

'Being The Change' For Climate Change Leadership

PENNY WALKER



Tackling huge global challenges like climate change needs leaders at all levels of society. These leaders will find their own impacts scrutinised by those they attempt to lead. From time to time they may also feel uncomfortable tensions in their efforts to reduce their own 'carbon footprint'. Here I describe a workshop exercise which explores the congruence between participants' individual environmental impacts and their role as aspiring leaders in the drive to avoid dangerous man-made climate change.

KEYWORDS: Climate change, sustainable development, leadership, congruence, footprint, leading change

Introduction—climate change and congruence

"Where theory and practice can meet together and agree, there is congruence." Judith Harron. (Harron, 1996)

Industrialised nations must cut their carbon dioxide emissions by 90% by 2050 to avoid runaway climate change (Bows et al, 2006). Emissions from industrialising countries like China and India are, however, growing, as are those in Europe and North America (Environment California Research and Policy Centre, 2007). With trends and destination so far apart, change leaders are in uncharted territory. Climate change leaders do not necessarily have structural power. They may show leadership from any position in society. We really need these emerging potential leaders, and we need them to be effective and resilient.

One aspect of leading change is congruence. As Gandhi said, "...we must be the change we want to see in the world".

A typical response to climate change leaders is an aggressive judgement of their own climate misdemeanours (Treehugger, 2006; Lynas, 2006; I Count, 2007; BBC, 2007). Al Gore and Prince Charles have been criticised for flying and living lavishly. International conferences on climate change are routinely lampooned for generating air travel, as was Live Earth (conferences and concerts on other topics attract less criticism).

Congruence and leadership

Argyris and Schön showed that people have at least two distinct 'theories of action':

- **Espoused theory**—the world view and values people believe their behaviour is based on.

- **Theory-in-use**—the world view and values implied by their behaviour, or the maps they use to take action.

According to Argyris and Schön, people are often unaware of their theories-in-use, when they are different to their espoused theories (Anderson, 1997). But other people spot the difference.

Leaders of change need to understand their personal congruence, or lack of it, and work out for themselves how to manage it to be more effective. The degree of congruence has an impact on the people the change leader is trying to influence (for a more detailed exploration, see Walker, 2006).

High congruence (i.e. low environmental impact) has the positive effect of leading by example, and showing what's possible. 'Followers' will be more likely to trust the leader if a leader's behaviour is congruent with their espoused theory. Taking congruence too far also has its pitfalls, as the leader may be seen as eccentric, and impossible to emulate. For example, Mayer Hillman's stance may be seen as too extreme to be followed—the UK-based transport and climate expert has given up flying. According to Lynas (2006) he "recently refused, albeit after much soul-searching, to visit New York to attend his son's wedding, and is reconciled to perhaps never meeting his new grandchild".

Low congruence (i.e. high environmental impact) has the negative effect of implying hypocrisy, insincerity and disempowerment. 'If even you can't do it, how can I expect to?' It can have the positive effect of creating a relationship with others who are incongruent: 'they are like me, not always succeeding but still trying to do the right thing'. This may lead to opportunities to work together to 'do better'.

More potential implications are explored in Marshall (2001) and Ballard (2005).

If the aspiring leader is able to reflect on their own degree of (in)congruence this may lead to some helpful outcomes in understanding, modelling and confidence.

- **Understanding:** increased awareness of what prevents their own behaviour changing, and what helps it to change, gives the leader

greater understanding of how this might be for other people.

- **Modelling:** demonstrating a willingness to enquire into their incongruence can increase credibility, and encourage more imaginative thinking by others.
- **Confidence:** a high degree of incongruence can lead to self-doubt and defeatism. This low morale can be avoided by seeing incongruence as a phenomenon to be curious about, rather than as a failure.

Being an incongruent leader

What is it like to be a climate change leader with a large carbon footprint? How can such people manage the relationship between their public stance on climate change, and their personal impacts?

