study was conducted to understand the training methodology being followed in MANAGE.

Methodology of the study

The study was conducted at National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management, which is popularly known as MANAGE, located at Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India. A total number of 60 participants were chosen as respondents for the study by Random sampling method. The interview schedule developed for the study was administered on the selected respondents.

Training Methodology

MANAGE believes that individuals and groups have lot of potential and the challenge is to realize the energies and skills of all the members to benefit the organization as a whole. If training is valuable for individuals, it is even more powerful when a team and project members are trained. It can transform the behavior of the whole organization. The central theme of MANAGE training is to help people manage themselves better. The job of managers is getting things done, usually in cooperation with other people. MANAGE follows an integrated process of training as mentioned below:



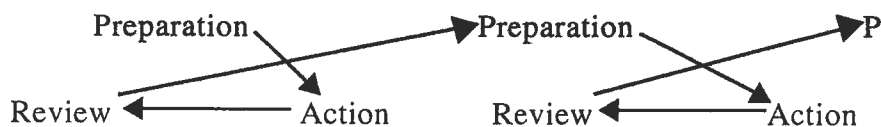
At MANAGE, the facilitators give utmost importance to the structure of any training program which will include a range of activities to reflect the different learning styles like:

- ✓ Theory input
- ✓ Practical experience through group tasks
- ✓ Application of theory to the practical experience through rigorous and in-depth reviews
- ✓ Ideas generation and consolidation of learning in general sessions.

On arrival at the training venue, the participants get introduced to the training staff, institute and to each other. A detailed introduction to the objectives, methodology of the training, expectations of the course staff follows. Based on their background, participants are divided into heterogeneous groups. Each session consists of a brief input on the topic followed by group tasks that are done in separate groups with the help of a facilitator who mostly acts as an active observer. The tasks are mostly neutral in nature and carried out with time specifications. Review follows task. Group members themselves generate the lessons from the tasks and reviews to show ownership. Facilitators use the technique of in-depth probing for drawing the lessons. After the review, all the groups meet in general sessions where each group shares their learnings with other groups by making brief presentations. Summarizing their learnings, application of the learnings to the job situation and additional inputs on the same topic are given by the course director. Thus participants consolidate 'the known' and then move to the 'unknown'. This cycle goes on through out the training.

To enable groups to practice working together, the group members carry out a series of tasks, each calling for a certain amount of action, and having an end product that can be reviewed by the group itself. Tasks given are short- usually less than an hour. Each task is followed by a review, in which participants analyze the way they worked together, and plan to repeat practices that helped, and avoid behavior that hindered.

Thus, a series of task cycles are carried out. In the groups, for any task, first some preparation (P) takes place followed by action (A). The preparation may be short or long depending on the complexity of the task which would include aims setting, information collection and deciding on subtasks and planning. After the action, another useful step is to review (R) the end results and the process. This process could be explained as Preparation-Action-Review cycles.



These stages of doing a job in a sequence i.e. preparation, action and review is called a systematic approach to getting things done which was developed by Coverdale Organization Limited, UK. The process issues will be incorporated in the task cycle. Thus lessons from the reviews are used in a cyclic way.

The learning comes from the way the members of the group work together – how they agree on an effective approach to the task, and how they combine their talents to build a successful team. People are encouraged to experiment since they operate in a risk free environment. If some procedure does not work it can be thrown out, and if it proves useful, it can be deliberately used again. In this way people acquire a certain amount of knowledge of human behavior; but far more valuably, they begin to build up habits of good management that they can develop further at work.

An ideal groups in training program consist of five to eight participants, with two to four groups on a course. This makes a group small enough for everyone to take part, and large enough to provide problems of interaction e.g. people have to agree on aims and procedures. This size of group is also large to bring out a differentiation of roles, such as coordinator, ideas generator, timekeeper or conciliator. In groups, people can experiment with their own behavior, and try out things they would not risk doing with their colleagues at work. A coach who is called a facilitator helps the groups. The facilitator's job is to observe and help them to see what they did that was different, what it was that them helped finish a task in time. They focus more on successes and what / how improvements can be done for future tasks. The facilitators only advise or put a question so that the group thinks in that direction, but do not prescribe what people should learn. Nearly all the learning is inductive, the facilitator and the group pull lessons out of what actually happened and devise their own procedures for the future.

