



CLIMATE CHANGE

KEY POINTS IN COMMUNICATION

Prepared for the Sustainable Peterborough *Climate Change Working Group* from a scan of academic literature

CLIMATE CHANGE

KEY POINTS IN COMMUNICATION

THE FIRST AND SECOND WAVES

During the first wave of the past few decades, the *deficit model* was the predominant mode of communication of climate change. According to the *deficit model*, lack of effective response was assumed to be due to a need for *additional information* (Moser & Dilling, 2007 p. 495). The problem is that the *deficit model* did not result in effective response, even where there was high concern about climate change (Stoknes, 2014 p. 161).

A second wave of climate change communication is emerging that draws on insights from the field of the social sciences, including human psychology. There is now response to the discrepancy between *concern* about climate change, and *action*. Key points from academic literature are quoted or paraphrased below, and grouped in the following sections: **Successful Psychological Strategies; Reaching Audiences Effectively;** and **Fostering Social Change.**

SUCCESSFUL PSYCHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

Five psychological strategies have been identified for successful communication of climate change. These behavioral strategies help move from the cognitive *deficit* model to the *psychological involvement and interaction* model (Adapted from Stoknes, 2014):

1. Use the power of social norms and peer pressure. This strengthens belonging and collective purpose.
2. Supportive: Find deep framings that are positive and support action. Use metaphors and language to turn loss-aversion from a barrier *into* gains, environmental care, and parts of solutions.
3. Simple: Make it easy and convenient to act in a climate-friendly manner.
4. Story: Use the power of storytelling to tell and create new stories of opportunity and attractive futures that appeal across the political spectrum.
5. Signals: Use meaningful indicators and metrics that monitor societal progress.

INSPIRE...

“The idea of climate change should be used to rethink and renegotiate our wider social goals about how and why we live on this planet. We need to harness climate change to give new expression to some of the irreducible and intrinsic human values that are too easily crowded out—our desires for personal growth and self-determination, for creative experimentation, for relationship and for community. In this way, climate change can be assimilated into our future. If we harness the full array of human sciences, artistic and spiritual endeavours, and our civic and political pursuits we can reconcile climate change with our human and social evolution, with our instinct for justice and with our endurance on this planet.” (Hulme, 2009 pp. 361-362)

REACHING AUDIENCES EFFECTIVELY

In the second wave of climate change communication, insights from multidisciplinary research inform how climate change communication with audiences can be shaped and carried out for effective public engagement (Adapted from Moser & Dilling, 2007, 2011; Moser, 2007).

1. **Know who you are trying to reach:** Identify the audience with decision-making power or influence over an intended outreach goal. This is critical to success.
2. **Audience knowledge:** When the relevant audience is identified, find out what people care about, what they value and how they think about climate change and related matters (e.g. energy, environment). Solid audience knowledge reveals what issues and language resonate with individuals and groups, which values are important, what aspirations they have (as parents, as professionals), as well as any preexisting knowledge of the climate change issue, common mental models, and possible misconceptions.
3. **More audience knowledge:** Audiences differ by the information channels they use, what messengers are credible to them, and what challenges they may face in implementing any desired action.
4. **Framing the issue:** Identify the best ways to frame an issue. Framing—through words, images, tone of voice, messengers, and other signals—provides essential context for people to make sense of an issue; it triggers a cascade of responses and can prime an audience for action or not. Frame climate change and solutions in ways that link them to more salient (local) issues people consistently care about—the economy, their children, their health and safety.
5. **Cultural world-view:** Research suggests that individuals view incoming information through a filter that is coloured by their general beliefs about society, the world, and right or wrong. Incoming information may be rejected upon very quick (intuitive) judgement if it evokes some kind of threat to the listener's sense of self, i.e. by challenging deeply held beliefs of the self or the group that the individual most identifies with. There is also *confirmation bias*, whereby people tend to selectively hear and collect evidence that supports their beliefs and underlying values. People will maintain their sense of self and identity before changing an environmentally damaging behaviour, *unless* the new behaviour is consistent with whom they want to be in the world.
6. **Messengers:** Those who convey the message are part of the framing. It is important that the messenger is consistent with the way the message is framed or else the importance and credibility of the message is undermined. Messengers must be trusted, knowledgeable, and trigger a frame that opens a door for the message, e.g. religious leaders for framing of climate change as a moral issue, a business person for framing as an economic issue, military experts for framing as a security issue, 'hip' celebrities for teenagers or teenagers already active in the climate movement may be most effective.
7. **Behaviour change or policy action:** For communication to be effective in leading to active engagement, it must be supported by policy, economic, and infrastructure changes that allow concerns and good intentions to be realized. Communication for social change must consist of efforts to increase the motivation to make a change and help to lower the barriers to realizing it. People want to know what they can do, that they are able to do it, and that others are doing their share as well.

