



# Seminar series supports professional development in Gippsland

## Introduction

The Winter Warmers Seminar Series provided Gippsland growers with the opportunity to learn about three key topics – Cultural Diversity and Managing a Culturally Diverse Team, Lean Principles in Agriculture, and Leveraging your People – to help further individual staff development and people skills, along with providing techniques to help businesses improve from within.

VegNET Gippsland, through Food & Fibre Gippsland, facilitated and funded The Winter Warmers Seminar Series throughout August 2023. The professional development sessions aligned strongly with VegNET Gippsland's priority area to build business capacity and a sustainable workforce in the region, including to equip businesses with processes and structures to better train and retain their workforce, and to develop a robust business structure.

A total of 14 separate businesses from across Gippsland attended the Winter Warmers Seminar Series. The Seminar Series highlighted the desire for ongoing professional development from individuals within the industry whilst also demonstrating the challenges in disseminating information and opportunities throughout larger, well established, farms.

## Tailored Program

The 3-part series was run over the quieter winter period to enable vegetable growers in Gippsland the time to engage in the professional development opportunity. The topics addressed in the series were dictated by the requirement for the seminars to be as uniquely tailored to the horticulture industry as possible, with the presenters chosen not only for their extensive knowledge on their individual topics, but also for their knowledge of and connections to Gippsland's horticulture industry.

## Session 1: Cultural Diversity and Managing a Culturally Diverse Team

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) workers are essential to the vegetable industry in Gippsland, with almost all businesses employing CaLD workers in their harvest, weeding, planting, picking and packing teams. The session was designed to help employers understand and manage CaLD workers. It focused on culture, diversity, and multiculturalism in the workplace, and how growers can be culturally aware, inclusive, and foster a good workplace culture, while improving their on-farm safety, communication, and productivity.

Two three-hour seminars were delivered by Nino Cipriani from AMES Australia on 'Cultural Diversity and Managing a Culturally Diverse Team' with a total of 19 growers and

### KEY MESSAGES

- The Winter Warmers Seminar Series, facilitated and funded by VegNET Gippsland, provided professional development opportunities for horticulture workers and businesses in Gippsland.
- At a time when vegetable and salad farms are struggling through a quiet winter with low prices and a flooded market, the Seminar Series focused on empowering participants with the knowledge, skills and tools to make improvements to their daily operations and farm processes at no – or very little – cost.
- While there are ongoing challenges to overcome, the series paved the way for a more knowledgeable and skilled workforce, and helped to foster a culture of working on your business, not just in your business.

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community health workers attending the events held at Stratford and Korumburra. Nino has previously partnered with VegNET to deliver English lessons as part of the Informed and Supported Workers (ISW) Program which was funded by Agriculture Victoria and delivered by Food & Fibre Gippsland through the VegNET Regional Development Officer.

When asked after the seminar 'On a scale of 1 to 10, has your awareness of the topic increased?' participants responded with an average score of 7. Extending on from this, participants were asked if they would likely change farm practices or advice following the cultural diversity sessions, with over 76% of the participants saying they would by doing things such as celebrating cultural backgrounds, getting involved with workers' culture, education, and using more pictures for work instructions.

## Session 2: Lean Principles in Agriculture

Session 2 was presented by Toby Cook from Lean 6 Sigma Solutions and saw 21 participants learn about cost efficiencies in farming over lunchtime sessions held at both Sale and Korumburra. Toby has significant experience with Gippsland farms, having helped multiple growers across the region achieve their Certificate IV in Agriculture.

Lean Principles was identified by one participant as "a very relevant topic and timely discussion within the current environment." Specifically, with a quiet winter, low prices and a flooded market, things are tight for Gippsland growers and one of the key benefits of the Seminar Series was that it educated participants on ways to save money and make improvements to their business at no or very little cost. For example, the Lean Principles session focused

on reducing waste at all levels within a business from transport and inventory, to production, processing and of course, time. The concept of 'what gets measured, gets managed' provides businesses with a fundamental starting point to reducing waste across their business and thereby cost.

The Lean Principles Session also highlighted the benefits of using a 'decision matrix' when prioritising projects, upgrades, or any major decision for the business. By ranking options against the business's key values, individual opinions are removed, and decisions are streamlined against the broader business' long-term goals and strategies.

Following the Lean Principles session, 90% of participants stated that they would likely change farm practices or advice following the event, with one participant commenting that they see "a direct and immediate application" for each of the tools that were discussed as part of the course.

## Session 3: Leveraging your People

Session 3, Leveraging your People, was presented by Hugh Reardon who has 17 years' experience in horticulture, nine of which were in Gippsland. Hugh's session followed on seamlessly from Lean Principles as it focused on empowering growers to maximise efficiency and productivity by applying fundamental business principles tailored specifically to managing and enhancing a farm's existing team. The session was held on a Friday afternoon in Sale and combined with networking drinks and nibbles for all attendees.