An effective facilitator knows to intervene in group processes in an assertive fashion without being either over-dominant or hesitant. Queries and suggestions is the armory of the facilitator whenever he/she decides to intervene. Importantly, although the facilitator is giving inputs to the group at this point, the attitude which he/she adopts is still one of neutrality. The facilitator questions, makes comments or suggestions but leaves it up to the group whether or not to

take these forward. This helps in taking up ownership of the learning process. The facilitator abides by the team's decision. The facilitator uses observation skills to make a judgement on when to intervene.

Task and process distinction in experiential learning of MANAGE is very distinctive in nature. If a group builds a tower with Lego pieces, it is a task. Group process consists of the social phenomena that occurs during the task. How the group generated and handled ideas, how the aims were set, how decisions were made, how the coordination took place, what psycho dynamic interaction between people and intra-psychic states within each person could be stated as some examples of the process.

Facilitation is primarily about enabling, supporting and encouraging participant learning. This is achieved by adopting a flexible style of teaching that is trainee-centered, experiential and activity based. In this case, the facilitator needs to have all the knowledge and skills of the trainer/tutor, and also may need to be even more knowledgeable in view of the unforeseen demands that might be made by the learners. The facilitator must be able to stand back and not present himself as the expert, rather a resource for the free use of learners. He/she must be able to intervene or stay remote at the appropriate moments; to lead the learning process, to offer relevant activities, but allowing them to dig themselves out of the holes they have dug for themselves. When the training program is in progress, the facilitators will have several roles to play, some of them are presented below.

Role of course director

- ▶ Paces the course as per the needs of participants
- ▶ Provides a safe learning environment by being flexible and informal
- ▶ Sets the tone by welcoming participants, briefing on learning aims and program
- ▶ Ensures that learning is based on the experience of groups and at the level of the group
- ▶ Establishes clearly to staff and participants the aims of the session
- ▶ Periodically observes the groups to assess learning and skill development

- ▶ Listens and gives importance to group reports and takes care not to compare them
- ▶ Times General Session inputs so that they take learners forward in their learning
- ▶ Develops inputs by involving the learners
- ▶ Synthesizes learning by bringing out key points/lessons from reports
- ▶ Indicates time available for group presentation and the content
- ▶ Looks after course administration such as equipment, tea arrangements, transport, etc

Role of coach/facilitator

- ▶ Builds rapport with the group and addresses participants by name
- ▶ Creates learning environment by being informal, friendly, encouraging, etc
- ▶ Observes the progress of the group
- ▶ Does not impose his/her ideas on the group
- ▶ Enables the group to learn inductively i.e., to learn from experience
- ▶ Focuses on the process i.e., how the group is working
- ▶ Charts verbatim of what the members say while doing process reviews
- ▶ Avoids win-lose situations with the group
- ▶ Probes through questions in reviews
- ▶ Intervenes when group is stuck but does not interfere in group tasks
- ▶ Involves all the members in review and respects each member's views
- ▶ Strikes a balance among varied views by acting as mediator
- ▶ Avoids making evaluative judgements
- ▶ Highlights successes of the group

In every training program, the facilitators change their roles and assume roles of course director and group facilitator. Mostly, the inputs are given in a general session where all groups meet to share the lessons. In groups, the tasks are used as vehicles of learning where these inputs get reinforced through experiential

learning and rigorous and in-depth reviews. Very rarely, inputs are given in groups to have the same level of learning progress for all groups.

Results and Discussion

The learners were from different levels like agricultural officers, Assistant Directors, Deputy Directors and Joint Directors with varied educational background like BSc to MSc and PhD in agricultural sciences having varied length of experience and age. This mix of learners indicates that the training methodology suits the learners irrespective of their backgrounds.

Data collected is analyzed, discussed and are presented below. The study revealed the following observations as perceived by the learners:

Strengths in training methodology

Sl.No	Strengths	Percentage
1	Understood each others' skill in the group	88
2	Shared each others' experience in groups and in general sessions	95
3	Interesting group exercises	78
4	Neutral tasks used as vehicles for learning helped us to realize our potentialities and skills	53
5	Made us active throughout the learning process	77
6	Lectures were very short and interesting	82
7	Introduction of theory concept followed by group exercises and again consolidation of the lessons after practice	93
8	Learning is interesting and effective	68
9	A team of facilitators rather than single lecturer	77
10	Small groups led to effective learning	78
11	Learning by doing	88
12	Learning from each other	72
13	Focus on learning than teaching	77
14	Facilitators related the lessons to the job situation	67
15	Learning aims explained before the start of the day	80
16	Learning aims explained at the end of the day	80

Utility of training methodology

Learners expressed that the methodology could be useful in imparting different skills like managerial practices, observation, feedback, setting aims, identifying other's skills and sharing the work accordingly and learning new concepts.

