



MY MEETING NOTES

Master Class on Agricultural Research Leadership and Management
Penang, Malaysia | 2–7 November 2025
Crawford Fund, Australian Council for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)



In this meeting note, Homaira Jahan Sonom reflects on her participation in the Master Class on Agricultural Research Leadership and Management, held in Penang, Malaysia, from 2–7 November 2025.

CONTEXT

I recently had the privilege of attending the *Agricultural Research Leadership and Management Master Class* organised by the Crawford Fund in Penang, Malaysia. Supported by the Australian Council for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), this week-long training brought together diverse participants from across the Asia-Pacific region—scientists, research managers, early-career professionals, and leaders working in agricultural R&D. As someone working actively in plant protection, biosecurity, market access, and agricultural trade, this Master Class was both timely and profoundly transformative for my professional journey.



This note captures my reflections, major learning insights, and the personal growth I experienced throughout the program. The training was designed in a highly interactive, participatory, and reflective manner—very different from the typical lecture-oriented workshops we often attend. There were role plays, brainstorming, group simulations, self-analysis exercises, collaborative leadership tasks, cross-country learning, and many opportunities to reflect on who we are as individuals and leaders. The experience was not only engaging but also energising, and it has significantly shaped how I think about leadership, teamwork, management, and my own growth trajectory.

CONTENT

Understanding Myself: The Starting Point of Leadership

The technical sessions began with “*Understanding Yourself*”, a session that set the tone for the entire Master Class. Through structured self-reflection tools, guided exercises, and small-group discussions, we explored our personalities, communication styles, preferences, blind spots, and the behaviours that influence our leadership capacity.

This session helped me understand why I react the way I do, how my strengths serve me—and sometimes limit me—and where I need improvement. I became more aware of my natural tendencies: where I excel, how I behave under stress, and how I can adjust my style to collaborate more effectively with colleagues, team members, and leaders.

One key learning was that *leadership begins with self-awareness*, and I realised that personal effectiveness increases when we understand our inner drivers and patterns. This simple yet powerful realisation became a central theme throughout the week.

Communication: Beyond Delivering Messages

In “*Effective Communication*”, we explored the nuances of how communication shapes team culture, trust, and collaboration. The exercises—especially the role-play scenarios—were eye-opening. They helped me see the gap between what we say and what others hear.

The facilitators emphasised that communication is not only about words; it is about clarity, tone, timing, listening, body language, and empathy. Through group activities, we practised delivering difficult messages, giving feedback, and navigating sensitive situations.

I particularly enjoyed the hands-on activities that showed how easily miscommunication can occur even with the best intentions. These sessions strengthened my confidence in approaching conversations with colleagues and superiors in a more thoughtful and structured way.

Leadership and Management: Understanding the Difference

The session on “*Concepts of Leadership and Management*” helped participants distinguish between Leadership and Management, something that often gets blurred in our daily work. Leadership is about direction, inspiration, and change, while management involves systems, planning, and execution.

We explored governance structures, organisational culture, and the social context in which agricultural systems operate. These conversations made me appreciate the complex realities we work within—especially in South Asia, where institutional environments vary, priorities shift, and resources may not always be predictable.

A fascinating aspect was reflecting on the challenges we personally face at work. Many of us resonated with issues such as navigating hierarchy, limited communication, unclear roles, and heavy workloads. The facilitators helped us analyse these issues using leadership frameworks, which made them less overwhelming and more solvable.



Participants discussing project documents during a simulation exercise.

People and Team Management: The Heart of Organisational Success

The two-part session on “*People and Team Management*” was one of the most engaging components of the Master Class. We worked in teams to analyse case scenarios, identify drivers of good and poor performance, and understand the dynamics that make teams effective.

I learned:

- how performance management systems function,
- how to encourage and motivate people,
- how to recognise team dysfunction early, and
- how to create conditions where everyone can contribute meaningfully.

This was followed by “*Performance Management in Practice*”, where we practised giving and receiving feedback, handling difficult colleagues, resolving conflicts, and—most importantly—*managing your boss*. This was particularly valuable for me, as it reminded me that managing upward is part of leadership and requires tact, timing, and strategic communication.

We also talked about what leaders should not do—micromanage, avoid conflict, suppress new ideas, or respond emotionally rather than thoughtfully. These discussions helped me reflect deeply on what sort of leader I aspire to be.

