

# The Dispatch

Family Business Insight for your Agriculture Company  
January 2023: Progress Through Peers

This month's Dispatch focuses on the value of peer interaction, specifically through peer groups. A peer group is an intentional, ongoing meeting with a group of respected business owners, designed to provide education and accountability. Ethan pinpoints the "aha" moment that forms the foundation of a peer group experience, while Davon clarifies the many immediate and lasting benefits of peer group interaction.

In a peer group meeting several years ago, one of the members talked about the benefits of being a part of the group by highlighting Proverbs 27:17: "**Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.**" His point was that the insight and challenges that come from respected peers, sustained by interaction over time, made him a better person. Recurring opportunities to interface were beneficial to life as a family member and business owner.

*Inspiration* to become better can come from books or blogs, podcasts or Instagram posts, motivational speakers or masterclasses. But actual *improvement* in our families, businesses, physical, or spiritual lives often comes through the wisdom and accountability of those with whom we have interpersonal relationships. As you consider the benefits of a peer group, think about how you have improved an aspect of your life from the advice or challenge given by a friend. That's the power of peers. -[Lance](#)

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## Peer Groups: The Antidote to Loneliness

[Ethan Smith](#)

We've all heard the adage "it is the people around you that count." We experience seasons in life where we pull information and encouragement from those close to us. It could be from mentors we have looked to in the past, or trusted advisors from our churches or other organizations. But what happens when the information you need concerns the profitability of your business? Or sensitive issues with your family? Or even just to energize yourself mentally before the next season rolls around? Where do you turn for such help?

This feeling of being on an island, especially in small communities, is prevalent. The isolation may be a choice or simply a product of where we live. Regardless of the circumstances, we feel alone. Whether your friends or peers in the community are seen as competition, or whether you just aren't comfortable disclosing financial information to them, there is a hesitancy in asking for input and advice. We are concerned this information could enter the coffee shop gossip or worse, local prayer chains! We have the urge to connect with people outside our circle, but a good forum is elusive.

Davon highlights the benefits to groups that she has experienced throughout her tenure. I recall after my first meeting, I had the light bulb reaction that *this* is the caliber of trust and confidence I have been searching for. Without a doubt, many of you are facing difficult decisions in your professional or personal life, but what if I told you that the most powerful outcome of a peer group is the ability to say, as C.S. Lewis did, "What, you too? I thought I was the only one!"

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## Learning *From* and *With* Your Peers

[Davon Cook](#)

I've been leading ag peer groups for a decade and have facilitated almost a hundred meetings. I've seen many examples of powerful interactions and sharing. These groups provide the opportunity to learn *from* and *with* people in similar situations. The benefits I've observed fall into five categories.

**Executive education and training.** There's no corporate training department on most farms. Peer group meetings that provide expertise, teachers, and experiences can provide needed skill and knowledge building.

**Information sharing.** This includes practical sharing about products, methods, financing, software, vendors, or anything else. It can be very specific, like learning from each other's shop and office plans, sharing product trial results, or replicating a management or compensation practice to recruit and organize a top-notch team. The peer group is a place to ask--without competitive concern and with people who are invested in your success--"How do you do X?"

**Resource sharing.** Obvious examples include group buying, shared equipment, shared employees, or farming together. Beyond that, it's been particularly satisfying to see internships for each other's next generation, or even full-time employment for a few years, to gain experience away from family.

**New ideas and 'tough love' challenges.** One farm hadn't considered recruiting a son-in-law in another industry until the peer group suggested it; ten years later, it's a success story. Some groups broach sacred cows, as in "This enterprise hasn't made money in five years...why are you still doing it?" Or, "You need to sell that vacation house if you really want the farm to survive." Some provide difficult, but valuable, perspective such as, "Be thankful for your non-technology savvy father on the planter because I'd be grateful to have mine back."

**Personal support.** Based on the relationships formed and trust earned, it's rewarding to see members support each other through the 'real life' challenges of illness, divorce, death, mental health, and much more. You are a human being managing a business; the overlap of the two is unavoidable.

I am honored to participate in these conversations and would welcome you to the table.