

IMPLEMENTING KNOW-HOW – EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION OF KNOW HOW TO PIG FARMERS

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Abstract

Denmark is known for a large pig production industry and a high level of efficiency. Besides strong breeding and well-educated pig farmers, the high level of efficiency is attributed to a strong connection between the research/development industry and the primary industry. Know-how is communicated from, for instance, Pig Research Centre (PRC) to the pig advisors in Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DAAS¹⁶) and on to the pig producers. Danish farmers are able to access know-how directly from PRC¹⁷ as well as through the local pig advisory centres.

However, despite our well-functioning, transparent system, the results achieved by the individual pig producers still vary greatly. This shows that there is still potential for improving the communication of know-how and thereby ensuring implementation on the pig farms.

Six years ago, PRC and DAAS Pigs established “Development Co-Operation”, which is economically binding co-operation on development of tools, Best Practice, for a number of areas within the production of pigs. This development takes place in a joint process with DAAS Pigs paying half of the costs and PRC the other half. The tools are developed by project groups consisting of local pig advisors and scientific staff from PRC. A tool – a set of guidelines – typically consists of checklists, fact sheets, recording forms, work plans, spread sheets, etc.

With the Development Co-Operation, advisors will obtain ownership of the tools and use them when advising pig farmers. As pig advisors are involved in both development and implementation, know-how is communicated with practical implementation in mind and is adapted to the target group.

Keywords: implementing, advising, networking, cooperation, know-how

Subtheme: Education & Training (Farm management)

Tasks included in the pig advisory process

Traditionally, the tasks included in advising on pig production were divided into three categories: service tasks, expert tasks and advisory tasks. The first two are characterised by the advisor creating satisfaction – the client needs a product that meets his expectations and needs. The last category

¹⁶ The Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DAAS) is owned by Danish farmers, through the regional centres. DAAS offers service tasks within all areas related to farming and has 3,500 employees. DAAS employs approx. 90 pig advisors.

¹⁷ Pig Research Centre is in charge of research and development tasks related to the live pig and communicating knowledge obtained through these activities.

concerns creating a change for the client such as implementing new routines, providing inspiration for new ideas or helping the client clarifying various problems.

Demand on several levels

Pig advisors have witnessed a drop in the demand for service tasks (production control, scans etc.), whereas expert tasks and in particular advisory tasks take up increasingly more time. There is an increasing need for advisors who are skilled in explaining and providing instructions in practical routines in the pig facility (hands on) and for advisors who are good at seeing the overall picture and finding solutions together with the client.

Fewer clients – more tasks

In 1990, Denmark had approx. 9,000 fulltime pig farms. By 2006, this number had dropped to 4,000, and the Danish Agriculture and Food Council expect that it has dropped to 2,000 by 2014. The local pig advisory centres have largely succeeded in maintaining their activity level and thereby also the number of advisors. Pig farms have grown larger, and the need for advice has been increasing until today. Fewer and bigger clients have resulted in changed needs. On many pig farms today, for instance, there is a lot more emphasis on providing advice and talking directly with herd managers and staff. In these cases, the owner has left instruction, guidance, discussions and follow-up in the hands of the pig advisor.

Investment in advice is a good investment

Professional skills were always a requirement pig advisors had to meet – also at the time when pig advice was state-aided. As state aids and slaughter aid lapsed, the price of one advisory hour increased drastically. As a natural consequence of a high hourly price, clients have high expectation to the advisor ‘delivering the goods’ – each and every time. The clients are increasingly aware that when they invest one DKK in advice, they want more in return.

When you consider the potential for improvement on the Danish pig farms, the outlook for a win-win situation is good. The result of an increase of, for instance, +2 pigs per sow/year in a herd with 800 sows will be DKK +400,000 for the client. This is a good investment, as the advisory course has cost around DKK 30-35,000. If a finisher producer delivering 10,000 finishers for slaughter a year improves feed conversion ratio by 0.1 feed units per kg gain, his gross margin per pig will increase by DKK 8 (depending on the feed prices) or by DKK 80,000 a year. These examples show that when a pig producer spends one DKK on advice, he can realistically expect a 5-10 times return.

The client wants the best man on the job

Put briefly, clients expect results from bright, sympathetic, committed, persistent advisors who also know how to follow up. They want to be treated individually, and to be offered tailor-made solutions that match their herd and their needs. For many years, clients have been shopping around to find ‘the best man’ for the task at hand. ‘The best man’ may be located in another part of the country; he may be a private advisor, commercial advisor or a vet. It is important to note that ‘the best man’ is not necessarily the one who knows the most about certain subjects or is acknowledged as a leading technical specialist. ‘The best man’ is certainly also a person who, besides professional knowledge, is

able to inspire and motivate, to give the client a good experience and help him just as needed in that particular situation.

