

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Capacity Building Strategies to Enhance Core Managerial Competencies of Farmer Producer Companies of NCR of Delhi

Neha Kumari¹, Kamini Bisht² and Seema Naberia³

1. Ph.D. Scholar,
Dept. of Ext. Edu.,
B.A.U., Sabour, Bihar
2&3. Asstt. Prof.
Dept. of Ext. Edu.,
JNLVV, Jabalpur, MP, India
Corresponding author e-mail:
nehakumaricoll97@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Capacity building of office bearers of farmer producer companies assume great importance as well managed FPOs have proved to be successful. Efficient management of FPOs has been well recognized by researchers and promoters. Hence, agencies promoting FPOs have invested time, funds and effort in designing teaching, training and capacity building strategies to inculcate essential capabilities among office bearers and board of directors. But the lecture method and exposure visit were quite inadequate. A need is felt to identify core competencies and best management practices and design innovative capacity building programmes & manuals for enabling office bearers of FPOs. This study was conducted with the objective of assessing degree of competency of office bearers of FPOs and identify the most essential competencies required for managing FPOs for better performance. An attempt was also made to specify capacity building techniques and tools for competence enhancement among office bearers. In this empirical study with ex-post facto research design, data were collected from 80 office bearers of twelve purposively selected FPOs from NCR of Delhi in March 2021. Since competency is a measure of the ability in successful accomplishment of a task, a competency inventory of 25 statements (on a five-point rating) was developed for the study. Factor analysis could extract six factors of managerial skills as core managerial competencies – planning & business development, marketing management, controlling and managing business operations, democratic leadership, and managing finances for efficient management of FPOs. To make office bearers of FPOs competent, capacity building strategies must be effective enough to promote practicing best management practices. The innovative capacity building strategies included reflective teamwork activities, simulation games, role-plays, workshop, and pilot project work to imbibe both the spirit and value of best managerial competencies among office bearers of FPOs. These results have implications for trainers and promoting agencies.

Key words: Capacity building; Efficient management of FPOs; Managerial skills.

In India, as per Agriculture Census of 2015-16, small and marginal farmers own 86.21 percent of the country's total land holdings (Govt. of India, 2019). These small farmers lack the requisite volume (both inputs and outputs) to profit from economies of scale. To help small farmers attain these objectives, farmer producer organisations (FPOs) have been introduced to raise their market standing in negotiating collectively. Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have shown to be a beacon of hope for the millions of farmers across India (Gorai and Wason, 2022). But to manage the FPO, farmers were found to lack necessary skills as mentioned in the following

studies: 'entrepreneurial spirit and cooperative spirit' (Senanayake, 2004); 'entrepreneurial and management skills' (Esham and Usmi, 2007); business leadership' and business strategy' (NABCONS, 2011); 'knowledge about running business' (Venkataraman, 2017; and 'management capabilities' (Nikam et al., 2019). All these research studies emphasized that the major challenges of FPOs was lack of professional managerial competencies among office bearers to run their FPOs efficiently.

So, capacity building and training were rated as the highest requirements by producer organisations, even higher than finance, in the Microsave study

covering seven states of India (*Microsave, 2018*). These aspects have not received the kind of attention in FPO discussions that it required (*Prasad, 2019*). A few FPO promoting agencies and NGOs have conducted one-day training courses for office bearers of FPOs (*Loganandhan, 2021*). A few state institutions including BIRD, Lucknow, NIRD, Hyderabad, IRMA, Anand made some special efforts in capacity building of FPOs. However, this is less than adequate for the kind of scale and the complex nature of the FPOs. A significant addition to the FPO ecosystem has been the introduction of a new capacity building training manual brought out by *Mascarenhas et al. (2019)* through collaborative effort of the Green Innovation Centre, Welthungerhilfe and Skill Green. The training manual released in March 2019 at Anand followed an inclusive approach drawing from existing manuals (*Prasad, 2019*).

