The Workshop

How to Talk About
Climate Change
A Short Guide
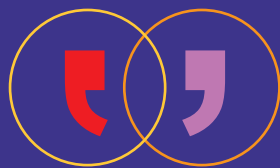
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About this toolkit

**This toolkit is based on** research conducted by The Workshop on behalf of Oxfam New Zealand.

It is designed for people working to achieve meaningful climate action.

Its purpose is to help us use more-effective strategies to create hope, improve people's understanding of the causes and solutions of climate change and motivate people to act in meaningful ways.

Components of evidence-led communication

At The Workshop, we have developed a framework for communicating research and science and inspiring action in relation to the big issues of the world.

This draws on theoretical and applied research undertaken by many people across multiple disciplines. We use this framework to discuss our findings on climate action.
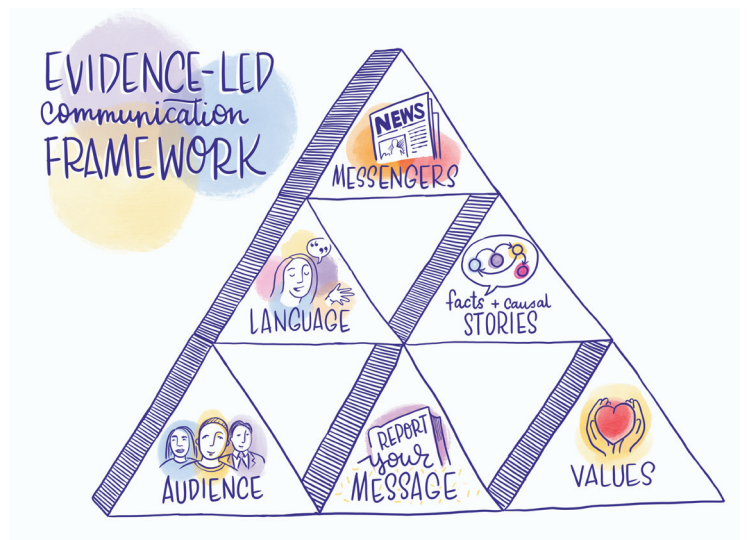
Why is this hard?

Many people have spent a lot of time and energy trying to motivate others to take effective collective action on climate. It has proven to be challenging. Even where we've seen levels of public awareness of and concern about climate change going up, we haven't necessarily seen a matching increase in effective collective action.

Why is it SO hard?

Both our in-built cognitive processes and our information environment can conspire to narrow our thinking about complex issues such as climate change. As experts who communicate on climate change, we also play our part.

➜ Our **fast-thinking brain** uses many shortcuts to cope with the vast amount of information in the world and protect our existing beliefs.
  » These shortcuts mean we grasp the concrete and shy away from the abstract.
  » This makes it hard to have a productive public conversation about complex issues like climate change.
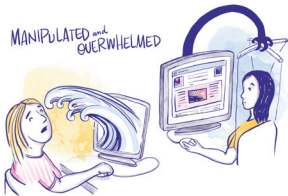
➜ At the same time, we are **overloaded by information**, including a lot that is poor quality or manipulated.
  » The digital age has brought new, faster and more targeted ways for us to be exposed to unproductive explanations about complex systems issues.

➜ As experts, we often assume that, if we fill people up with good information, they will understand and act accordingly.
  » This is known as the 'information deficit' model, and the evidence is clear that it is ineffective in deepening how people think.
  » Another common strategy is to tell compelling personal stories.
  » If our stories don't engage people in more productive understandings, we will fail to achieve the systems and structural shifts we need.

The combination of cognitive shortcuts, an overloaded and often misleading information environment and experts focused on filling people up with information can reinforce dominant cultural narratives that are overly simple or simply wrong.

What does this mean for building public support for climate action?

➔ On many complex issues, including climate change, public understanding of the causes of the problem is shallow.

➔ This makes it hard to build support for effective but complex solutions.

➔ However, cultural narratives are not monolithic.

