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Making the most of meetings: An entry point for knowledge sharing

Simone Staiger, Nathan Russell and Allison Hewlitt

More effective sharing of the knowledge generated by agricultural research and development (R&D) will enhance global efforts to reduce poverty, hunger and environmental degradation. Major meetings provide a useful opportunity for introducing knowledge sharing (KS) attitudes, methods and tools to R&D organizations. Such events can promote awareness of new types of collegial relationships and foster more creative scientific collaboration. If they are to successfully perform these functions, however, the meeting organizers must plan carefully, identifying the KS techniques that are most appropriate to the defined objectives. Feedback mechanisms (before, during and after the event) are also required. While major meetings can be an entry point for KS into an organization, they will not necessarily lead to mainstreaming of the concept. It is important to incorporate KS into the whole information continuum; a process that includes internal and external communication channels and involves all the organization's stakeholders. For KS to lead to organizational change and sustainable improvements in performance, top-level management must be committed and meeting results must be followed through.

Introduction

To combat hunger, poverty and environmental destruction more effectively, the 15 centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) need to do a better job of sharing the knowledge they generate through collaborative research with national organizations. Enhanced knowledge sharing (KS), in turn, will help the centres to learn from the experience of staff and partners and result in more effective research and development approaches.

Knowledge can be captured to some extent in publications, databases, improved crop germplasm and other such tangible products. However, a lot of knowledge is held in the minds of CGIAR scientists and collaborators and this will remain under-utilized unless a more open and inclusive KS culture can be cultivated. The KS Project of the CGIAR's Information and Communications Technologies–Knowledge Management (ICT–KM) Program is focusing on practical ways to improve KS culture and embarked on four pilot initiatives during 2004–2005. These were carried out at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI).

This Brief describes the pilot initiative at CIAT, completed late in 2004, which focused on transforming the centre's annual staff meeting into a major KS event. We hope our account of the experience at CIAT will inspire colleagues at R&D organizations to undertake their own experiments in using major meetings as an entry point for KS.

A new formula for the annual staff meeting

Like most other CGIAR centres, CIAT has a long tradition of annual meetings of professional staff. The format has typically centred on plenary sessions, in which researchers deliver formal

PowerPoint presentations, followed by questions and discussion. In addition, time is usually allocated for project teams and other groups to review on-going activities and plan future work.

Here, as elsewhere, many feel the time spent in annual staff meetings is not used as well as it could be. Too many hours, they say, are consumed by formal presentations, with little in-depth discussion of 'burning issues'. There are few opportunities for people to get to know each other and establish the collegial relationships that are essential for creative scientific collaboration. Moreover, meeting results have seldom been documented and follow-up action has been limited.

In an effort to address these concerns, the KS Project proposed a major overhaul of the CIAT annual staff meeting. The idea was to try an alternative formula that would help staff share knowledge, broaden communication, stimulate dialogue and strengthen personal relationships.

A knowledge sharing approach

A team of five, with strong skills in information management, communications and monitoring and evaluation was established to work with CIAT management in planning and carrying out the meeting. The team included a consultant from the Bellanet International Secretariat, which is a key partner in the KS Project and is closely involved in the four pilot initiatives. The consultant introduced the team to different KS tools, co-facilitated the meeting, and, most important, helped the team understand the changes in attitudes that are involved in cultivating a KS culture.

One of the coordination team's first tasks was to help management define the meeting objectives. The team then met with a range of other CIAT staff – in face-to-face meetings at headquarters and via telephone with out-posted staff – to check the relevance of the proposed objectives and collect reactions to alternative meeting designs. As a result, the one-week meeting was organized around four objectives:

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1. Develop a shared understanding of three major new initiatives at CIAT (referred to as 'development challenges') and contribute to their effective operationalization.
2. Enhance the integration of headquarters with regional staff and activities.
3. Promote effective work planning on the part of project teams and collaborators.
4. Demonstrate how KS techniques can help staff work more effectively.

The coordination team selected well-known KS approaches and complementary measures to achieve those objectives. The 'open space' approach, for example, was used to involve a large number of staff in a two-day session on planning how CIAT should move forward with its development challenges. Open space is a highly democratic method of group agenda setting, followed by small group discussion, reporting and preparation of action plans. It is based on the idea that follow-up action is more likely when individuals become engaged due to strong interest in the issue.

The 'peer assist' method – an aid to collective problem solving between colleagues – was used to address the meeting's second objective, namely that of integration between CIAT headquarters and regional staff. Like the open-space technique, the peer assist is democratic in the sense that participants may offer advice or analysis as they see fit, on the basis of personal interest in the problem or prior experience with it. But those who present problems for analysis also benefit from collective wisdom, since problems are 'rotated' from discussion group to discussion group. A total of seven peer-assist topics were dealt with in a half-day session; for example, the challenge of reconciling differing institutional requirements and expectations when a researcher has a joint appointment between two CGIAR centres.

As a further aid to headquarters/regional integration, a 'knowledge fair' was organized in the form of an exhibition of support services available within CIAT and of the activities of other scientific organizations that share the CIAT campus. The displays were designed by the support staff, who were present to answer questions and provide services on the spot. The knowledge fair focused specifically on support services because of a perception that regional staff have particular difficulty in accessing these services.

The third objective – to promote effective work planning among project teams and collaborators – was achieved by providing an online meeting planner to facilitate the scheduling of planning meetings. A similar planner was piloted during CIAT's 2003 annual meeting. In addition, the coordination team set up a special section of the CIAT website dedicated to KS Week news.