Profile of a pig advisor

Technical abilities and the ability to communicate clearly are essential elements in the profile of a pig advisor. There will still be a need for staff with a very high degree of technical skills both in terms of hands-on advice in the herd; in terms of advice on production and management; and in terms of more strategic and managerial advice. Technical skills must go hand in hand with a high degree of awareness of communication and the role as advisor. The figure below illustrates the tasks of the advisor where all steps must be completed before he/she has reached the goal. The pig advisor communicates information to the client, and if this information is relevant and adapted to the needs of the client, we move onto step two where the client converts this information to know-how. However, merely possessing know-how is not enough – the advisor must support and facilitate the process of implementing know-how in the daily routines to create a change in the herd. In other words, the subject or topic that the advisor communicates must reach the client, be converted to know-how and then implemented.

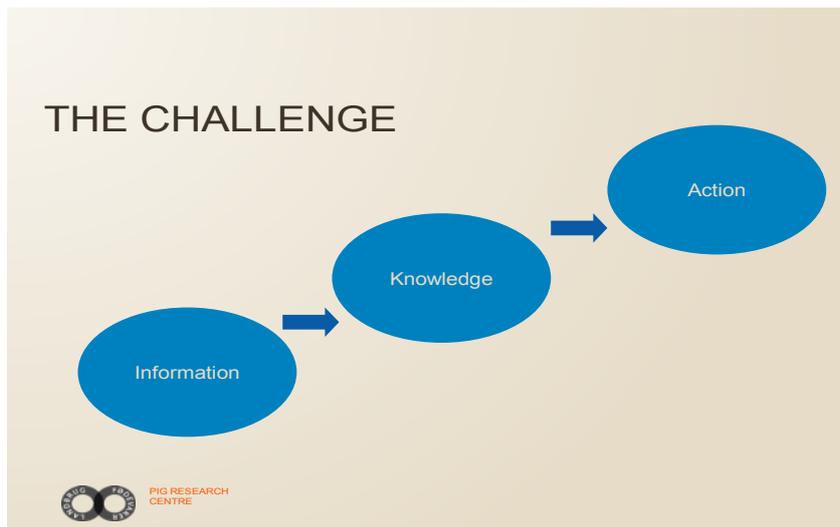


Figure 1. The tasks of the advisor is to adapt the information to the need of the client, communicate this so that it is converted to know-how and ensure that this know-how is implemented in the routines on the farm.

The advisor must network

Advisors must be good at networking and at inter-disciplinary co-operation. This will strengthen the ability to seeing the whole picture and finding solutions that match the client, staff and herd. A good network will also strengthen the technical range and it will be possible to contact or refer to specialists who have a greater know-how than the advisor himself in some areas.

We must set up advisory courses

The client expects results and therefore advisors must be good at showing that the advice does have an effect and that the goals set are being reached. Persistence and follow-up are decisive when it

comes to maintaining the partnership with the client and thereby get the possibility of completing a full advisory course that will create the desired change. A few ad hoc visits will normally not have any particular effect and the desired change will not take place.

The tools

For the last 6 six years, DAAS Pigs has co-operated closely with PRC on development of tools (manuals). The development takes place in a joint process with DAAS Pigs paying half of the costs and PRC the other half. The tools are developed by project groups consisting of local advisors and scientific staff from PRC. A tool – a set of guidelines – typically consists of checklists, fact sheets, recording forms, work plans, spread sheets, etc.

The mutual economic binding giving ownership to both parties is thus part of the success of the Development Co-Operation. Other important values are openness, trust and equality.

Development Co-Operation is still unique in Denmark, and other sectors (cattle, economy, vets) express interest in working like this with development and practical implementation of know-how as it is clear that trial reports, briefs etc. are not always the most efficient ways of communicating know-how – neither for advisors nor for pig farmers.

As a result of dedicated work with advisory tools and development of skills, we have a lot of advisors in Denmark with a high level of technical know-how and who are also focused on advisory techniques, and through this they succeed in creating changes.

Development of skills is part of Development Co-Operation

When a new set of guidelines is finished, an expert group is set up consisting of advisors specialised within that particular area, for instance liquid feeding or management of the farrowing facility.

The expert group prepares 'skill catalogues' that define the requirements to an expert in that particular area. This gives the individual advisor a good idea of what skills he needs to work on. Typically, several advisors will have the same needs, and this gives the expert groups the chance to focus in depth on development of a few skills.