➔ Alongside dominant shallow understandings of complex issues like climate change, other more nuanced but recessive understandings also exist.

Dominant narratives are ones that:
» show up most often in the public discourse
» are readily available to people, i.e. they are often the first thoughts that someone will have when asked their opinion on an issue
» are simple and easily accessible by our fast-thinking brain.

Recessive narratives are ones that:
» show up less often in the public discourse
» are harder for people to access, i.e. they are not necessarily the first thought someone might have on the issue
» often require slower thinking, i.e. more time to reflect on the issue.

It is possible to change the dominant narrative:
» Over time, through consistent careful communication across a field of practice, recessive narratives that support more helpful evidence-based understandings can become more dominant in the public narrative.
» If dominant narratives change in this way, over time, the public appetite for new solutions can also change.
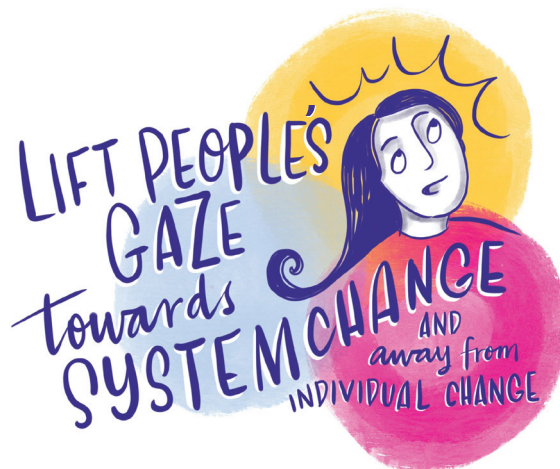
Moving from individual to collective action

To get the kind of widespread urgent changes that we need to ensure a healthy climate and planet in the future, we need to create the kinds of systems and structures that make climate-positive action the default. This requires actions that change systems and structures.

Helping people see upstream factors:

➔ When we talk to the public about climate action, we need to help them see they can act collectively to demand that national and local governments build climate-positive systems and structures.

➔ We want to help people look upstream to focus on structural factors like urban design rather than focusing on the downstream impacts of that design, for example, on personal choices about transport.

➔ The goal is to make the climate positive action the default – this can only happen through systems and structure changes, which are brought about by collective action.

LIFT PEOPLE'S GAZE towards SYSTEM CHANGE AND away from INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

How do we move people from individual action to collective and systems change?

➔ The three things people need to understand in order to motivate collective action are that:
  » change is possible
  » the most effective action will happen at a systems and structure level
  » by acting together with others, they can motivate systems-level action.

➔ Stories about individual action, therefore, need to be framed as a stepping change to collective action, i.e. inspiration for people to act collectively and demand that their governments give them better infrastructure for climate action.

Audience: who should you communicate with?

Generally speaking, there are three main groups of people to consider:

➜ People who are already persuaded (the base).

➜ People who don't yet have a fixed view or who have mixed and sometimes competing views on climate change and climate action (the persuadables).

➜ People who are firmly opposed.

Some key principles on audience:

➜ Focus on finding effective ways to communicate with persuadable people.

➜ Don't spend your time and energy trying to persuade the firmly opposed.

➜ Test your messages first on people who are persuadable as well as your base.

➜ Don't only test your message on the base. They are already persuaded and will usually agree with and share any message – even ones that don't work with persuadable people.

➜ Don't measure the effectiveness of a message by how the firmly opposed respond to it. Don't be afraid of messages that are unpopular with people who are fixed in their opposing views.