Importance of 'competent and convincing management' has been emphasized by *Chamala and Shingi (1997)*. *SFAC (2012)* explicitly pointed out the importance to build governance structure and develop managerial capabilities. Hence, a strong need was felt to address these gaps, identify essential managerial skills and suggest appropriate mechanisms for capacity building of office bearers of FPOs. So, this study was undertaken with the objective of identifying core managerial competencies and suggesting innovative strategies for enhancing capacities of office bearers for efficiently managing their FPOs.

METHODOLOGY

The National Capital Region (NCR of Delhi) was selected purposively. Twelve farmer producer organizations functioning for more than three years from the villages of six districts, two each from Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh of NCR of Delhi were selected for the study. From each FPC, about seven office bearers were selected, adjusting the total sample size of the study up to 80. A detailed structured interview schedule was prepared and the data were collected from the farmers through personal interview, scales and case studies during February-March, 2021.

Competence is operationally defined as the degree of ability to apply knowledge and skill to accomplish a task successfully and efficiently. It was observed that management or managerial competency is not a unidimensional concept but a multi-dimensional one. As the objective of this study was to identify core

managerial competencies essential for FPO, factor analysis was used. Factor analysis was first developed by *Thurstone (1931)* to propose his multiple factor theory of intelligence and pioneered a new trend that gradually replaced the unidimensional factor in social research. In this study, factor analysis was adopted to reduce the number of variables to a small set of factors to facilitate understanding of the concept of managerial competency. It was done through three stages of rigorous procedures and scrutiny.

In the *first* stage, managerial skills and competencies required to run the farmer producer company were identified and listed. This list of managerial competencies was shown to experts and judges from the disciplines of agricultural extension, agricultural economics and agribusiness management to arrive at a final chosen list of managerial competencies that may be essential for running the farmer producer company. In the *second* stage, scale construction was done. About thirty-four self-assessment statements were written for each competency representing farming situations. These were then screened using the fourteen criteria proposed by *Edward & Kilpatrick (1948)* & *Edwards (1969)* for scale construction. A final set of twenty-five statements were selected through judging by the experts and judges for achieving clarity. A pilot survey with farmers was done for further refining the scale items. Thus, the competency inventory was made on managerial competencies to elicit response of agreement on five-point rating scale of *very little true, somewhat true, moderately true, highly true, and very highly true*, with scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Data were collected from 80 respondents (office bearers of FPOs) by recording responses on competency inventory. In the *third* stage, the statistical technique of factor analysis (with principal component analysis and varimax rotation) was done to confirm clustering of several management variables under specific core managerial competency.

The capacity building methods adopted by the promoting agencies for enhancing farmers; competencies were recorded from personal interviews and focused group discussions held with farmers, promoters and trainers. These are further ranked and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study focused on identifying core competencies for effective performance of FPOs and to suggest appropriate capacity building strategies for

farmers to learn these core managerial competencies. The results are presented here to answer three questions: how this study could identify core managerial competencies? What were the prevailing training and capacity building methods and strategies adopted by FPO promoting agencies? And what strategies can be suggested to enable the directors of FPOs adopt and practice core competencies for efficient management of FPOs?

Identification of core managerial competencies: First, an attempt was made to identify core managerial competencies required by directors of FPO in efficient management of FPOs. Confirmatory factor analysis was

Table 1. Factor loadings on identified factors depicting six managerial competencies and their clustered variables

Factors and the clustered variables	HFL
<i>Planning and business development</i>	Factor 1
Goal-clarity	.871
Business plan writing skills	.910
Shared vision for strategic plans	.896
Operational plans	.922
Ability to make short & long-term plans	.898
<i>Marketing Management</i>	Factor 2
Conflict resolution mechanisms	.820
Delegation of works with authority & responsibility	.736
Utilizing market information & market intelligence	.772
Developing marketing strategies	.764
Orientation to enable direct marketing	.774
<i>Controlling operations</i>	Factor 3
Developing control mechanisms	.809
Watching ever-changing business environment	.839
Handling uncertainties & adjusting to market forces	.805
Controlling operations in implementation of plans	.777
Constantly monitoring plan implementation	.539
<i>Financial management</i>	Factor 4
Recording income statement and balance sheet	.814
Assessing fund status regularly	.830
Concern for breakeven point in agribusiness	.709
Cash flow management for timely funds	.651
<i>Democratic leadership</i>	Factor 5
Believing values of mutual help & cooperation	.514
Commitment to whole-hearted participation	.616
Decision-making by discussion & majority vote	.763
Enabling leadership through democratic process	.779
<i>Managing business operations</i>	Factor 6
Adherence to uniform rules & policies	.750
Coordination of business operations	.775

