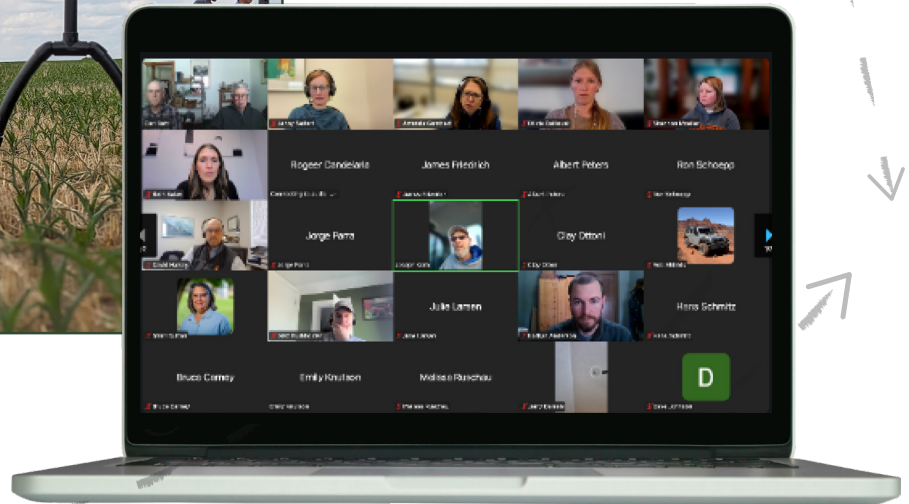


Good Idea Shop Talks

A Playbook for Virtual Farmer-to-Farmer Learning About Conservation Agriculture



Photo by Maranda Miller.



At field days, have you ever noticed that farmers often share their ideas in sideline conversations after or between the presentations? Ever wondered how to re-create those farmer-to-farmer conversations in a virtual setting?

Have you also noticed the same farmers keep showing up to your events, even though you are trying to bring in new faces, particularly of those who have not yet adopted conservation practices?

If you are curious about how to add virtual farmer engagement to your outreach repertoire or how to reach farmers who are “beyond the choir” of early adopters, Good Idea Shop Talks might be a model that can augment your programming.

This virtual farmer-to-farmer learning approach is designed to foster sideline-like conversations between farmers, attract farmers who are at the threshold of conservation practice adoption, and build a supportive community to help farmers on their conservation journeys.

Good Idea Shop Talks in a Nutshell

Good Idea Shop Talks is a virtual meet-up series for row crop and livestock producers to exchange practical ideas that can help them steward their land and protect their profitability. A multi-state team of land-grant university Extension professionals and farmer advisors developed it as part of One Good Idea, an online farmer-to-farmer learning platform about conservation practices.

Good Idea Shop Talks is research-based by design. Social science research tells us farmers prefer to learn from other farmers about conservation practices. The research also tells us that farmers who might be on the fence about adopting these practices want practical information that gives them proof a practice can make a difference on their operation.

The format of Good Idea Shop Talks is all about conversation between farmers. It takes a page from the computer programming world, adapting the peer-learning format called a hackathon. That is, farmers get together to workshop a specific problem together.



→ goodideafarm.org

One farmer kicks off the conversation by “pitching” a challenge or question they are grappling with related to a specific conservation practice or soil and water resource concern. **The pitch is not a presentation.** It is merely the farmer explaining their challenge and relevant context about their operation in five minutes or less to jump-start the conversation.

The group then troubleshoots the challenge, sharing ideas from their own experiences. Again, no formal presentations are involved; the format is purely a space for lightly facilitated conversation and information exchange between farmers.