➜ A good message is one that will activate your base and convince people who are open to persuasion.
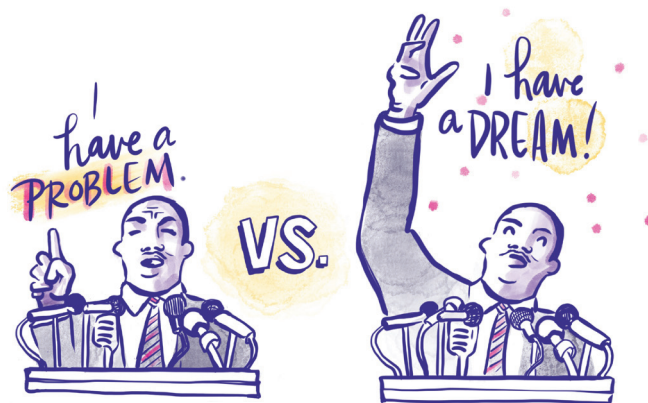
Constructing a good message

Key principles:

→ Lead with a vision.

Give people a positive vision – one that is clear and concrete about the better world that is possible. Start with your vision before you start listing the barriers or problems.

→ Be clear on who can make the change.

Emphasise the potential for humans to solve this problem by being clear about the human agents who are creating the problem and who can solve it.

Focus on the bad choices and behaviour of an agent instead of labelling agents as "bad people". Make it clear that the agent could make different choices to solve the problem.

➜ Avoid negating or myth busting.

Avoid spending time negating or myth busting climate change denial. Repeating myths or opposing stories in order to negate them just reinforces them in the minds of some persuadable people. Don't spend your precious energy and time doing that. Instead, focus on telling your positive story for action and reframe the debate.
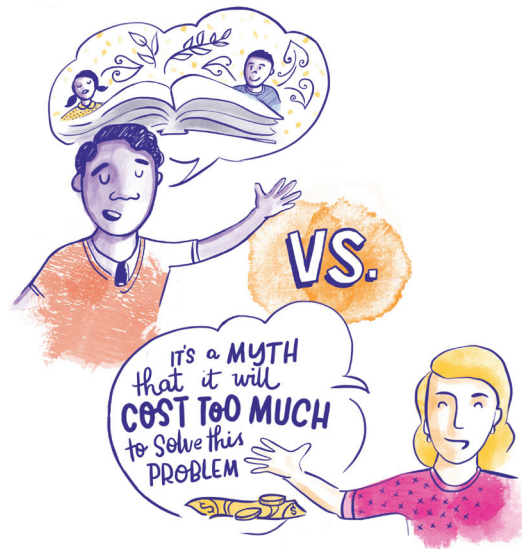
➜ Sell the cake, not the ingredients.

Tell people how the proposed change will make a positive, tangible change in the lives of people.

Don't lead with the technical or policy details of how to get there. Avoid leading with facts on climate change science.
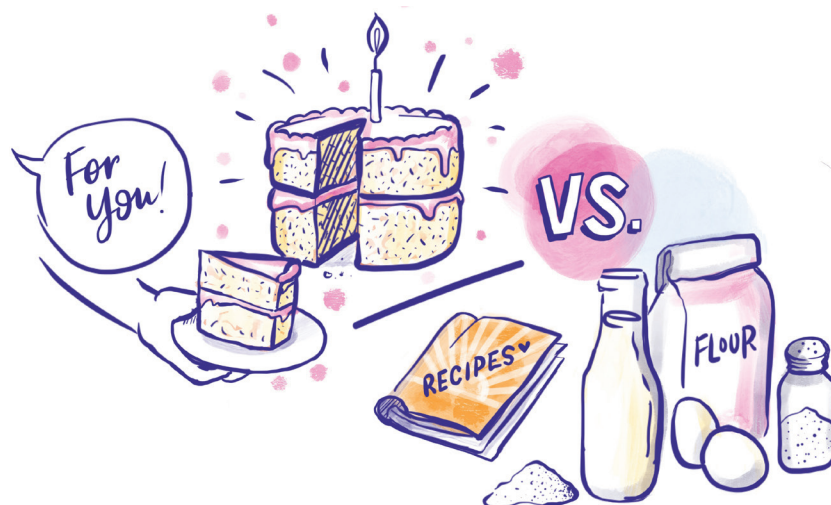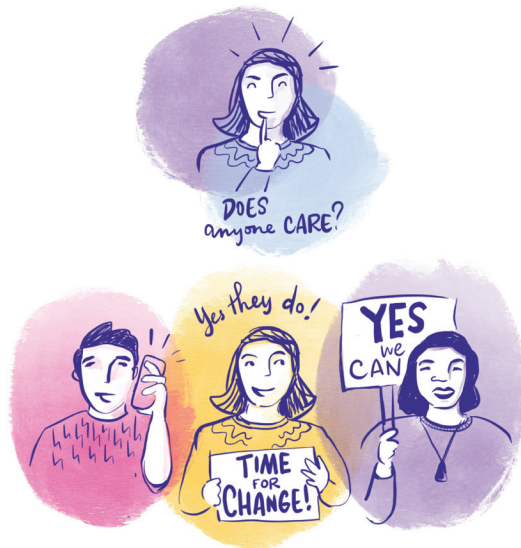
➔ Show people they are not alone.