HFL=Highest Factor Loadings

used to reduce the twenty-five management variables into six factors by clustering the related variables under independent factors or managerial competencies. The factors and the management variables with highest factor loadings are given in Table 1. The results reveal that six core competencies were identified.

The study, could find, through confirmatory factor analysis, six core managerial competencies in their order of importance: (i) competency for planning & business development, (ii) marketing management competency, (iii) competency for controlling operations, (vi) financial management competency, (V) democratic leadership competency and (vi) competency for managing the business operations.

The mean scores of core managerial competencies are given in Table 2. The mean scores obtained on the degree of competencies by the respondents were high on three competencies: planning, marketing, controlling and managing business operations. These four managerial competencies have also shown their association with perceived performance scores of FPO. The mean scores were comparatively lower on the managerial competencies of leadership and managing finances. Correlation analysis among the six competencies was done to ascertain their independent nature. As the factors need to be ideally not related with one another.

Table 2. Mean Scores of Core Competencies for managing the FPO and their correlation coefficients with Performance of FPO

Core Competencies (MOS)	Mean	S D	'r'
Competency for planning & business development (25)	18.23	4.464	0.399**
Marketing management competency (25)	17.73	4.523	0.512**
Competency for controlling operations (25)	16.69	4.043	-0.323**
Democratic leadership competency (20)	14.73	3.048	0.065 ^{NS}
Financialmanagement competency (20)	13.93	3.337	-0.084 ^{NS}
Competency for managing operations (10)	8.40	1.572	0.597**

**Significant at 0.01 level of probability;

^{NS}Not Significant; MOS=Maximum obtainable score.

Training methods adopted by trainers in training office bearers of FPOs: The training methods that were used in training courses by promoting agencies were enlisted and the responses were recorded and presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Training Methods used for training office bearers of FPOs of the study area

Training methods and strategy	No. (%)	Rank
Lecture method	80 (100.0)	I
Slideshow Talks	68 (85.00)	III
Field Exposure Visits to nearby markets	46 (57.50)	V
Field exposure visits to successful FPOs	65 (81.25)	IV
Interface with Govt. Officials	75 (93.75)	II

It has been observed that lectures, slideshow talks and exposure visits were the most popular methods of delivery. Farmers were also encouraged to participate in interface meetings with various officials. The respondents of the study got training from FPO promoting professional institutions, NGOs, KVKs and staff from banks. Some of the respondents of the study attended for two-day training at BIRD, Lucknow. NABARD and SFAC were the sponsoring agencies for these training courses. A typical training course conducted for 1 to 2 days by KVK (*Loganandhan, 2021*) covers basic concepts on such as:

- General governance and management of FPOs
- Roles and responsibilities of BODs and CEOs
- Conducting of BOD meetings and General Body meetings
- Legal/ROC compliances
- Auditing requirements of FPOs
- Various schemes / Programmes of State and Central Governments for FPOs
- Importance of aggregation on input/output business
- Recent policy / strategy of State and Central Governments
- Preparation of business plan
- Marketing strategies for FPOs
- Any other topic as per training need assessment

As can be observed from the above topics, the training courses were introductory in nature and attempted to give a broad idea on various aspects of FPOs. The time allotted for key topics such as business plan and marketing may be around a maximum 45 to 60 minutes. Training was conducted only lecture method and followed by an exposure visit to a nearby working FPO. This may not be sufficient to enhance the capabilities of directors of FPO.

