



Building a Culture of Conservation

Farmer to Farmer: Iowan to Iowan



The Language of Conservation



The language we use matters: It begins with you!

One April morning at a listening session, a group of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field staff from Soil and Water Conservation Districts in southwest Iowa seemed frustrated. They felt that conveying their message of conservation was ineffective when compared with competing advice to increase yields and profitability. They were conflicted between wanting to defend current practices and acknowledging that what is being done is not nearly enough to improve water and soil quality.

The frustration was clear when one gentleman interjected, “I think we need to re-language some of our conservation practices so other people will understand them and kind of relate a little bit better.”

Could “re-languaging” be a key to increasing conservation practices and improving water and soil quality in Iowa? If we change the language, can we change individual practices?



Discourse: n.

1. verbal expression in speech or writing.
2. Verbal exchange; conversation.
3. A formal and lengthy discussion of a subject, either written or spoken.



Using discourse to inspire change

Can we “re-language” our social interactions and get changes in behavior? Russian philosopher M.M. Bakhtin pointed out, “It is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words,” rather, he hears them “in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions.”

The use of language (or re-language) is better identified as *discourse*, the institutionalized way of thinking that is made real through language. Discourse defines socially acceptable speech and includes all of the ways a society uses to communicate, not just words. It directs our way of seeing issues and gives meaning to our actions.

Discourse occurs whenever two or more people are gathered together around a given idea or social issue. Past behavior is a key factor used to give meaning to any given moment. For example, asking people to recall and talk to others about a personal experience with water (fishing, swimming, catching frogs, viewing blue herons wading in shallow streams) helps them to reattach meaning to the importance of protecting water. The interpretation of any discourse is in its link with memories.

Anthropologists Mannheim and Tedlock assert, “no one can speak or write language, as we now know it, without already being situated in this world.” The same is true for non-verbal signs. In any communication event, the participants give indications of how non-verbal signs can and should be understood. The meaning of discourse rests simultaneously between speaker and listener.

Defining the ‘Good Farmer’

The power of discourse is evident in the ways marketers use messages to move people to action, using nostalgic images of the “perfect” farm to sell seed, implements and chemicals. The farmers depicted in marketing campaigns are young; healthy fields of beans or corn grow out of finely plowed, black soil. This is despite the fact that the average age of Midwestern farmers is late 50s, and uncovered, tilled soil is known to diminish water and soil quality through soil displacement. The industry uses these images because they tap into a socially acceptable discourse on farming practices.

We must negotiate and change the perception that black soil represents good farming if behaviors are to be changed. The challenge of changing perceptions is illustrated by a southeast Iowa farmer who expresses his concerns at a listening session about the appearance of a no-till field compared to a tilled field:

One of the biggest hurdles to me [in convincing others] is the way the field looks from the time the corn or beans emerge until they cover the ground. It looks like crap. When I went to no-till conferences, we were told the first thing you do when you’re done planting is go fishing, just go away for a couple weeks and then

come back later. Because you drive by a hill that’s been turned black, it’s got corn in it, the corn comes up faster, it’s darker green – now, it doesn’t mean it’s going to yield more, but it does look better; I mean, there’s no question about it...But that is when a farmer brags about his field, when it’s coming up. You don’t brag about a field in October.

This farmer’s story negotiates and changes, if ever so slightly, the pre-existing ideas, values and beliefs concerning “good” farming. The black field is part of the social discourse of farming and is socially, politically and historically framed.

Today, the agricultural industry is complex and multiple factors affect everyday land management decisions. Success is measured by greater efficiency and higher yields, yet fails to factor in environmental responses such as soil erosion, water pollution and flooding. The amount of money invested in conservation pales compared to the resources allocated to sell yields, chemicals and equipment.

The first step to “re-linguaging” conservation is to recognize the conflicts caused by the ag industry’s complexity. These conflicts can discourage discourse and lead to inactivity, reducing the capacity to change behavior. Discussions that simultaneously engage farmers and technical specialists can link science with local knowledge, increasing appropriate land management practices under risk and uncertain conditions.

How do people change?

What are the traits of those farmers and technical specialists whose discourse led to their own changed behaviors and influence over others? We asked Iowa Learning Farms partners what motivated them to become good conservationists.

The conservation ethic is inherent:

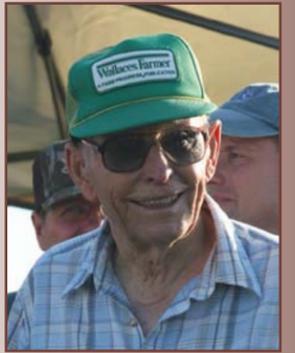
I always hated going through fields and seeing erosion channels. Maybe because I know how long it will take to get it back. Maybe because I am young and I worry what the land will be like when I am older. Once it is gone, it is gone. Even if no-till didn’t save me time, I would do it. You always hear people say this generation does something on their farm because their grandfather or father did it. I have never done anything because that is how it has always been done. I am the one that drives the conservation on the farm.

A major event took place:

I first started no-till because in spring 1979, we had a heavy rain and there was bad erosion; I figured we needed to change that. A big rain event got me thinking we needed to make changes.

Took a class or read a book:

In 1979, one of my college professors held up a book on ridge tillage. I bought that book and read it cover to cover. I came home and told Dad I was going to do no-till. My dad thought I was crazy, but I started with 10 acres. I made some mistakes, but it worked. When





Dad saw that, he started no-tilling some acres. Our neighbors thought we were crazy. This farm has really changed since then.

A change in regulation:

In 1988, the Farm Bill said we had to go with more no-till. I needed a new planter so I bought one that could do no-till. I didn't think it would work but was going to give it a try...ten years into no-till we noticed the organic matter was increasing. No-till works.

These farmers are curious, willing to take risks, creative in finding solutions and care about the land and their communities. Their personal observations and experiences reinforce their conservation ethic. They become champions of conservation, changing the discourse and, in turn, shifting social norms by managing their farms for both productivity and natural resource protection.



What is your conservation message?

Regulations and short-term incentive payments will not sustain change. In many cases, farm managers will reverse their practices as soon as regulations or monetary incentives are removed—unless the farmer learns that the new practice is advantageous. True change is inspired. Technology will play a role in the transition to a resilient agricultural system. However, changing discourse about the environment to build a Culture of Conservation is the more daunting challenge.



Currently, there is a good deal of confusion and conflict regarding conservation and its relationship to agricultural productivity. This uncertainty leads to inaction or status quo. Until watershed neighbors acknowledge and clearly articulate the problems and potential long-term consequences of reduced water and soil quality in Iowa, they will not feel the need to change.

We encourage you to evaluate the messages you are conveying to see if they are unintentionally misleading or confusing. We all need to “re-language” our conservation practices in a way that inspires others to follow. Language is a powerful tool; the words and actions we use matter.

References

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- Chapter 6: The Language of Conservation, J. Comito, M. Helmers

For more information

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