

Food and Fibre Skills Framework:

Groundspread NZ Leadership Skills Case Study



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Introduction

Background

This case study is one of a series that provide examples of practical application of the Food and Fibre Skills Framework. The Food and Fibre Skills Framework¹ has been developed to:

- Develop a common language to describe skills and knowledge, in order to support simplified, flexible qualifications and transferable skills
- Help understand which skills are relevant across many food and fibre sectors and workplaces, and which are more specialised
- Help recognise skills that are gained outside of the formal qualification system
- Enable the future proofing of food and fibre sector skills and capabilities, addressing new and emerging skills as well as current skills.

The key parts of the framework are:

- Core transferable skills – ‘skills to build skills’: learning to learn, learning for work, and learning for life. The term ‘core transferable skills’ has been deliberately chosen as these skill sets underpin the ability of individuals to gain, value, extend and transfer any skills or knowledge to different contexts.
- Core technical skills – generic skills common to most industries in the food and fibre sector
- Specialised technical skills – unique skills or knowledge for a certain industry
- Bodies of knowledge – develop superior knowledge in a particular area.

The current work focuses on the **core transferable skills**, with a [website](#) providing further detail to articulate examples of these skills. The aim of providing these examples is for the Skills Framework to be able to be used by the industry – individuals working in it, employers, and educators. It provides an approach that can be contextualised for any organisation, providing a common foundation to build the skills the industry needs to develop an engaged, effective and empowered workforce.

Purpose of the case study

This case study reports on the integration of the Skills Framework core transferable skills with another Food and Fibre CoVE initiative, the Food and Fibre Leadership System Research project, to support the development of applied leadership training for members of a niche industry association, Groundspread NZ. In particular to align with the Principles-centred Leadership Model, developed as part of that research project.² The purpose of the case study is to illustrate the practical use and applicability of these evidence-based resources for both an industry association and an education provider.

¹ [A New Approach to Learner Pathways](#) (Muka Tangata, January 2023) put forward concepts and design principles to simplify and streamline qualifications in the Food and Fibre sector, and to support increased flexibility and transferability of skills. From there, a research project co-funded by Muka Tangata and the Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (FF CoVE) investigated what type of framework would provide the desired outcomes for the sector (See research report [here](#)).

² Parsons, C.J., Ford, E.J., Williams, J. (2024). A Path to Realising Leadership Potential in Aotearoa NZ’s Food and Fibre Sector, NZ Rural Leadership Trust https://foodandfibrecove.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/A-Path-To-Realising-Leadership-Potential_15-6-24.pdf

Methodology

The researchers were observers of the development and delivery of the GroundED Leadership Programme, which ran from February 2025 to June 2025. It consisted of two full day face-to-face training sessions at beginning and end, along with three 1-hour virtual check-ins, each month between.

Research activities included:

- Discussion with the learning designer and trainer prior to the development of the programme
- Sharing and discussing the Principles-centred Leadership Model and Skills Framework resources
- Designing a pre-training evaluation based on the two frameworks
- Observing the training sessions
- Post-training survey with the participants
- Post-training debrief with the learning designer and trainer.

The industry

Groundspreading is a niche industry that plays a vital role in New Zealand's food and fibre sector.³ Also known as fertiliser or nutrient application, the industry is comprised of mainly owner-operators or small businesses, with a few larger entities. Many involved have decades of experience, but there are low levels of formal qualifications, and the workforce has an aging demographic.⁴

The industry is becoming increasingly sophisticated, with an emphasis on environmental sustainability and health and safety, including the physical and mental health of the workforce. The importance of environmental concerns is evidenced by the Spreadmark programme, established by Groundspread NZ in 1994. This is a fertiliser placement quality assurance programme, which has as its objective the placement of fertilisers in locations where they can be of the most agricultural benefit and the least environmental harm.⁵

Groundspread training

Groundspread NZ, recognising the need for formal credentialisation for the industry, began working closely with Hanga-Aro-Rau Workforce Development Council (WDC) in October 2022 to develop tailored training for the nutrient-spreading industry.⁶ While the core function of the industry is in nutrient application trucks and transport, the majority of work is on farms, so qualification development also required input from Muka Tangata WDC. To fully support this sector-straddling association, Hanga-Aro-Rau worked alongside Groundspread NZ to initiate and develop micro-credentials for their truck drivers, then connected them with Muka Tangata WDC to provide targeted support around fertiliser application. The nutrient application micro-credential developed in collaboration with Muka Tangata provides a further opportunity for industry professionals to have

³ <https://www.groundspreadnz.com/2024/06/24/raising-the-groundspread-profile-in-nz/>

⁴ <https://mukatangata.nz/spreading-success-with-new-micro-credentials-for-the-fertiliser-application-industry/>

⁵ <https://www.groundspreadnz.com/spreadmark-nz/about-spreadmark/>

⁶ While there was a National Certificate in Commercial Road Transport (Ground Spreading), this was discontinued in December 2019.

their skills recognised and also enables those entering the industry to have a clear pathway to acquire the skills they need in order to succeed.