Suggested capacity building methods and strategies: Different strategies were suggested for enhancing these core competencies of directors of FPOs. While interviewing directors and other farmers, a focused group discussion was conducted to enlist requisite skill

Table 4. Suggested Capacity Building Methods and Strategies for enhancing competencies of BoDs of FPOs

Training modules & methods
Workshop (for practicing business planning & problem solving)
Lectures & slideshow talks followed by E-learning modules for self-learning
Case study, critical incident technique & focused group discussion
Experiential learning modules with simulation games, role plays
Reflective Teamwork Activities (RTA) for real time processing
Field exposure visits to FPOs, markets & Interface with concerned people
<i>Strategies & action plans</i>
Handholding for 1 - 2 years for mentoring for nurturing youth
Pilot projects and apprenticeship with working FPO
Counselling & Coaching for perfecting managerial skills
Internship for on-job real time learning & practice
Institutional attachment & assignments
Market agreements with retail food chains, and infrastructure support

set for run their producer companies efficiently and to seek suggestions on ways to learn those skills. A few field observations gave some insights for amelioration, which were also incorporated. The results are given in Table 4.

Strategies for enhancing core competencies of members : Since this study could identify six core competencies for better management of FPOs, the strategies discussed here covered only those that aided in enhancing these six competencies. They were, in their order of importance: (i) competency for planning & business development, (ii) marketing management competency, (iii) competency for controlling operations, (vi) financial management competency, (V) democratic leadership competency and (vi) competency for managing the business operations.

(i) *Competency for planning & business development:* Competency for planning & business development was observed to be the most important factor associated with sustainability of FPO. This finding is supported by *Adhikri et al. (2021)*. Farmers have mastered contingency planning to evade, mitigate and manage risks involved in farming and so had higher scores on degree of competency in business plan development. But they agreed that mere lectures may not enable them to practice planning procedures. They suggested

involvement of more guidance, time and practice is necessary to master this competency, for which workshop method may be most appropriate.

Workshop mode: Mere training and teaching them through slideshows and lectures may not be sufficient. As has been understood in this study, competency is the ability to apply his or her mind to use the available knowledge and acquired skills to accomplish a task successfully and efficiently. So, this competency can be enhanced through practical work. So, it is suggested to organize a workshop, instead of a training course, to inculcate the skills and knowledge and also giving them an opportunity to work on small pilot projects.

(ii) *Marketing management competency:* The second most important competency is marketing management, which assumes significance in agri-business operations of the FPO, as through efficient marketing profits will increase. Venkatkumar et al., (2019) reported that farmers were found to go slow in acquiring the competency for marketing. Initially, the FPOs primarily deal with input purchase supply services for FPO members. But after few years their success, they tend to widen their market opportunities by entering processing and value addition. Yadav et al. (2022) reported that most of the FPOs are unaware of efficient marketing strategies for selling their produce. Generally, they sell their produce in nearby local markets without processing. Similar finding is also reported by Venkatakumar and Narayanaswamy (2022). Marketing competency can be enhanced through workshops focused to bring clarity on the following key concepts.

Marketing vis-à-vis selling: Farmers have all along been engaged in mere selling – the process of transporting huge quantities of food grains and vegetables and dumping them in large wholesale markets, without any concern for consumer's tastes and preferences. But the concept of marketing involves considering consumers' preferences and catering to their needs and tastes. This may appear as a Herculean task for farmers. But this can be learnt by farmers through survey and study of markets, processed products, prices, arrivals, supply & value chains and market intelligence.

Market survey: Farmers can be taught to conduct market surveys to find out the demand, supply, quality and prices of different products that consumers were buying. One team of members of the producer company may be entrusted with this task of conducting the market survey and keeping a watch on fluctuating

prices & arrivals, etc. Farmers should be taught about the business environment in the market ecosystem, suppliers & distributors and market forces operating in the market and understand the pitfalls in the ecosystem. This can be taught through workshop and pilot projects.