Collaboration Across Borders: A Lesson in Collective Effort

The session on “*Building Collaboration Across Agencies and Borders*” was a highlight because it offered a regional perspective. We explored:

- theories of change,
- how collaboration strengthens agricultural systems,
- why significant challenges require multi-country and multi-agency partnerships, and
- how communication, clarity, and complementary strengths support cross-border efforts.

As participants came from many countries, our group discussions naturally reflected the diversity of our systems. We identified regional opportunities for collaboration in areas like climate adaptation, food safety, digital agriculture, biosecurity, and market access. The cross-country networking that took place both during and outside the sessions was invaluable. I left with new contacts, new friendships, and renewed motivation to collaborate on future projects.



Participants engaging in role play on navigating and solving conflict

Project Management: Building Skills for Implementation

Practical project management was covered in detail—from designing logic models to planning activities, identifying KPIs, and building a functional team. The facilitators emphasised that good project management is not just technical; it is about people, systems, communication, and adaptability.

I particularly valued the discussion on *inheriting a team* versus *building a team*. Many of us have experienced joining ongoing projects, and the tools shared during this session will help me navigate these situations more strategically.

Evaluation and Impact: Ensuring We Deliver Value

The session on “*Evaluation and Research Impact*” showed us how planning for impact must begin at the design stage of a project, not at the end. We explored:

- when to plan an evaluation,
- how to write clear objectives,
- how to set KPIs, and
- how to measure outcomes meaningfully.

This was highly relevant to my work in agricultural trade and biosecurity, where evidence-based decision-making is essential.

Leadership Under Adversity

The session on “*Leading in the Face of Adversity*” touched all of us. We discussed disruptions like funding cuts, institutional changes, AI advancements, and the complexities of fostering careers in agriculture. This was followed by group work on *managing complex environments*, including matrix structures, intergenerational workplaces, and cross-cultural teams. These discussions helped me understand the challenges leaders face in rapidly changing systems and how to remain adaptive, resilient, and supportive of others.

Personal Productivity and Time Management

The session on “*Personal Productivity Hacks*” offered practical advice on managing tasks, improving systems, and making decisions more effectively. This flowed into the session on “*Managing Your Time and Priorities*”, where we learned techniques to handle competing priorities and stay technically competent while fulfilling leadership responsibilities.

I found the emphasis on managing meetings—preparation, facilitation, time allocation, and follow-up is beneficial, given how much time meetings occupy in organisational life.



Sharing the results of the group work

Building a Virtual Team: Lessons for Modern Workplaces

The final thematic session on “*Virtual Teams and Communications*” addressed the growing need to manage distributed teams. We discussed selecting appropriate communication channels, maintaining engagement online, and building a virtual leadership culture. With increasing digital collaboration across borders, this session felt very relevant to my daily work.

Developing My Personal Action Plan

One of the most meaningful exercises was crafting my *Plan of Action*, which we developed after reflecting on the entire training. This plan includes:

- areas where I want to grow,
- habits I want to change,
- leadership strengths I will build on, and
- how I will apply new skills in my organisation.

This exercise helped me commit to actionable steps rather than just walk away with inspiration.

A PERSONAL NOTE

What made the Master Class truly special was its warmth, energy, and participatory approach. Every session included interactive activities—role plays, “parking lot” discussions, group reflections, simulations, team challenges, and moments of personal introspection. These approaches kept us engaged and made learning enjoyable and memorable.

Evenings over dinner allowed deep conversations with facilitators and fellow participants. I learned as much from these informal interactions as from the sessions themselves. The entire week felt like being part of a community—one that cared about agricultural leadership, regional cooperation, and professional growth.

I returned home not only with new knowledge and skills, but also with a stronger sense of who I am as a professional, how I want to lead, and how I can contribute more meaningfully to agricultural development in my region.

END NOTE

The Master Class reminded me that leadership is not about position—it is about behaviour, self-awareness, and influence. It is about listening more deeply, communicating more clearly, collaborating more intentionally, and managing oneself before managing others.

The experience reaffirmed my commitment to strengthening agricultural innovation, improving biosecurity and market access, and working across borders for a more resilient agricultural future. I am grateful to the Crawford Fund, ACIAR, the facilitators, my fellow participants, and my organisation, APAARI, for enabling me to be part of this transformative learning journey.

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