Let people know that they are not alone in wanting a better world for all. Establish social proof by showing the many people who care and are taking action.

Avoid focusing on lack of action. Talk about what needs to be done, and highlight people who are already doing it.

➔ The overall structure of your communications should be vision, barrier, solution and action.

| Avoid	Replace with
Leading with the policy ask.	Leading with the better life or world that will result.
Leading with facts.	Leading with a positive concrete vision and shared helpful values.
Myth busting or negating someone else's inaccurate information or story.	Staying focused on your accurate information and telling your story.
Using passive phrases and not identifying agents, e.g. "climate change is destroying our future".	Naming human agents, e.g. "people in government have failed to commit to policies to transition us to an economy that doesn't rely on carbon".
Labelling politicians or institutions as corrupt, evil or dispositionally broken.	Naming the problematic behaviour and/or naming the new behaviour required.
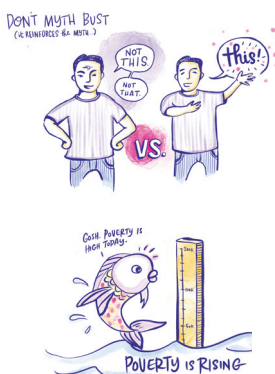
Values

Values are what matters most to us in life. They are at the heart of human motivations. Values are why we come to believe certain things about what causes climate change and support (or don't support) specific actions to address it.

We need to improve the likelihood that people will act on big collective issues like climate change. A growing body of research shows that, to do this, we need to engage all people with our shared helpful values. These are known as intrinsic values – when what matters most to us are things that are important and valuable in and of themselves. Examples of intrinsic values include taking care of each other and the environment, and setting and reaching our own goals. Loving our family, pursuing peace, protecting the environment or pursuing our creative gifts are inherently rewarding. We do not value them for any external reward or benefit we will receive for doing so.
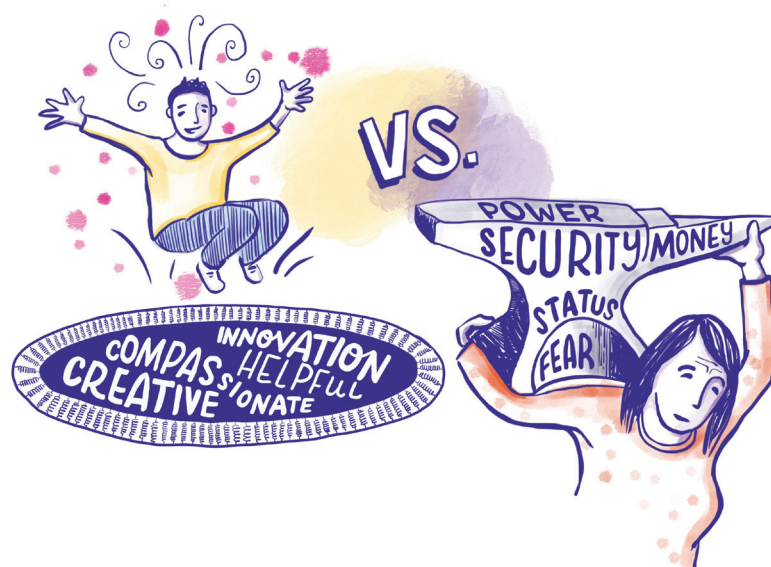
Researchers suggest we:

» move away from individualistic motivations towards those that encourage people to act collectively as citizens to find solutions

» focus on shared, intrinsic values like compassion and justice

» avoid appealing solely to fear and guilt

» appeal to people's shared sense of community to inspire action

» appeal to intrinsically valued long-term environmental goals and outcomes

» explore different intrinsic values for different audiences

» avoid appealing solely to economic values like cost-effectiveness or value to the economy.

There are different options for selecting which intrinsic values to engage with a persuadable audience. These depend on time and resources available:

» If you don't have time to segment and test, focus on identifying intrinsic values. Any intrinsic value is a better choice than an extrinsic value.

» Segment audiences and find specific intrinsic values that appeal to each.

» Combine different types of intrinsic values, e.g. combine innovation with concern for the welfare of others.

Some tested values for climate action

FrameWorks Institute and ecoAmerica[1] have found that four intrinsic values in particular moved people in the US to think more productively about the role of humans in climate change and support policies that reduce carbon emissions.

➜ **Protection:** e.g. "It's important that we protect people and places from harm. Concern for the welfare of others and preserving our habitats are the hallmarks of a protective approach."

➜ **Responsible management:** e.g. "It's important that we take responsible steps to manage the issues facing our environment. Open-mindedness and long-term planning are the hallmarks of responsible management."

➜ **Interconnection:** e.g. "Our fate is intertwined with the fate of the ocean. What happens in the ocean reflects and affects what happens on land: it's one interactive system."

➜ **Innovation:** e.g. "We have the capacity to solve difficult problems through innovation and ingenuity. We have a history of being resourceful, clever and thoughtful to solve problems and generate new ideas."

The same research found that appealing to scientific authority was not helpful.

Avoid	Replace with
Making why we should act on climate about cost, power or because something dreadful will happen if we don't.	Our ability to find creative solutions together, being responsible, loving and wanting to protect the environment we care about and each other.

1 Bales, S.N., Sweetland, J. & Volmert, A. (2015). *How to talk about climate change and the ocean*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Frames

Frames are part of our fast-thinking brain system – mental shortcuts we take to make sense of information quickly. Research on communicating about climate chnage gives some guidance on the types of frames to use and to avoid.
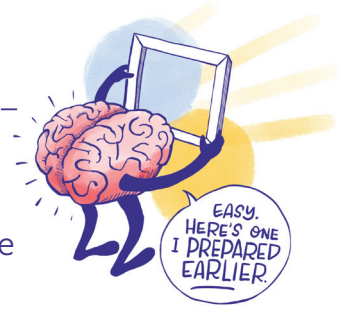
Helpful frames to use	Unhelpful frames to avoid
Local and relevant impacts and actions, places and things that have meaning for people, e.g. sea level erosion in local communities and local council adaptation responses.	Far-reaching impacts, e.g. polar bears dying.
Strike a balance between seriousness/urgency and hope.	Negative appeals, e.g. to fear or guilt.
The ability of people to solve this challenge and urgency to accelerate action.	Crisis and catastrophe or fear framing. This may activate the base, but research suggests it is unlikely to also motivate persuadables.
Adaptation and progress frames, e.g. our ability to adapt and progress and solve this problem and that we are already taking action.	Cost-benefit and trade-off/choices frames and anything that frames climate action as a money saving exercise.
Telling people we are already adapting and making progress on climate action and others need to get on board or be left behind.	Telling people we should act now because it will cost more later or that we need to trade something off.
Framing the protection of plants and landforms as an ethical issue.	Framing the protection of nature as a matter of human dominion or control over the environment.

Other frames to use

➔ **Ingenuity:** By being resourceful and innovative, we can come up with new ways to tackle difficult problems.

