

Maintaining viable organisations

Key points

- The Ag Excellence Alliance assists information sharing across the State
- Six principles for success
- New committee members elected

Two heads are better than one; then are multiple heads even better? Judging by the achievements of the Ag Excellence Alliance more heads are certainly an advantage.

Formed in 2005 with support from the National Landcare Program, the Ag Excellence Alliance facilitates linkages between thirteen grower groups, organisations and projects in SA. Participants include the Advisory Board of Agriculture, Partners in Grain, SANTFA, SPAA and nine farming systems groups, including two new groups, one in the lower EP and one in the mid north, that were developed with support from the Ag Excellence Alliance.

One activity that helps achieve linkages between the participants is the Ag Excellence Alliance Annual Forum. The Forum provides an opportunity for representatives from all the groups to come together to share knowledge, to inspire, to develop linkages and to learn from each other.

At this year's Forum, held at the end of March, participants had the opportunity to report back and share information on their group's activities. Despite difficult conditions all were able to report positive achievements for the year. In addition they were able to learn from speakers on topics that included successfully sourcing funds, identifying training needs and maintaining a viable organisation.

The latter topic was tackled in detail by Ms Alexandra Gartmann, CEO of the Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) in Victoria. Birchip Cropping Group was formed in 1992, by a group of farmers who had been inspired by their visit to the Hart Field Day. Sixteen years later the organisation is managed by a board and CEO, rather than a committee and has 500 farm business members, 14 full time and eight part time staff, most of which are based in Birchip and are under 35 years old. Each year BCG hosts about 3500 visitors.

Ms Gartmann explained how the BCG aims to manage the Group under six 'principles for success': embrace entrepreneurs; build leadership and teamwork; determine your own destiny; work in partnerships with the best; communicate to all and just do it – small starts are better than no start.

For example, to try and ensure the BCG has the opportunity to work with the best people a range of strategies is used, from actively seeking out employees through Universities and training organisations to keeping in contact with researchers and funding body representatives who visit the BCG. BCG has used a system of billeting researchers, investors, partners and potential employees etc when they visit Birchip. By billeting these visitors with farmer members of the board or advisory committees, both parties have a much better opportunity to become acquainted; this helps form stronger links between individuals and the BCG.

Remaining motivated can be difficult for employees and volunteers involved with grower groups. Ms Gartmann is a strong believer in encouraging all to 'tell the story', "focus on the Group's successes and share them, avoid becoming stuck on problems or failures."

For herself, winning the 2005 National Not-For-Profit CEO of the year was a big motivator, "We all need a pat-on-the-back, even those at the top of the organisation."

Ms Gartmann shared many practical examples of how she and the BCG dealt with issues, providing the audience with ideas and insights that could be put into practice in their own groups.

The Ag Excellence Alliance AGM was held during the Forum. New committee members Sharon Honner, Ken Solly and Maggie Dowling were elected to join the returning committee members Jeanette Long, Peter Cousins, Mick Faulkner, Mark Habner, Rick Llewellyn, Mark Stanley and Geoff Thomas. Departing committee members Geoff Bammann and Nigel Wilhelm were thanked for their support over the past year.

The Ag Excellence Alliance announced that it has made funding available to encourage participating groups to work with their local Tafe colleges and develop training appropriate to the needs of young people returning to farms in their areas.