The case study: GroundEd Leadership Programme



The partners

The industry association: Groundspread NZ

Groundspread NZ is a voluntary, member funded, not-for-profit organisation. The Association is made up of regional branches and a national council bringing members together at both a provincial and national level. The organisation has around 115 members, representing approximately 450 groundspread units.

The education provider: Education Unlimited (EU)

[Education Unlimited](#) provides solutions-focused, tailor-made training that is grounded in the workplace. They provide leadership, literacy, language and numeracy, critical skills, health and safety, and well-being programmes to a wide variety of clients.

The training initiative

Groundspread NZ's purpose for developing and promoting the training programme was to assist their members to grow their own and their workforce leadership skills, to aid changing responsibilities as their workforce demographic ages.

This year's programme builds on GroundED 2024, where 16 participants progressed through the initial leadership training programme. For GroundED 2025, alumni from 2024 were joined by 14 emerging leaders. The initial session gave the alumni the opportunity to bring the new participants up to speed with what they had learned last year. From there, new leadership essentials were worked through and discussed. Participants had the opportunity to put these concepts into practice between sessions, and to reflect back to the wider team as part of the sessions.

Findings

Design

The learning designer engaged for this project had developed GroundED 2024, and has an extensive adult education background, and a Masters in Adult Literacy. He focuses on leadership, designing and developing adult leadership courses, with a workplace focus.

His feedback after reviewing both frameworks was that he was familiar with most of the material and would naturally be incorporating elements within the GroundED leadership programme. He felt that the Leadership Model was good at a theoretical level, but for this audience, it would need to be contextualised to make it meaningful. For the Skills Framework, it was less relevant for this particular training programme, although he did note the importance of progression of core transferable skills within the development of good leaders.

The designer felt that by using the Leadership Model material, he saved some time in the design phase, as it provided a very workable structure and contextualised examples that could be the base of practical activities.

Evaluation Summary

Pre-training evaluation

Survey design: This was designed in consultation with EU and Groundspread NZ. The purpose was to gain participants' insights into their skills by using concepts and language from the two frameworks. It should be noted that Groundspread NZ also do a pre-training survey, for their own purposes.

Survey delivery: Because of low uptake of the Groundspread NZ survey, it was decided to conduct the survey at the beginning of the first workshop. This worked well, with the use of QR scanning provoking much hilarity!

Survey outcome: There were responses from all 17 participants. All questions showed a range of skills as expected with the mix of alumni and new participants. These responses aided the design of the follow-up sessions, as well as providing a baseline level of skills at the beginning of the training. The survey was repeated after the course was completed.

Post-training Evaluation

Survey Design: In order to provide comparison to the pre-training evaluation, the questions based on the framework were kept the same. It should be noted that the purpose was not to evaluate the effectiveness of the training (which Education Unlimited will assess), but to see if there were any insights about the framework and skills language.

Survey delivery: With the success of using QR code at the first workshop, this delivery method was used at the close of the second workshop, with 100% response rate.

Survey outcome: The baseline skill questions showed a positive movement in all aspects. As a test of the usefulness of the framework, two questions were paired. One used the "I can" statements to allow participants to select their skill descriptions. The other was a free text field. When respondents were asked about skills level without having the skill framework "I can" statements, the responses were far less insightful ("Good" was the typical response).

Evaluation Summary

The two frameworks provided language and concepts to easily create pre and post training evaluations. These could be used both to tailor the training programme, as well as give the trainer and learners common language to describe their skills and levels.

Delivery Observations

It is useful to split the observations into two categories – those about the participants and training programme in general, and those that concern the use of the framework concepts and resources.

General observations were that this group of participants were hugely varied in experience and demographics. They, however, did share a common world view which was practical, down-to-earth and forthright. While some may have been less disposed to speaking, once in small groups, they all shared experiences and opinions freely. This training programme developed a safe environment for

people to share their good and not-so-good experiences. It deliberately sought to create a team of future leaders through their shared participation in the programme.

