

MARL Class VIII - In Marshall, MN - Cowboy Hats, Leadership and Crisis Communication

MARL Class VIII embarked on the city of Marshall, MN for Session 2. The very first thing I felt and saw was a more relaxed class. We are starting to get to know each other and personally, I no longer was feeling anxiety like I was the first session. During the second session our minds would wrap around emotional intelligence, we conversed with "MARL" participants from South Dakota, whom they call SDARL (pronounced SaDARL . . . don't worry - my first question of the day was "how do you pronounce SDARL?"), participated in tours, listened to speakers talk about leadership and learn about crisis communication. I think it's safe to say that none of us knew completely what this journey would entail. But . . . we are *so thankful* for this journey.

Here are some highlights:

Much of the first day we explored "[emotional intelligence](#)." Up until this class, I was not aware of what emotional intelligence was. Well, I now have a better idea. Emotional intelligence involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions. We were all required to take an on-line EQ assessment prior to our class. We were given the results on our first day along with a thorough explanation of what EQ is and what our results will tell us. I really can't say that I learned a lot from my results (helps to be around this earth for many years) but I do find this science very interesting. EQ is something that can be improved and strengthened. We will see if someone like me can improve! At the end of our class (in 18 months), we will take this assessment again to see if we have improved.

We toured AURI Laboratory, a government funded company who helps other meat/food companies develop and test new products. The great thing about this lab is there is no cost to companies who wish to use their services. What a great benefit for these type of companies residing in Minnesota.

On Thursday, we were on the bus early heading to Brookings, SD. Our agenda? We were going to meet with SDARL (South Dakota Ag And Rural Leadership) - our cohorts from South Dakota. We met at the McCrory Gardens Visitor Center, which is part of the South Dakota State University campus. The members of the SDARL group were great hosts. So fun to meet others from a different part of agriculture, but all with the same goal. Even though our groups are similar, there were some differences. As you will see from the picture, nobody wears cowboy hats to our Minnesota meetings! I also think our MARL is more diverse than SDARL. But in the end, we all want to become better leaders and improve our skill set.

While in Brookings, we listened to a dynamic speaker, [Michael Brandwein](#). Michael talked to us about leadership skills. Michael Brandwein is one of the most dynamic speakers I have ever

listened to. What a great speaker . . . and magician. Yes, you read that correctly. He incorporates some magic into his presentation. I was completely enthralled in his message. Thank goodness we were given handouts to refer to later because I was definitely on information overload. The message Michael brought to us is something I personally can use immediately. My most important takeaway? The specific techniques and skills to use when engaging and talking with others. And I can sum it up in one word - **LISTEN**. I have heard that before, but it makes so much more sense now.

Later in the day, we toured [Prairie AquaTech](#) in Brookings. Prairie AquaTech is a startup company housed in a business incubator building. They have developed a process to take soybean meal, improve it's protein level, and put it into a form (soybean meal pellets) that can be used as fish feed on fish farms initially and then possibly use it to replace fish meal in swine farms. A new building will be built for AquaTech in the very near future as they move from development to commercial use. What an innovative company! And I particularly loved seeing the excitement and enthusiasm from the employees who gave us the tour. They were so proud to work there and really excited for the future! I could really relate to this feeling as many years ago I worked for a company that was the same way. Our company was new and innovative and we were growing. Just a really fun place to work when that happens. As I went on the tour, I noticed a sign on a piece of feed processing equipment that said "[Easy Automation](#)." Loved seeing it because I live in the same town (a very small town, by the way) Easy Automation is located. I know the CEO of Easy Automation and many of the employees that work there. Very cool! The day ended with a banquet where we listened to [V.J. Smith](#). Very thought provoking and entertaining as he spoke about "Simple Choices, Big Rewards." THANK YOU!

Our last day was all about crisis communication. We received some great training on how to handle communications in a crisis from media experts. We also were given tips on how to write a letter to the editor. I could have probably used that in the past as I have written letters to the editor before but just kind of "winged it." Now I have the tools to do it properly.

All in all, MARL is so much more than I imagined. On a personal level we are being pushed into areas that are not always comfortable. We all are experiencing high-level speakers, company tours (many times we are meeting CEOs of these companies) and training. But best of all, we are *becoming friends*. We are learning more about each other. And I for one, really do appreciate learning from everyone else. There is no question that I live in a bit of a bubble here in southern Minnesota, so to hear and talk with others is really opening up my world in ag and the world.

And I am *thankful*.