When asked 'On a scale of 1 to 10, what level of new knowledge and skills did you gain from this event?' participants' average ranking was an 8. This demonstrates that participants gained substantial levels of new knowledge and skills from the session on Leveraging your People, a topic not many would have heard of. Participants identified that one of the key learnings they took away from Session 3 was the concept of 'the internal customer'; that every department within the business should be treated as a customer. This was supported by an overwhelmingly positive response from participants when asked 'Will you likely change farm practices or advice following the event?' with 100% of participants answering yes. One participant noted that the key learning they will



'What does culture mean to you?' Participants at session 1 of the Winter Warmers Seminar Series.



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'What gets measured, gets managed.' Participants learning about Lean Principles in Agriculture.

take away from the event was the need to make clear objectives for their time, while another highlighted the notion that people are different and think differently, and that based on their experiences will also interpret interactions and communications differently.

Another area that gained significant interest was the idea of team huddles or toolbox meetings, which many might argue are increasingly becoming a 'tick and flick' exercise rather than a tool for continual improvement. Following the session, one participant commented that they plan on taking tools from the session and the other Winter Warmers sessions to help implement an effective team meeting, while another noted that the session provided tools and perspectives to suit all team environments.

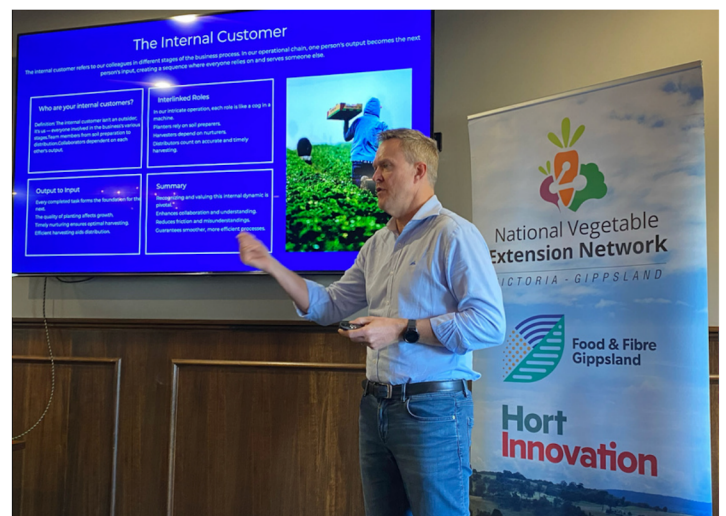
Session 3 was finished off with a captivating demonstration of the possibilities of using AI technology to create efficiencies within businesses. One participant was asked to 'host' a short toolbox meeting which was recorded on a smartphone. Within a couple of minutes, the AI technology produced a very accurate set of detailed meeting minutes which could then be emailed onto meeting attendees. While not perfect, many attendees were excited about the possible time savings the technology could bring into the future.

## Challenges and Successes

Through the Winter Warmers Seminar Series employees have received professional development opportunities to further their knowledge within the horticultural industry. Following the completion of the series, multiple

participants commented that they attended the first session on Cultural Diversity, thought it was great, so continued coming to all the sessions for both personal and professional development and because they were relevant topics. The Lean Principles in Agriculture Session was a great success, with one participant noting in their feedback that "from a broader management standpoint I think our farm will benefit day-to-day from the decision-making matrix and other tools to help with prioritisation and process." This farm went on to have their management team use the decision matrix tool to help prioritise continuous improvement projects in line with the business's core values. This demonstrates the no-cost benefits of empowering employees with the knowledge, skills, and tools to make improvements to their daily operations and farm processes.

A challenge to attendance at events such as the Winter Warmers Seminar Series is the struggle to promote events to all levels of employees across farming businesses. Senior management are often the only contact details that VegNET has within farms and as such, events can get lost in emails, be considered low priority, or declined universally for all staff. While there are ongoing struggles in disseminating information regarding events, particularly professional development opportunities to all levels of staff within farms, anecdotal stories have also emerged of attendees actively sharing their learnings with executive management teams. This helps demonstrate the value of attending such events, despite the time required away from farms, which can often be a barrier to attendance.



Presenter Hugh Reardon explaining the concept of 'the internal customer' during session 3.

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## Next Steps

The Winter Warmers Seminar Series has wrapped up for 2023 and the following recommendations were identified to support the provision of ongoing professional development opportunities for the horticulture industry across Gippsland. They include:

- Continued support from VegNET Gippsland for businesses and employees to participate in professional development opportunities. Following the overwhelmingly positive feedback for the Seminar Series, VegNET Gippsland will continue to facilitate events that help to provide participants with additional knowledge, skills and tools to support progress in the horticulture industry.
- Use social media platforms, newsletters, and networks to expand the reach of VegNET Gippsland communications to ensure as many horticulture workers as possible are aware of professional development events happening in the area. Follow 'VegNET\_Gippsland' on Instagram and Facebook.
- Encourage workers across Gippsland to share events with colleagues, and to reach out to Emily Scott, the VegNET Gippsland Regional Development Officer, to be added to the email list for VegNET Gippsland; and to suggest any speakers that would be of benefit and interest to Gippsland growers.
- Help to foster a culture that supports working on your business, not just in your business.

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