The workshop session described here was held during a week-long residential programme organised by Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD International). The author designed and facilitated this session, with support from Lead International staff including Edward Kellow, Fernando Monteiro Da Cunha and Miranda Morgan. Our half-day session was designed to come towards the end of a week-long residential workshop for people who are trying to show leadership on climate change. The eighteen participants were drawn from Western Europe, North and South America, and emerging economies from the former Soviet Union. Their organisations included large and small NGOs, government bodies, and businesses of different sizes. Some have specific responsibilities for sustainable development in their work; others were on the programme despite, rather than because of, their day jobs.

The aims of the session were to:

- Explore people's values and behaviour in relation to climate change.
 - Reflect on what it means to 'walk the talk'.
 - Think about what a 'great leader' would do.
- Reflect on personal responses.
- Identify personal action points.

Step one—how (in)congruent are you?

We invited workshop participants to use an on-line ‘ecological footprint’ calculator, called My Footprint (Redefining Progress, 2007). This multiple-choice questionnaire takes users’ answers and produces a single quasi-objective figure for their environmental impact. The result is expressed like this: “If everybody lived like you, we would need X planets.” The result is absolute: if the result is more than one, the lifestyle is unsustainable—the user is living their life in a way which takes more than their equitable share of environmental resources. The result is also comparative: users can see which of them has the largest or smallest environmental impact.

Participants were asked to keep a note of their result which was not revealed before the workshop: we wanted the group members to build a level of trust before asking them to share.

Step two—sharing

The group was invited to form a line in order of their results (see what I mean in Figure 1). Not everyone had results to share so some people’s impacts were open to scrutiny by other people whose impacts were unknown—a common situation in the real world.

Having lined up, people were asked to say what they observed in the overall pattern of the results, and what they felt about their own position in the line. The observers were also given the opportunity to talk about what they saw, and how they felt about their own position as observers.

The highest result was six (if everyone lived like that person, we would need six planet Earths to support the current human population). The lowest was 1.2. This is a dramatic spread, and the lowest impact is still higher than ‘sustainable’—because of course there is only one planet Earth.

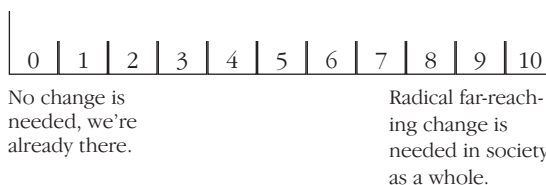
Discussion threw up interesting themes, which also occur in other situations where people’s environmental impact is scrutinised:

- Putting the responsibility for the impact elsewhere—blaming circumstances.

- Criticising or challenging the details of the analysis—questioning the assumptions built into the tool. This criticism persisted, even when the conversation had moved on to examining the relationship between personal impact and climate change leadership.
- Putting themselves in the position of observers or commentators rather than participants.
- Being satisfied with a ‘good’ relative performance.
- Being shocked and expressing unhappiness at the overall ‘poor’ performance—that even the ‘best’ was still in absolute terms unsustainable.

Step three—what do you believe about climate change?

The participants identified themselves as understanding climate change issues, accepting that man-made climate change is happening and that ‘something should be done’. The session did not aim to reinforce or question this. Instead, we explored beliefs about the scale of response needed. We invited participants, in pairs, to briefly discuss and decide their individual response to this question: *To respond adequately to the challenge of climate change, what scale of societal change is needed?*



(Since the workshop, opinion polling for HSBC has explored similar questions in nine countries. According to this research, Western Europeans are the most pessimistic about the possibility of stopping climate change. Indians and Chinese people are the most optimistic (HSBC, 2007).)

Step four—mapping congruence

Having now got two scales (how much change is needed in society, and personal environmental footprint), we invited participants to plot their results on a simple matrix, using dark sticky dots.