8. **Two-way engagement:** Shift from one-way “message delivery” to more engaging, dialogic forms of communicating. Dialogue offers a forum in which value differences, conflicts, misunderstandings, and the communal visioning, and search for solutions can be addressed directly. One-on-one and small-group communication in social networks is essential for knowledge exchange, resolution of differences, social learning, diffusion of innovation, persuasion, and mutual support. People in a democratic society are best served by actively engaging with an issue, making their voices and values heard, and contributing to the formulation of societal responses. Imposing a deluge of scientific facts and technocratic solutions on a populace without discussion and awareness of risks and choices is likely to lead to resistance and opposition.
9. **Face-to-face communication:** Generally, while mass media are important for agenda-setting, face-to-face communication is more persuasive. Information passed along through media-ted channels is often ‘consumed’ without great attention, quickly discarded or ignored. Face-to-face communication is more personal; allows non-verbal cues to gauge reception and response; allows for dialogue to emerge; and trust between individuals participating in a two-way exchange goes a long way toward engaging and convincing someone. Different audiences relate to distinct frames, goals, messages, and messengers, and have preferences as to the communication channels they frequent. Choosing the appropriate channel with a tailored message is more likely to reach and actively engage a specific audience.
10. **Emotional motivation to act:** At an early stage, many people do not realize the fearful aspects of the impacts of climate change and what society may choose to do about it, so they lack emotional motivation to act on climate change. These people need first to accept that they are vulnerable to the risks of climate change and thus need messages that increase their personal sense of vulnerability. However, in order to avoid counterproductive responses, any fear appeals must be coupled with constructive information and support to reduce the danger.
11. **Fostering true hope:** People need a minimum amount of information, a realistic assessment of the threat or diagnosis, a sense of personal control over their circumstances, a clear goal, an understanding of the strategies to reach that goal (including possible setbacks along the way), a sense of support, and frequent feedback that allows them to see that they are moving in the right direction. Importantly, fostering true hope is not erasing fears or doubts, but facing reality full on, while banking on promising strategies and uncertainty. Provide a sense of empowerment, clear instructions on what to do, and help people to see themselves on the path of reaching the goal.
12. **Creating a shared vision:** Provide fora where people can engage in the visioning process. A grand positive vision may well be something that no one creates but eventually emerges out of a myriad of images, stories, and on-the-ground efforts in developing alternatives (lifestyles, technologies, behaviours, environments, communities, institutions, etc.). Point to the many positive efforts under way and avoid doomsday scenarios. Moving the conversation beyond physical science enables discussion of solutions, values, and visions of the future, for a more appropriate and effective step towards social action on climate.

FOSTERING SOCIAL CHANGE

(Adapted from Moser & Dilling, 2007, 2011; Moser, 2007)

1. **For social change the questions are:** What works for the present situation? Where can change happen? And who are the necessary change agents? Help people find higher common ground and identify ways to meet their diverse goals so as to help reduce or at least not increase their emissions impact.
2. **Policy and political changes:** Small-scale actions are critical for the emergence and spread of innovation and social learning. Early and relatively easy “solutions” are ways to get a first commitment, on which bigger commitments can be built. The small-scale actions and successes slowly change the political climate, which in turn enables large policy and political changes. Policy changes at lower levels of government can also create direct or indirect pressure on higher levels of government to level the regulatory playing field.
3. **Small and large changes:** Social change happens on a variety of temporal scales. The deeper the sought social change, the longer it will take to bring about. Both small and larger changes are needed. Quick, superficial changes may be necessary to ready a society for larger, deeper changes when the window of opportunity suddenly opens. However, it is important not to neglect the larger, deeper, more difficult changes, such as our political, electoral, and education systems. Sometimes the most ambitious goals are excellent motivators.
4. **Open and flexible at this stage:** None of us knows on which pathway societal transformation will eventually converge. Novel ideas, innovations, and momentum-building, rather than premature selection and channeling, are required at this stage. Any decisions or actions that lock us in, rather than open opportunities and maintain flexibility (ranging from the building of power plants to how we educate our children) should be assessed very carefully, conscious of their long-term impact on climate and society.

Bibliography

- Hulme, M. (2009). *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (p. 392). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser, S. C. (2007). More bad news: the risk of neglecting emotional responses to climate change information. In S. C. Moser & L. Dilling (Eds.), *Creating a climate for change: communicating climate change and facilitating social change* (pp. 64–80). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser, S. C., & Dilling, L. (2007). Toward the social tipping point: creating a climate for change. In S. C. Moser & L. Dilling (Eds.), *Creating a climate for change: communicating climate change and facilitating social change* (pp. 491–516). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser, S. C., & Dilling, L. (2011). Communicating Climate Change: Closing the Science-Action Gap. In J. S. Dryzek, R. B. Norgaard, & D. Schlosberg (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (pp. 161–174). Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stoknes, P. E. (2014). Rethinking climate communications and the “psychological climate paradox.” *Energy Research & Social Science, 1*, 161–170. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2014.03.007