The expert groups also function as a network in which new know-how, new experiences and new ideas are discussed with colleagues possessing specialised know-how within that particular area. This is highly beneficial, and the advisors express great satisfaction with this way of developing skills and sharing know-how.

Development of professional skills has lifted the local pig advisory centres to new levels, and as a consequence farmers are given even more qualified advice.

Technical know-how and advisory methods yield effectiveness

It was quite clear early in the process that the guidelines did not create changes in the herds unless they were accompanied by advice. Advice will ensure that goals are set; that action plans are made

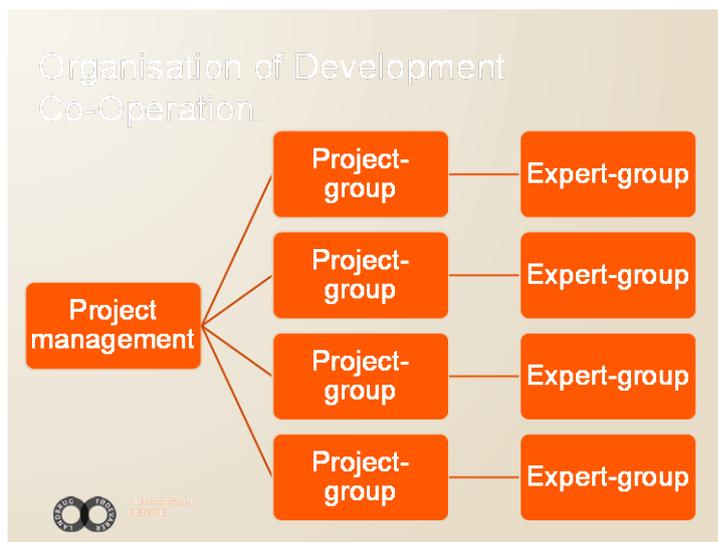
and followed up upon to ensure that the client is enrolled in an advisory course and has an experience of successful implementation. The guidelines are rarely used in their entirety as the advisors often wish to focus on the subjects and topics that the client needs, and the client is therefore often only given the forms and fact sheets relevant in that situation.

The expert groups obviously need to concentrate on technical issues a great deal of the time, but they are also aware that communication is extremely important to their success as pig advisors. In practice, the expert groups therefore work on how to prepare a visit, how to cover the needs of a client, how to set goals in co-operation with the farmer, how to make action plans and follow up.

Pig advice in a changeable world

Communication of know-how is quite a challenge – unfortunately, a large part of our knowledge remains passive as it drowns in the sea of information that is available to the farmers. As mentioned, merely possessing knowledge is not enough – it must be converted into actual actions on the farms. Most farmers need help to make this process happen, and advisors are therefore still needed despite that fact that most know-how is available to pig producers without talking to advisors. In Development Co-Operation, professional specialists from PRC meet those advisors who daily visit pig farms across the country, and it becomes possible to convert technical know-how into, for instance, fact sheets that are adapted to the needs of the farmer and his staff.

PRC and DAAS pigs are well prepared for the future through this dedicated development work and the development of skills in the expert groups. PRC sees this as one of the communication methods available to us, and it gives our employees valuable information on what is required for know-how to be implemented in practice.



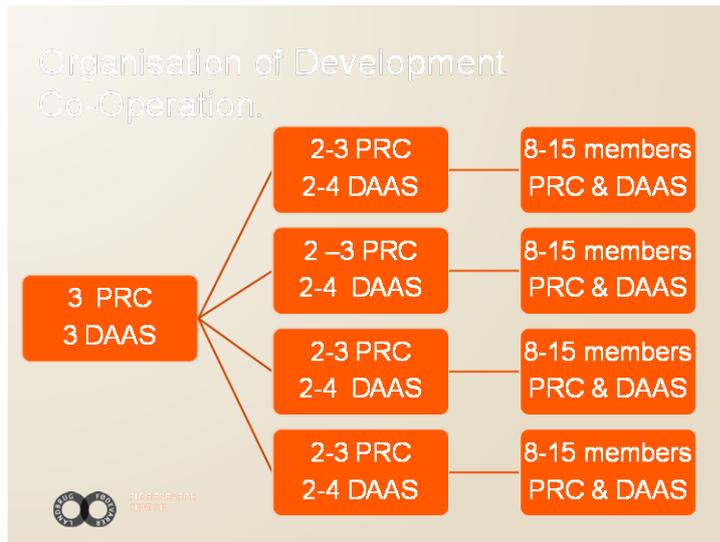


Figure 2. Structure of the Development Co-Operation with a management group, and number of project groups and accompanying expert groups.