Direct marketing: Farmers gain more when they market directly to consumers, but it involved a lot of problems in transit of vegetable trucks in residential colonies, lack of permanent sale outlets or selling farmers' products directly to consumers and other problems including staffing, storage and disposal of waste, etc. The directors of Gro Free FPC of the study area of Tiggipur, North Delhi district, who were engaged in direct marketing pilot project for four months gave the following suggestions: marketing management competency can only be enhanced through such pilot projects, learning lessons and acting on the lessons learnt through engaging themselves again into direct marketing. The directors of Gro Free FPO suggested the following for attaining success in direct marketing of vegetables: recruiting regular staff, and proper training for handling and supervising direct marketing operations and monitoring quality control and efficiency.

Infrastructure support to farmers for direct marketing: Director of Gro Free FPC have suggested the following infrastructure support to enable farmers engage in pilot projects of direct marketing:

- Provision of land and building for Farmer's sale outlets in various corners of the city, either in public spaces, or residential colonies, just like Mother Dairy and Safal Booths to sell dairy products and fruits & vegetables. Sale outlets should have a backroom storage facility.
- Setting cold storage facilities for farmers' products to store unsold products for a short time of few days,
- Setting up pack houses for vegetable collection, grading and packaging
- Fabricating specially designed mobile-vegetable-sale-vehicles for encouraging unemployed rural youth in direct marketing
- Setting up of unit for packing fresh cut vegetables for value addition.
- Setting up customer service cell for direct marketing FPOs for better customer care
- Special vegetable supplies to weddings and parties through customized sales, services and support

(iii) *Competency for controlling operations:* The controlling function is important in agri-business

companies as it allows for monitoring and supervision of implementation processes of business plans of FPOs. Controlling is as important as planning as both are complementary to each other. Controlling ensures proper functioning of FPO, takes care of coordination of various business activities, arranges for working capital requirements, quality control, customer care, and maintains smooth cash flows to ensure better financial health of FPO. In the FPOs under study, farmers possessed higher degree of competency for controlling operations of FPO.

Suggested training methods: To enhance the competency for controlling operations, the office bearers of FPOs need to be given training on such managerial skills as monitoring, supervision, delegation, coordination and financial managerial functions like calculating and arranging for working capital for each operating cycle and managing cash flows for better financial discipline. The suggested training methods were reflective teamwork activity with teams of FPO directors, role play, case study, and workshop mode for practice.

(iv) Financial management competency: Financial management is the backbone of financial health of any farmer producer company. The financial discipline of the FPO directors need to be improved by adhering to regular book keeping and accounting practices and reporting the status of recoverable amounts and payment dues so that proper care is taken to manage regular cash flows in the company. It was observed in this study, respondents had low levels of competency for financial management functions. The share capital was never touched or used for any investment in marketing operations or any infrastructure development. Directors expressed a fear for using the share capital funds, lest they may end up in diminishing fund status. This fear of farmers resulted in making them too cautious in touching the share capital for any investment purposes. Even the profits gained by the company were also left unutilized as bonus or dividend was seldom distributed to members in the first few years of setting up the FPO.

Pilot projects: FPO directors need to be provided with working capital through term loans from banks and other financial institutions on a pilot project basis. Such a pilot would enable FPO directors appreciate the worth of financial management for the success and growth of their FPO. Such financial support would help in infrastructure support in procuring transport vehicle, grading and quality control equipment or for any other constructive purpose. Such a pilot project

would address the following critical issues:

Remove fears: Unfounded fears of losing share money must be removed from the minds of the office bearers of FPO. Being too cautious and hesitant may not help in business operations or in business expansion. But adequate care is needed for decision-making by consensus for taking any credit from formal financial institutions using set procedures and the loan money should be invested for good reasons by adhering to proper procedures.

Share of profit for reinvestment: Office bearers may be taught the proper procedure of setting aside a share of the profit for reinvestment in business, for marketing operations, or investment in pilot projects that would enable the FPO to test new ideas and benefit from them in future. Profits of FPO may also be judiciously used for investments and adding to the assets of FPO so that the benefits may get accrued to all the FPO members.