Key features observed on the methodology

Sl.no.	Key features	percentage
1	A well-set platform for learning	75
2	Learning by doing	80
3	Learning owned by participants	43
4	Trainers' role is to facilitate learning rather than teaching	93
5	Participants feel that they have contributed more than facilitators	58
6	Theory-practice-theory	65
7	Preparation –Action –Review cycles	92
8	Participants are made active during the programme	83

The physical setup of the training environment plays an important part in retention and receptivity of the lessons. Hence, classroom arrangements were modified from time to time to suit the mood of the sessions. Effectiveness of the training also depends on the ready availability of all the necessary stationary and other related items during the program. This shows that trainers had their physical arrangements well.

Extent of Effectiveness

Sl.no	Extent	Percentage
1	Highly effective	51
2	Effective to a large extent	47
3	Effective to some extent	2
4	Not effective	-
Total		100

Enhanced participation

Short span of exercises; some result expected at the end of exercise; groups compete with each other, hence strive for better quality results; facilitators' intervention and encouragement for silent members; and team spirit to complete the task were the responses as to how the training methodology enabled the enhanced participation.

In this training methodology, the participants are divided into groups and different names are given to each group. Tasks of action oriented nature are assigned to each group where each member is expected to participate to accomplish the set purpose. Many respondents also expressed that learning was effective as the participation of every individual member was possible in each task.

Key competencies of facilitators

Sl.no.	Key competencies	Percentage
1	Command over the subject	68
2	Fully aware of training schedule and schedule of the day	88
3	Sequence	83
4	Lot of preparation before and after the day	63
5	Intervention/facilitation only when required	77
6	Ability to give freedom to groups while operating	83
7	Continuous observation	78
8	Probing for lessons in review sessions	72
9	Team spirit among the facilitators	83
10	More information in short inputs	63
11	Relevance of inputs on the course to the job situation	63

Conclusion

The study highlighted the importance of participatory training methodology and the role of facilitators for creating conducive environment for adult learning through active involvement. At MANAGE, self directed learning is facilitated that enables the learners to exploit their knowledge and skills in the process and explore their potential for learning. Participatory methodology enables the agricultural extension managers to learn and enhance their skills and prepare them to be proactive, creative, innovative and problem solving while working with farmers, operating in teams and in their day-to-day work.

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Annexure I

Profile of MANAGE

National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management, also known as MANAGE is the Indian response to the challenges of agricultural management of the future. As a management institute, MANAGE has the mission to assist the state governments, Government of India and other International organizations in improving the capacity to effectively manage agricultural extension and other agricultural systems. MANAGE was established as an apex national institute under the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India.

Mandate

The mandate of MANAGE vests the institute with the responsibility to work in the following directions:

- ◆ Developing linkages between prominent state, national and international institutions concerned with agricultural extension management
- ◆ Gaining insight into agricultural extension management systems and policies
- ◆ Forging collaborative linkages with national and international institutions for sharing faculty resource
- ◆ Developing and promoting application of modern management tools for improving the effectiveness of agricultural extension organizations
- ◆ Organizing need based training for senior and middle level agricultural extension functionaries
- ◆ Conducting problem oriented studies on agricultural extension management
- ◆ Serving as an international documentation center for collecting, storing, processing and disseminating information on subjects related to agricultural management.

Mission

Within its overall mandate, MANAGE regards its mission as *Facilitating the Acquisition of Managerial and Technical Skills by Extension Officers, Managers, Scientists and Administrators in all sectors of Agricultural economy to enable them to provide most effective support and services to Farmers and Fishermen for practicing Sustainable Agriculture.*

The task of facilitating the modernization of India's agricultural extension system is far beyond the capabilities of a single institution. As an apex institution, therefore, MANAGE functions as a pacesetter, developing system designs and models of professional activities for other state level institutions to adopt. Sharing these experiences to enable other institutions to adopt these innovations is one of the core concerns.

The range of professional services offered by MANAGE

1. Process consultancy for enhancing Organizational Effectiveness.
2. Regular consultancy activities.
3. Management training.
4. Management Education.
5. Applied research.
6. Consultancy services to Extension Projects.
7. Distance Learning for Farmers' Skill Development.
8. The role of information technology in all spheres of management today is of critical significance. The institute has always tried to integrate the state of the art in information technology in the professional activities and services. Considerable investments in experimenting are made with varied applications of modern information technology. It offers services to client organization in designing and installing IT application systems for specific missions.