Evaluation

Whether staff find KS approaches helpful (thus fulfilling the meeting's fourth objective) and begin incorporating them into other activities depends on the effectiveness of these approaches. The coordination team employed two techniques for gauging the utility of different aspects of KS Week and for identifying ways to improve it. First, a 'barometer team' was formed to monitor the week's activities and recommend ways to make future meetings more effective. The team consisted of five headquarters staff, four out-posted staff, meeting facilitator Allison Hewlitt and one other communications consultant. Meeting three times during KS Week, the team made 48 recommendations related to the event's strengths and weaknesses that were observed by the team members themselves or reported to them by other participants. In a particularly significant observation on the open-space activity, the barometer team recog-

nized that many CIAT staff did not grasp the development challenges in sufficient detail to be able to design action plans for operationalization. "We should have done a better job of determining whether people understood the topic well enough to discuss it," was one comment.

The second approach for judging the usefulness of CIAT's KS Week was a formal evaluation. Most KS Week participants surveyed were quite positive about it and felt the meeting had improved communication and relationships and demonstrated the value of KS techniques. While it is difficult to assess the usefulness of specific KS tools separately from the usefulness of the sessions in which they were used, most participants indicated that they had found the peer assist, the knowledge fair and the open-space approaches useful. They also expressed interest in using these approaches in the future and felt they should be incorporated into CIAT projects. Moreover, they suggested that special attention should be paid to involving nationally recruited staff members more fully in KS activities.

When asked to compare KS Week with previous annual meetings, participants responded that the communication and interaction were more effective than in previous years. They also appreciated not being confined to closed, dark rooms for lengthy PowerPoint presentations. Nonetheless, one aspect of previous meetings that participants preferred over KS Week was the exchange of scientific information on work in progress, results and impacts. They suggested that some mechanism be found to facilitate the exchange of such information, but without returning to the previous format of non-stop presentations with limited discussion.

Future implications

The pilot initiative carried out at CIAT was based on the hypothesis that high-profile events, involving large numbers of staff and organized specifically to demonstrate KS approaches, are an effective entry point for promoting cultural change. We further assumed that creating an opportunity for management to observe how KS approaches can help their centre address key issues would complement other approaches to securing management commitment to KS.

Despite its success, events like CIAT's KS Week are simply an entry point. Additional mechanisms need to be identified for expanding the use of KS approaches within the CGIAR and for gauging their effectiveness in contributing to a more learning-oriented culture. CIAT will continue to foster KS among its staff by offering training in practical approaches through the Communications Unit. At the same time, we will seek ways to enhance KS along the whole information continuum, encompassing international centres, national and local organizations and rural communities. For this purpose the InformCom Project, which aims to strengthen local capacity for innovation with the aid of new information and communication technology, is devising a variety of people-centred methods to help people obtain, use, share and create information and knowledge pertinent to their needs.

One such tool involves characterizing information networks in relation to agricultural supply chains. The results indicate information flows between the many actors participating in these chains as well as the media they use. Based on these results, we are designing strategies to enhance information and knowledge networks. This can be accomplished, for example, through the use of KS techniques in R&D organizations, strengthening of local organizations through the use of new information and communication technology that is available in community telecentres, and through training and support for information intermediaries in the rural sector.

Agenda for CIAT's Knowledge Sharing Week, Monday 29 November – Saturday 4 December, 2004

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Development Challenges	Development Challenges	Support and Service Fair and Expo-Agronatura	Regional/HQ Integration Day	Open for Meetings	Business Process Re-engineering and Evaluation
<p>Welcome and introduction to new CIAT staff Joachim Voss</p> <p>Overview of Agenda Doug Pachico</p> <p>Update from the DG Setting the scene: The Development Challenges Joachim Voss</p> <p>Opening the Development Challenge Space: What are the ideas, possibilities, challenges and issues you want to explore for operationalizing the Development Challenges?</p>	<p>Operationalizing the Development Challenges: Prioritizing topics and developing action plans</p>	<p>Professional Staff Association meeting</p> <p>Research Support and Service Fair and Expo Agronatura</p> <p>Open for meetings</p>	<p>Regional/HQ Peer Assist: staff brainstorm on six practical issues or problems related to regional/HQ interactions and identify new insights and innovative approaches</p>	<p>Open for meetings</p>	<p>Business Process Re-engineering: update and progress, feedback</p> <p>Wrap-up</p> <p>Workshop evaluation and reflection</p> <p>Project Leaders' wrap-up session</p>
Lunch					
<p>Operationalizing the Development Challenges: Discussing the issues and opportunities</p>	<p>Reporting back and closing the development challenge space</p>	<p>Research Support and Service Fair and Expo-Agro-natura</p> <p>Open for meetings</p> <p>Question time with the DG: Joachim Voss</p>	<p>What's new in the regions? Regional coordinators share the main achievements and lessons learned, highlight what's new and identify new opportunities for collaboration</p>	<p>Open for meetings</p>	<p>Open for meetings</p>
Social activity	Free evening	Social activity	Free evening	Free evening	Social activity

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Many development agencies are already engaged in such work, and InformCom's experience suggests they are quite keen to have international centres as partners in this important endeavour.

Further reading

Toomey, G. and Russell, N. 2005. Knowledge-sharing solutions for a CGIAR without boundaries. Cali, Colombia: International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT).

Knowledge Sharing Project: http://www.ciat.cgiar.org/cgiar/knowledge_sharing/home.htm

CIAT's Knowledge Sharing Week: http://www.ciat.cgiar.org/ks_week/index.htm

CGIAR ICT-KM Program: <http://ictkm.cgiar.org/>

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