Effectively Causing Change: Communicating that Leads to Learning and Action

Ryan Stockwell
stockwellr@nwf.org
715-965-2538
Barriers to Cover Crop Adoption:

1. Public policy
2. Equipment availability
3. Advanced information on cover crop management and cover crop performance
4. Need more trusted messengers with effective skills
5. Message not resonating with majority of farmers
Mental Barriers to Cover Crop Adoption:

1. Decision making under risk/uncertainty does not fit rational economic approach
   1. Safety in groups
   2. Non-voluntary public occupation
   3. W/ uncertain info, status quo is safest

2. We are more willing to recognize problems in others than ourselves.
The Many Factors in Decision Making

1. Values/emotions
2. Social support
3. Change aversion
4. Access to information
5. Economic ROI

Significant shift in mindset and decision making
The Different Thought Processes of Innovators and Late Adopters

• Innovators/Early Adopters:
  • Are more open to new or challenging ideas/more comfortably with uncertainty
  • See failure as part of progress
  • Use longer timeframes to evaluate options
  • Do not respond as readily to social pressure

• Middle/Late Adopters:
  • Are uncomfortable with new ideas that challenge existing thinking
  • See failure as a stain on their reputation
  • Use strict short time-frames
  • Are concerned with what others are doing to define what they will do
Barriers to Reaching Middle Adopters

1. Middle adopter decision making places raised standards on new practices.

2. Sublatent signals:
   1. Beautiful field
   2. Good farmer
   3. Rural Midwestern culture

3. Messages they receive do not fit their decision making process.
Getting Middle Adopters to Engage in Soil Health

1. Get them to see the value of soil health from their current decision making process.
2. Get them to adopt an innovator mindset
Strategies for Messaging to Middle Adopters

1. Protect the ego
2. Solve problems
3. Frame the conversation
4. Speak in their terms
5. Provide clear action steps
Protecting the Ego

• Provide a means for your audience to protect their ego for past refusal to change:

  1. Acknowledge legitimate reasons for not adopting earlier.
  2. Tie to new reasons for adopting now (Note how things are different)
Solve Existing Problems

- General benefits not the same as solving problems
- Existing problems have more traction than potential benefits
- Solving problems = Avoiding risk
- Example: Solving the problem of poor drainage and N
Frame the Conversation

• Establish the history of change.
• Don’t talk cover crop costs/risks, talk returns of all agronomic practices.
Relative Risk of Agronomic Decisions for Corn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Impact on yield potential of corn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genetic traits</td>
<td>Up to 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pest control</td>
<td>Up to 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil Fertility</td>
<td>Up to 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crop Rotation</td>
<td>Up to 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid Selection</td>
<td>Up to 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting date</td>
<td>Up to 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant density</td>
<td>Up to 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvest timing</td>
<td>Up to 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cover crops</td>
<td>Up to 15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tillage</td>
<td>Up to 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row spacing</td>
<td>Up to 5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cover crops were not included in the study. Yield impact cited from SARE/CTIC survey results.
Frame the Conversation

• Don’t present cover crops as simply “to add or not”
  • Puts emphasis on new tasks and risks
  • Eliminates current risks from the frame
  • Removes the consequences of a “no” decision

• Instead: Frame the different outcomes: Ex: Weed control in corn/bean/cover system vs. corn/bean
Speak Their Language, Not Yours

Words to Avoid:
• Innovative
• New
• Trial and error
• Learning curve
• Every farm is different
• Experiment
• Try it

Use:
• “This is what we do.”
• “A key part of (weed, risk, nutrient) management.
• Easier.
• Basic steps to success
• Common
• Start simple
Be clear on the steps

- Don’t assume they know the basics.
  - Example: Chose your cover crop goals
- Provide details on the 3-5 decisions/steps:
  - Use a calendar/timetable
- Complication leads to procrastination or avoidance
- Boost self-efficacy
Recap:

1. Protect the ego
2. Solve problems
3. Frame the conversation
4. Speak in their terms
5. Provide clear action steps