

MARL Class VIII - Session 1 Willmar, Just Getting Started

Last week I completed Session 1 of the MARL program. MARL is the Minnesota Ag Rural Leadership program. The program runs two years and is affiliated with the Southwest Minnesota State University. 30 people, a diverse group from across Minnesota, are accepted into the program once every two years. One can't just sign up for the program, but rather, one needs to go through an application process. The application process consists of being nominated, three letters of recommendations, a lengthy application and an in-person interview. After these steps are completed, you wait to see if you are selected.

And I was.

It's really an honor and privilege to be selected into the MARL program. Previous participants have said only positive things about their MARL experience. *Not one single person* has said anything negative. MARL groups are referred to in numerical order based on what class they were part of.

We are Class VIII

I was truly excited for this opportunity, but at the same time really, really nervous. I knew a few people that were going to be part of Class VIII prior to the first day. But many did not.

We are a very diverse group. Diversity based on gender, age, culture, ethnic, ag background and occupation. By the end of Session 1, many of us were realizing that our world is much bigger than our own and yet, we are similar. And I believe as we continue our journey, these realizations and others will become more evident.

MARL also allows us to be in a safe environment. We help each other. We respect each other. We accept each other. We learn from each other. And we will grow and learn together. And it's these things that will *make our world and Minnesota a better place for agriculture and rural communities*.

Highlights:

While it's impractical to write every thing we did during session one (we were kept very, very busy), I will highlight a few things about the MARL Session 1 experience:

Trying to learn everybody's name and a little something about them. There are 30 of us. And we are a diverse group. Our very first project, when we arrived in Willmar, was to create a personal storyboard. We were given a poster board where we placed pictures, etc. that tells a "story" about who we are. I loved the storyboards because they gave me an insight to who the other participants are. I saw pictures of their family, their farms or businesses and their passions.

I loved the speakers! Glenn R. Leitch, President of Jennie-O Turkey Store spoke to us at the banquet Wednesday night and Jim Sieben, CEO of Nova-Tech was keynote speaker Thursday evening. Both of these businesses are located in Willmar. It was a privilege to hear these visionaries' stories and feel their aspirations for their businesses. It truly was inspiring.

Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator. The Myers Briggs is a test to determine our personality type. The test probably did not reveal any big surprises for many of us, but it did give us a better insight to ourselves. The Myers Briggs exercise gave us the tools and knowledge on how to engage with others that don't view situations as ourselves. It really does lessen the stress between individuals when you start to understand what is important to others based on their personality type.

Tours were great! On Day 1 we were allowed us to choose a tour. These tours were businesses in the Willmar area. I chose to tour DuPont Pioneer's Research facility. I was not aware of their research facility in Willmar. I am glad I toured their company because I learned specifically what they did at their facility. And we plant DuPont Pioneer seed on our farm.

On Day 2 our entire MARL group toured Nova-Tech Engineering. What the heck! I had no idea Minnesota had this gem in Willmar! The technology and innovation that is benefitting agriculture, particularly poultry, is astonishing. Nova-Tech is a Minnesota-based company our state should be very proud of. Learn more about [Nova-Tech Engineering](#) from a post I wrote recently.

Group discussions. We spent some time in groups to discuss what we felt were the most important issues facing agriculture and rural communities today and in the near future. For the most part, we all had similar answers. We want more vibrant and thriving rural communities and we need a better connection between consumers and agriculture. These were just a couple of the issues we discussed. It is these discussions that we learn from each other. Each of us comes from a different corner of the state and depending on our "world," we may look at issues a little differently than our MARL cohorts. But that's why we are there. *To learn and work together.*

The enthusiasm and positivity! By the end of the session, everybody was ready to go home to re-energize. I was exhausted. And yet, at the same time, I was also exhilarated by what I had done the past 3 days and what was yet to come. And it was these kind of comments I heard as we packed up to go home. I felt a sense of enthusiasm for the program and the journey we will embark together for the next two years.

My reflection from session one was I realize how honored and blessed I am to be a part of MARL. It's going to push me. And probably hard some days. But that's okay. We only grow as individuals if we are pushed outside our comfort zone. And that growth, for all of us, will allow us to be leaders.

And that's what it's all about.