➔ **Energy shift:** By using energy sources that don't add to the heat-trapping blanket effect, we can get the climate back to functioning the way it should.

➔ **Energy efficiency:** We can use much less of the kinds of energy that add heat-trapping gases to our atmosphere.

➔ **Public health:** The air we breathe, water we drink and ecosystems we rely on are fundamental to human health, and climate change compromises them.

➔ **Interconnections:** Show interconnections between climate and other systems problems, e.g. an extractive economy hurts the environment and workers.

➔ **Scientific debate:** Scientists shouldn't engage in debate against fossil fuel industry representatives or think-tank spokespeople. Only debate methods and validity of the science with other scientists.

Metaphors

Metaphors, like frames, are another way our brain takes shortcuts to grasp complex and abstract ideas quickly. A metaphor takes something we understand on a practical everyday level and connects it to the abstract or complex to make sense.


General principles:

» Use metaphors with care and consider what ideas and beliefs they might engage.

» Use tested metaphors. Avoid untested and unhelpful metaphors where possible.

» Good metaphors connect something concrete that we understand to a more abstract or complex concept to help us make sense of it.

» Images often contain metaphors – test images before use.

Helpful metaphors

These metaphors have been tested and shown to help people understand the cause of climate change and motivate them to act in collective ways:

→ **Heat-trapping blanket of CO_2 simplified model,** e.g. "when we burn fossil fuels for energy, the carbon dioxide that is released builds up in our atmosphere and acts like a blanket that traps heat around the world, disrupting our climate".
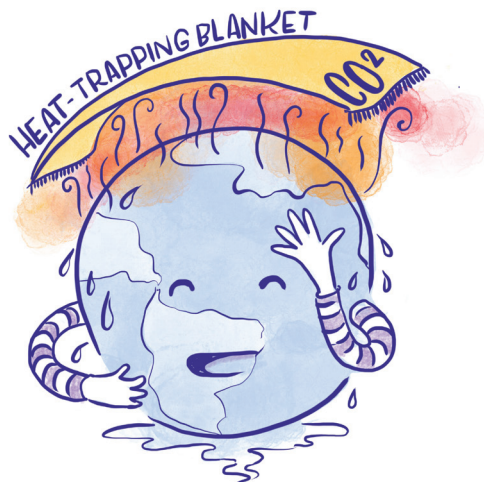
→ **Osteoporosis of the sea,** e.g. "ocean acidification changes the chemistry of the ocean, which causes osteoporosis of the sea and prevents animals from building and maintaining the protective shells they need to survive".

→ **The climate's heart,** e.g. "just as a heart circulates blood and regulates the body's temperature, the ocean regulates the world's climate system by controlling the circulation of heat and moisture".

→ **Regular versus rampant CO_2,** e.g. "regular levels of CO_2 are created by normal life processes but rampant levels of CO_2 are produced when we burn fossil fuels for energy – we need to reduce rampant CO_2, it's out of control".
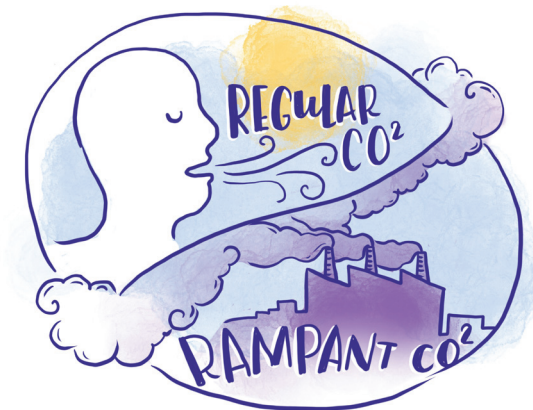
| Avoid	Replace with
Untested alarmist metaphors, e.g. "loaded dice", "time bomb" and "slippery slope" or any metaphor if you are unclear of what it evokes.	Productive tested metaphors, e.g. "heat-trapping blanket".