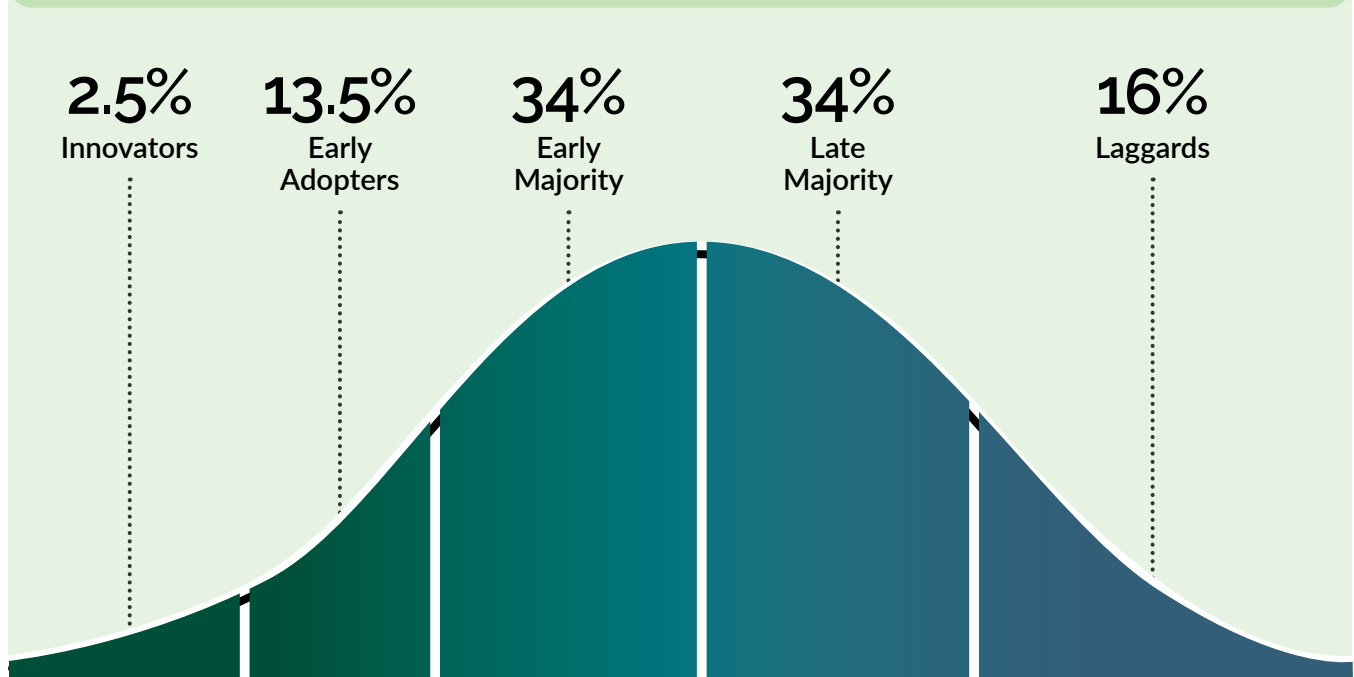
This model is easily replicable. If it sounds like something you would like to try with farmers in your community, watershed, state, or region, this guide can help you make it happen.

Key Features of Good Idea Shop Talks:

- It is designed based on what research tells us can help farmers adopt conservation practices: practical information exchange between peers.
- This is peer learning, not an expert-led presentation.
- Farmers decide the conversation topics.
- The purpose is practical problem-solving, not educational content delivery.
- The format involves very light facilitation by the organizers but is otherwise focused on organic conversation.

Reaching the Moveable Middle

The “moveable middle” refers to the segment of farmers who are not the first to adopt conservation practices but could be swayed to try one. The idea is based on a theory called Diffusion of Innovations, developed by Everett Rogers. Imagine a theoretical bell curve that segments farmers based on how quickly they adopt a new behavior. Currently, most farmers are in the bell at the curve's middle — they haven't yet incorporated conservation practices into their operations. To help them over the threshold into conservation, research shows these farmers often want practical information from peers that provides proof a practice can make a difference.



The Diffusion of Innovations can apply to any population of people, such as farmers, and to any new technology or behavior, such as conservation practices. The percentages are the estimated breakdown for how many people from a given population represent each segment. Figure source: Rogers, E.M. 2003. *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th Edition). New York: Free Press.

Is this format right for me?

The Good Idea Shop Talks format might be right for you if your goals include one or more of the following:

- Build community among farmers in your watershed, county, state, or region.
- Reach farmers “beyond the choir” of those who are already doing conservation.
- Facilitate practical information exchange and problem-solving among farmers to help them adopt and maintain conservation practices.
- Create a “farmers-first” space where farmers feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences freely.

Outcomes You Might Expect

The team who developed Good Idea Shop Talks evaluated participant outcomes from three pilot seasons of Good Idea Shop Talks through post-season surveys. Based on the results across the three seasons, here are some outcomes you might expect if you were to organize your own meet-up series.