(v) Democratic leadership competency: Prof. A. K. Alagh (2000) and his team in their "Report of High Powered Committee for Formation and Conversion of Cooperative Business into Companies" stated principles of mutual assistance which included (i) voluntary membership, (ii) democratic governance and democratic decision-making, patronage rather than capital, (iii) equality of all members before the law and (iv) distribution of surplus based on equal membership, (v) Leadership style to enable rather than prescribe and (vi) Education of members, and (vii) Encourage professionalization and modern management. All these principles represent democratic values of treating everyone as equal before the Law, equality in participation and in sharing benefits. For achieving these cherished values, the kind of leadership style that is needed is democratic style that does not prescribe but rather that helps people to help themselves and this enabling leadership is what is needed in efficient functioning of FPOs. The respondents of the study possessed low levels of leadership competency.

Capacity Building Methods: Democratic leadership competency of directors of FPO may be enhanced through appropriate training and capacity building methods, such as workshops with role-plays, simulation games & exercises and case studies. The focus of these approaches should be on ways to imbibe value of democratic principles among all members of FPO, and better ways of conducting meetings and decision-making on democratic lines, mutual help and sharing duties and responsibilities of FPO.

Participant-Observation: The staff of resource institutions can play participant-observer role in actual meetings and guide the members of FPO to conduct meetings, invite all members to share their ideas, take initiative in sharing workloads, participate in pilot projects for mutual benefit of all members and show their commitment to the welfare of their own FPO. Elections may be conducted to change the leadership so that some new momentum gets into the farmer producer company.

(vi) Competency for managing business operations: This competency for managing business operations includes such skills as coordination, role-clarity, delegation and monitoring of agribusiness operations of FPO. These can be taught by such training approaches as workshops, experiential learning, learning-by-doing approach and by internship and institutional attachment.

Coordination: This competency for managing business essentially focused on coordination function of management of FPOs. Gro Free FPO could actually got engaged in coordinating the activities of direct marketing of vegetable. The daily activities that were coordinated were: getting indent from the sale points on a daily basis, entrusting the job of collecting vegetables, by the collection team staff, as per the indent, arranging transport to pick up vegetables and distributing them to sale outlets by the same collection team and finally answering any customer queries to provide for good customer care. Such type of coordinating processes can best be taught on-the-job through pilot projects.

Role-clarity of duties and responsibilities: Directors of FPO must be clear about their duties and responsibilities, for which regular meetings and decision-making on work allotment of works should be practiced. Responsibility and accountability must be shared clearly for getting the works organized and departmentalized for easy operations and to practice single line of command in the FPO. In addition, directors of FPO must build their teams to handle different operations of their FPO, including regular enrolment of members, developing quality products and brand image, processing and value addition, market promotion and market expansion, aggregation of farm produce for marketing, customer care, etc.

Internship and Institutional attachment: This type of distribution of work responsibilities was being practiced in some FPOs and this must be explored for

institutional attachment and internship possibilities by the new FPO, to learn this managerial competency.

Hand-holding the FPO for initial one to two years: This is again one of the best strategies, followed by SFAC with Krishak Bharti FPO of North Delhi vegetable farmers. It yielded best results as marketing arrangements were made with retail food chains and malls, who procured vegetables directly from the fields.

Thus, the best capacity building approaches included workshops, pilot projects and on-the-job training, internship, institutional attachment and handholding by the FPO promoting agencies. that will help in acquisition of core managerial competencies among the directors of FPO.

CONCLUSION

The study could establish the fact that managerial competence is multi-dimensional in nature. It could identify six core managerial competencies, through factor analysis, as essential for effective performance of FPOs. The training courses, design, content and delivery (lectures and visits) were found to be less adequate to train BODs and turn them competent enough to run the FPOs successfully. Training and capacity building methods and strategies for capacity building of directors of FPOs were suggested and their significance explained from field experiences of few FPOs, especially in handholding and pilot projects. These findings have direct implication for the FPO promoting agencies, trainers and experts to focus on designing courses and delivering through workshops, pilots and action-plans on enhancing core competencies of BODs for greater impact. Trainers need to focus on making BoDs of FPOs competent by putting more efforts on capacity building than merely enhancing knowledge and skills.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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