Other language

Research shows that certain words are more or less helpful in motivating collective action on climate change.

Avoid	Replace with
Politician	Elected official or community leader
Government	Our state/community
Making business pay	Responsible business
Pollution-dependent economy	Clean-energy economy and jobs

Facts and causal stories: better explanations

➜ Use facts to frame necessary action not just to describe the problem.

➜ Ensure that the facts used serve a productive purpose, i.e. to help explain causes or point to solutions.

➜ Employ explanatory chains. Start with cause, lead people through effects and end with solutions. Combine this with value-led messages about why it matters.
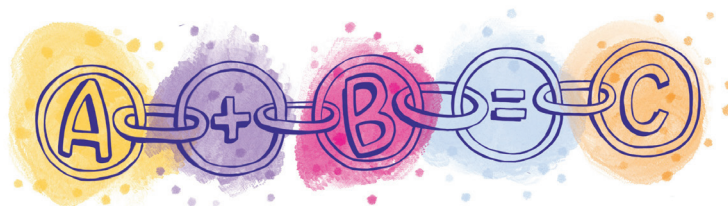
Here's what researchers recommend when we use explanatory chains:

» Identify the cause of the problem upfront.

» Provide general conceptual accounts of the mechanisms that cause the problem.

» End with broad repercussions.

» Clearly identify agents when also explaining the cause and effects.

Avoid	Replace with
Describing the problem with a lot of facts about climate change destroying our ecosystem.	Explanatory chains that start with cause, lead people through effects and end with solutions.

Here's an example of an explanatory chain about carbon that was tested in the US and shown to help people understand the causes and processes of climate change:

Some carbon dioxide, or CO_2, is needed for life processes. We can call this "regular CO_2." But CO_2 is not just something that we breathe out and plants take in. It's also something that gets put into the air when we use any kind of fossil fuel – when we burn coal to create electricity, or use oil to fuel transportation or manufacturing. These things are putting a lot of CO_2 into the atmosphere and oceans. We can call this Rampant CO_2 because there's too much of it and it's getting out of control. Rampant CO_2 accumulates in the wrong places like the ocean, and causes a number of problems in the climate and ecosystems. We'll always need regular levels of carbon dioxide, but we need to start reducing rampant levels of carbon dioxide.
—Bales et al., 2015, p. 12

Messengers

The messengers who convey messages about climate change also matter. Research on messengers and trust is complex, but findings suggest we should use:

➜ a wide range of messengers.

➜ messengers who are well qualified to comment on the context of the message

➜ unexpected messengers who may align with persuadable people's values

➜ intergenerational messengers, e.g. young people or children talking to their parents and grandparents.

Putting it all together

Use this framework to construct your communications:

WHO

→ **Decide the characters and agents** – the characters in your story. This could be the reader, the writer, a child, a politician, a fossil fuel executive, even a system.

WHAT

→ **Articulate a vision, a better future.** Be specific and concrete, e.g. "an economy based on 100% renewable energy, new jobs in wind farms, solar and sustainable buildings, workers paid a living wage to produce renewable energy".

WHY

→ **Identify helpful intrinsic values.** Why does this matter? What are the helpful values? e.g. using the value of innovation – "working together has solved many big problems throughout history, and we can rise to this one".

BARRIERS

→ **Specify the barriers to achieving the vision** – attributing cause and effect based on evidence, with agents named. There may be multiple causes, barriers and effects so try to keep it simple.

HOW

→ **Solutions** – attributing better outcomes based on evidence of the cause, e.g. "we can limit this warming by limiting the amount of rampant carbon we put in our atmosphere by urgently accelerating the work many people are doing to build a 100% renewable energy system".

ACTION/RESOLUTION

→ This needs to be in proportion to the size of the problem you have described. Be specific, e.g. "politicians need to recognise the opportunity we have right now, urgently commit to limiting warming to 1.5 degrees and redirect all their attention and resources to support people who are already building a new economy based on renewable energy".

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