- **Reach middle adopter farmers:** Results showed that this format can attract participation from farmers who have not yet adopted conservation practices. Among survey respondents across all three seasons, about a quarter of participants self-identified as “middle adopters,” and the number of those middle adopters grew with each season.
- **Increase willingness to adopt conservation practices:** Results showed that, overall, this format increased motivation, confidence, and willingness to adopt conservation practices among participants. Specifically, among survey respondents, 82% were more motivated to do conservation, 71% gained confidence and felt less concerned about barriers, and 81% felt more willing to experiment with conservation practices.
- **Build a community:** Results showed most participants – 78% of survey respondents – felt more connected to a conservation community because of Good Idea Shop Talks. And 90% agreed it is important to hear directly from farmers. Community building is important for maintaining social motivation and shaping social norms to do conservation practices.

Ready to organize your own version of Good Idea Shop Talks? Let's get started!

A Recipe for Success

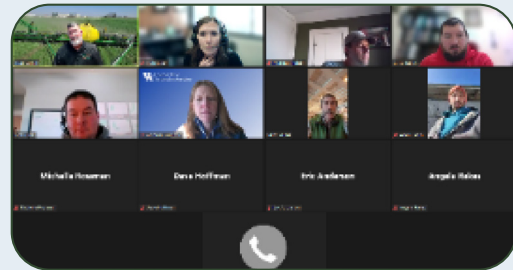
Like any recipe, you can add your own flair and don't need to follow this one exactly.



Planning Time:
at least three months



Run Time:
one hour



Key Ingredients for Success:

- Clear goals for organizing a Shop Talk series.
- A geographic region in which to target promotion to farmers.
- A virtual meeting platform for hosting the Shop Talks, such as Zoom.
- A co-facilitator. One person will serve as the “MC” to welcome participants and facilitate the discussion, and the other person will manage the chat and breakout rooms (if applicable) and provide other technical support as needed.
- A few farmers with whom you have existing relationships to help you promote and champion the Shop Talks.
- Farmers you can recruit to serve as pitchers. They could be your direct contacts or indirect contacts from the networks of your professional partners and collaborators. Over time, you should be able to recruit pitchers from among the farmers who have participated in your Shop Talks.

Optional but Recommended Ingredients:

- Partner organizations or individuals to help with promotion and pitcher recruitment (e.g., a commodity group, farmer organization, or other conservation professionals).
- An evaluation specialist to co-develop an evaluation instrument that can help you measure your success at achieving your goals.



→ goodideafarm.org



Pre-Shop Talk Preparations

→ 1. Set Dates

Schedule the Shop Talks during a time of year and time of day when the farmers you are targeting are most likely to be able to participate. Sixty minutes is the recommended length.

Tip: Consider the cadence. Good Idea Shop Talks were originally scheduled seasonally, with one set in late January/early February and another set in August, to avoid planting and harvest seasons. They were scheduled in three-week “bursts,” with one Shop Talk per week. This approach worked well. Ultimately, you should choose a cadence that meets both your audience’s needs and your own capacity.

→ 2. Set up Registration

Decide what information you need to collect from registrants to understand who is attending and include fields to gather that information in the registration form.

Tip: Consider a field where registrants indicate whether they are a farmer or non-farmer (e.g., a conservation professional or a landowner). Non-farmers might register for your Shop Talk series. Usually, they are well-meaning conservation professionals who want to listen in on what farmers have to say. While this desire is understandable, if you would like to preserve a farmers-first space, it is okay to gently dissuade registrants who are non-farmers from attending. A thoughtful email thanking them for their interest and clarifying your intent for the Shop Talks is a simple way to do so. You might also consider asking them to invite a farmer they know to attend instead.

→ 3. Recruit Pitchers

Recruit one or more pitchers for your season’s lineup. This will require tapping your network to find farmers with relevant, hackable challenges who would be willing to pitch them to a group of peers. As you move through the season, your registrants will become a pool from which you can recruit additional pitchers.

Tip: For best results, recruit your pitcher lineup before you start promoting the season, so you can promote the pitch topics from the start. Clear topics will help attract registrants. That said, pitcher recruitment can be the most challenging aspect of organizing the Shop Talks. So, if you don’t have your full lineup in advance of starting the season or your network of farmers is limited, don’t be deterred. At the very least, line up the pitcher for the first Shop Talk before promoting.