Principles-centred Leadership Model

Fundamentals from the Leadership Model were incorporated into the training programme, as they naturally comprised commonly accepted best practice and leadership essentials. The Principles were explored and then contextualised for the participants. The flow of 'Understand People, Service and Accountability and Building Teams' worked really well. The content within the model is sound, and although more can always be added, there was nothing missing to design a complete training programme. The stories interwoven in the model were great examples to discuss with the participants, as they were genuine and resonated with the participants.

The evaluation survey was designed using elements from the Leadership Model. The first set of questions were based on the principles: knowing self, knowing others, building relationships, service and accountability, building teams. It asked participants to self-evaluate their skill using a 5-step Likert scale, i.e. 1 = Lots to learn, 5 = Confident). The model gave us confidence in the design of the questions, and linked it with key leadership principles.

However, the learning designer reiterated that the model is not in of itself a training programme. It requires an experienced learning designer to convert the principles into contextualised exercises for the target participants/industry. Instead, the model provides a checklist of topics and a structure and progression which can be used to ensure anyone developing a leadership programme for the Food and Fibre sector is following a proven, research-based approach.

Skills Framework

As noted above, the GroundED leadership programme was not focused on developing the Core Transferable Skills as outlined in the Skills Framework. However, the researchers were interested in testing resources from the Framework, and to understand how the core skills were interwoven into the leadership essentials.

The second set of questions in the evaluation surveys used the "I can" statements from 'Sense of Self – Staying Positive and Interacting with others – Manaakitanga' to allow participants to self-evaluate their skills. These asked participants to consider skill statements, and select from a scale of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither agree or disagree, Agree and Strongly agree. The "I can" statements across the three progressions levels in the Skills Framework (becoming independent, independent, leading), were adapted, so that the trainer could gauge the participant's range of skill levels. When only a free text box was given to allow participants to describe their skills, the majority of responses gave a one word response – "Good". That doesn't allow for much insight or engagement around the skills. There was also negative reaction to the use of Manaakitanga as a term, whereas in the pre-evaluation survey, when there were "I can" statements that explained the term, there was no push-back.

In the discussions, time and time again core skills were mentioned. It was evident to the observers that while the focus was on leadership essentials, the foundation of core skills is a pre-requisite. The Skills Framework concept and resources supports the description of skills at a far deeper level, to exposure elements that participants could focus on.

| |
|---|
| I show others how to do work I know well |
| I take responsibility for my words when working with others |
| I correct mistakes respectfully. |
| I play my part to make sure everyone is included. |
| I manage time and share resources to support completing tasks |
| I manage group discussions to reach shared decisions |
| I offer constructive feedback |
| I manage conflicts diplomatically, aiming for respectful solutions |
| I support others through mentorship or coaching |
| I ensure everyone's voice is heard and respected. |
| I mentor others to develop their skills in fostering positive relationships |

An example of this was in the second online hui, where an opening exercise was designed around the “I can” statements for ‘Interacting with Others and Participating and Contributing’. These were put on an interactive board, and participants put a sticky for whether “I am pretty good”, “I do this most of the time” or “I need to do work on this”. Within a skill set box, people’s responses varied depending on the attribute of that skill. It gave examples of the skills in a practical way and allowed the participants and trainer to have a shared understanding of the aspects of skills to focus on.

Figure 1: "I Can" statements

Delivery Feedback

“With the CoVE’s content and some programme design magic we nailed it.”

The participants’ feedback about the course was overwhelmingly positive. There were many examples of light-bulb moments, where something being explained resonated with the participant, and helped change thinking and behaviours.

Conclusion

The Food and Fibre Principles-centre Leadership Model and the Skills Framework provided a strong backbone for this training programme. The Leadership Model provides a checklist and flow to developers. The Skills Framework use of common language in its examples can more clearly articulate what a core skill means in a workplace.

The concepts and resources allow training providers or employers to select elements that fit with their requirements, knowing that both frameworks are research-based, proven models. It benefits the providers who can tap into the myriad of resources available, to reduce the content creation costs for a new programme.

The wider Food and Fibre ecosystem will benefit as these frameworks and the skills-first approach is adopted by more industries and providers. Having a shared language to describe skills increases the potential pool of talent available to all employers and increases retention through fostering the ability to have shared employer-employee skill conversations.

For society, taking a skills-first approach can create a far more inclusive and diverse workforce, because it means that people who missed out on traditional education pathways have more opportunities in the labour market. For the economy, fewer shortages of skills and labour will mean higher productivity, more innovation and higher GDP growth - plus a better sense of preparedness for the future.

[World Economic Forum](#)