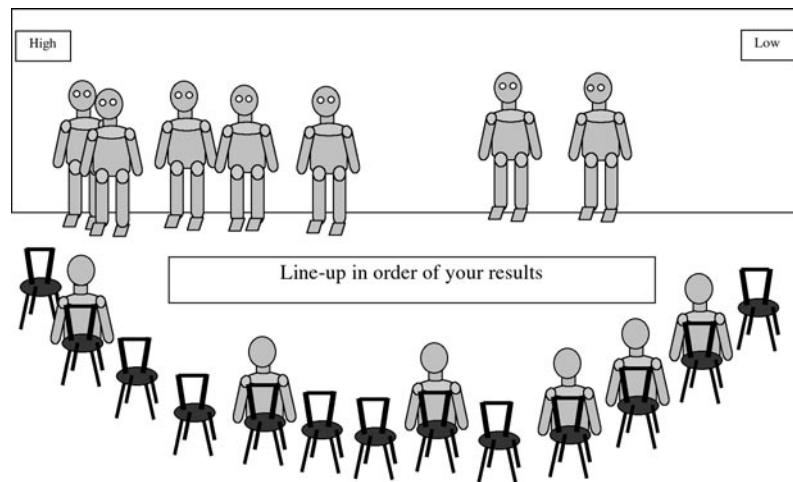


Figure 1: "Line up in order of your results."

The results are shown in figure 2.

Those people without footprint results were nonetheless very engaged, and requested to guess their impacts and put their results on the matrix too (light dots). During the mid-morning break, some people accessed the internet and completed the questionnaire so that they could add their results to the matrix.

People discussed the overall pattern of dots:

- On the 'societal change' scale, no-one scored the scale of change needed as below 5.
- Many dots were arranged along a diagonal line, with those with higher impacts thinking more change is needed. These people were not justifying their high impacts by claiming that change isn't needed.
- One person explained that they had, over the previous year, consciously worked to reduce their footprint. This had been successful and felt quite easy to do—so this person consequently had a relatively low footprint score and felt less radical change was needed (because though society hadn't changed much they had managed to reduce their personal footprint).
- There was a range of emotional responses mentioned (hope, despair) and their more analytical counterparts (optimism, pessimism), leading to a conversation about the appropriate attitude of a leader: should leaders trust that it is possible to solve the problem? Does a pessimist make a poor leader?
- A seeming paradox was identified: that because leaders need to travel to communi-

cate with each other and the people they need to influence, they have a high environmental impact. Or is this just a story we tell ourselves to justify our impacts?

Step six—leaders' stories

The group then came up with a wide-ranging list of mini-stories that people might tell about their (in)congruence, and identified from within that list, stories which climate change leaders might reasonably tell. The leaders' stories were:

- "I am human not self-righteous."
- "I am a citizen, part of the society I live in."
- "I have a certain job, it requires travelling."
- "It's not difficult—just do it."
- "I'm offsetting my emissions by giving lectures on Sustainable Development."
- "I can create awareness in my country with my medium impact."

Small groups took one of these statements each and worked up creative presentations sharing the strong arguments in favour of their assigned story.

Step seven—what would a 'great leader' do?

After sharing their presentations around 'walking the talk', a solutions focus exercise was used (Jackson and McKergow, 2007). The group as a whole made suggestions about what a great leader would do. Some of the points included:

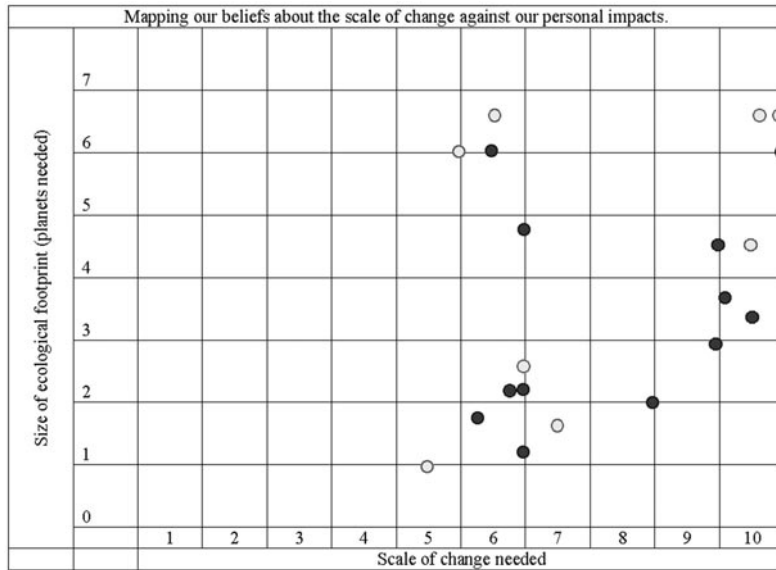


Figure 2: Workshop matrix mapping ecological footprints.

- Starting with themselves: leading by example with (small) changes in their own life.
- Acknowledging inconsistencies but not shying away from the challenge.
- Developing innovative responses to solving the paradoxes. For example, when their job obliges them to fly, make the most of opportunities for face-to-face communication.
- Avoiding fear—inspire and be positive, whilst being clear and honest about the scale of the challenge.

People were invited to envisage themselves as a great climate change leader, and score themselves on a scale of 1–10, in relation to the vision. In pairs, people coached each other using future-focused positive questions (some suggestions were provided) (Walker, 2006b).

Outcomes

We didn't need to use this session to examine technical or political aspects of climate change solutions. Instead, the aim was to increase people's capacity to be effective leaders of change over the long term, through experimenting with different ways of seeing their probable incongruence. Through examining incongruence as an interesting phenomenon (rather than judging people's impact) we gave these aspiring leaders a safe opportunity to reflect and challenge each other without defensiveness. These conversa-

tions enabled them to consider the explanations (and 'excuses') for leaders and would-be leaders with personal impacts of all sizes.

Approximately three months later, feedback was collected on outcomes and reflections. Everyone who gave feedback reported that they had made some changes to reduce their carbon footprint. Some had done this at work, others outside of work.

A: "I do think that some of us are in a position to influence our organisation and colleagues by introducing better ways of doing things."

B: "As a direct result of discussions from that session, I lobbied for clearer internal policy in my organisation around transport for work purposes."

D: "I have started to eat less meat. ... Other items are difficult to change for me since I live in a big city in an apartment that I have limited ownership over, so I saw the food item as something I had biggest control over to make changes."

E: The session "... raised a very important issue, very true in my case: knowing (i.e. not forgetting) the theory behind my actions. ... I assumed I had the perfect congruence between my actions and my own person. Having a closer look again I'm convinced that routine had set in, and some actions (theory-in-use) which would be incompatible with my theory started creeping in. I'm now going back to be the role model for my home on recycling nearly everything! Many challenges remain ... but being aware of these in addition to what I want to do (both in theory and in action) will help me."

Some reflected on the difficulties of walking the talk, as a leader. Others on the importance of doing so.

A: "Well, being a leader or not, we all have our professional obligations and only limited means of truly influencing the way we are embedded in a system. Even a leader in the field of climate change has responsibilities which don't make him look good in terms of his carbon footprint."

C: "LEAD had us thinking around seven facets of leadership that they had identified. One of these was one's own personal footprint. I do think (and increasingly so) that anyone who wants to lead on these issues needs to demonstrate that they are at least trying to address their own personal footprint."

And a final challenge to all of us:

C: "One thing that has remained with me is how difficult some people found it to accept as an approach and they wanted to question the method rather than accept that—however flawed the instrument—none of us were living 'one planet' lives and we all needed to make changes."

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Penny Walker is an independent consultant working with clients to help them learn about sustainable development, and make changes at all levels to bring it about. Clients include Greenpeace, ICI and the UK Sustainable Development Commission. A Chartered Environmentalist and member of the International Association of Facilitators, she is the author of *Change Management for Sustainable Development—a Workbook* and numerous articles under the 'engaging people' banner for The Environmentalist magazine. She is a regular contributor to academic courses for professionals in the field, including the Post-Graduate Certificate in Sustainable Business run by the University of Cambridge's Programme for Industry. www.penny-walker.co.uk