→ 4. Prep the Pitcher

Schedule a short (e.g., 20-minute) call or video chat with the pitching farmer before their Shop Talk to make sure you both are on the same page about the pitch and to run through how the Shop Talk will work. This will help the farmer feel more comfortable with the task. Remind them they do not need to make a presentation. They just need to explain their pitch and provide some context about their operation in five minutes or less.

Tip: With the pitcher, brainstorm a few “back pocket questions” that are related to their main pitch, which could serve as supplemental discussion questions in the event the conversation lulls or needs redirecting.

→ 5. Promote

Promote your Shop Talks through whatever communication channels are most appropriate for reaching your target farmers (e.g., social media, email marketing, local radio announcement, word of mouth). Be clear in your communications that the target audience for the Shop Talks is farmers to try to passively dissuade non-farmers from registering. Your promotion should include reminders to existing registrants at appropriate time intervals before the Shop Talks to help them remember to show up.

Tip: Consider seeking a co-sponsor with a wide advertising network to help you reach more farmers. Co-sponsors could also help you recruit farmers to be pitchers.



Shop Talks: The Play-by-Play

→ Here Is What a Shop Talk Looks like from the Facilitator's View:

Start the meeting: At least 10 minutes prior to the start time, the facilitators and pitcher join the virtual meeting.

Give a welcome: At start time, the lead facilitator should set the stage for the group. Include your goal for the Shop Talks, give a brief explanation of the format, and provide other housekeeping tips, such as turning on their cameras to create a more conversational atmosphere and sharing the airtime. Try to complete your welcome within five minutes.

Make the pitch: The farmer makes their pitch. The lead facilitator can introduce the farmer, but let the farmer do the talking from there. They will have five minutes or less to explain their pitch and briefly provide some context for it – e.g., relevant details about their operation and the goals they're trying to achieve.

Discuss as a whole group: Let the conversation begin! This is when participants share their ideas to help troubleshoot the pitcher's challenge. Participants can share their thoughts by just jumping in, raising their virtual "hand," or using the chat feature. Let the conversation happen organically as best you can. A little bit of silence is okay – wait seven seconds before jumping in to break the silence with a relevant prompt to the group. However, you likely will never find yourself in that situation.

Bring out the back pocket questions (if necessary): If the conversation starts to stall, use those back pocket questions to ignite a new thread. You could either stay together as a large group, if that seems to be working, or you can move into smaller breakout groups, especially if your group is particularly large (e.g., more than 25) or you think participants might speak up more in a smaller group.

Wrap it up: With about 10 minutes left, prompt the group to wrap it up. If you were in breakout groups, bring everyone back to the main room. Invite the pitcher to share one or two takeaways or "good ideas" they got from the conversation. Then invite others to share their takeaways. Finish off with thank yous and whatever other information makes sense for you – e.g., announce the pitcher and date of the next Shop Talk, invite them to sign up for your mailing list or visit your website, etc. If possible, leave room for additional conversation. You may find some participants want to keep talking beyond the wrap-up.



Photo by Maranda Miller.

→ Ready to give it a try? Please get in touch.

We'd love to hear from you if you plan to organize a set of Shop Talks for the farmers you serve. You can ask us questions during planning or just let us know how it's going. You can contact any one or more of us:

- **Jenny Seifert**
Watershed Outreach Specialist
University of Wisconsin–Madison
Division of Extension
jenny.seifert@wisc.edu
- **Amanda Gumbert**
Extension Specialist for Water Quality
University of Kentucky
Cooperative Extension Service
amanda.gumbert@uky.edu
- **Beth Baker**
Associate Extension Professor
Mississippi State University Extension Service
beth.baker@msstate.edu

Funding for Good Idea Shop Talks and this playbook was provided by the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR) and the Walton Family Foundation through the Achieving Conservation Through Targeted Information, Outreach & Networking (ACTION) Program.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming in compliance with state and federal law. You may request an interpreter, materials in an alternative language or format, or other services to make this document more accessible by contacting Jenny Seifert at jenny.seifert@wisc.edu. There is no added cost to you for these services.