The Workshop

How to Talk About
Urban Mobility and Transport Shift
A Short Guide
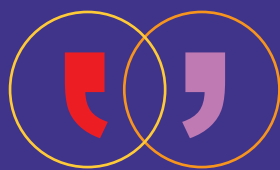
About this guide

This guide is designed for technical experts, communicators and advocates working to deliver urban mobility solutions that grow the share of travel by public transport, walking and cycling.[1] Its purpose is to help us use more effective strategies to:

→ improve people's understanding, based on best evidence, of why a shift in transport modalities away from cars and towards active and public transport is needed

→ help people designing and leading the shift to have better conversations with the public

→ motivate people to act in support of these shifts.

Why is it hard to get logic and evidence at the heart of people's understanding?

Shifting New Zealanders away from car use as the transport default in cities and into public and active transport has proven to be challenging work over recent years. Even where we've seen raised levels of public concern about issues relating to transport in urban environments, we haven't always seen a matching increase in support for the types of policies and structural changes that evidence shows support the mode shift.

It is assumed that, in explaining the changing population's need, the technical details or the evidence, people will develop a deeper understanding of the issues and make decisions in the context of this new information.

Such strategies are based on the information deficit model of information assimilation: people will support a solution when they are filled up with sufficient detail and facts. Unfortunately, this strategy has been shown by scientists to be ineffective for building deeper understandings of complex issues, especially when working with the wider public. This is because the way in which people assimilate and respond to information is complex.

Both our in-built cognitive processes and our information environment influence how shallow or deep our thinking is about complex issues such as urban transport.

➜ Daniel Kahneman coined the term "thinking fast" to explain the many mental shortcuts we use to reduce the work of assessing the vast amount of information we are exposed to. These mental shortcuts:

» work to protect our existing beliefs and knowledge

» encourage us to grasp the concrete (what we see, touch, smell and hear) and shy away from the abstract (unseen systems and structures, that impact our day-to-day lives).
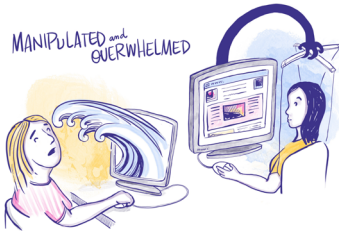
➜ At the same time, the digital age has brought new, faster and more targeted ways for us to be exposed to unproductive and shallow explanations about complex systems issues.

➜ If people have shallow beliefs about issues and their fast-thinking defaults to protect them, while shying away from complexity, it makes it hard to have a productive public conversations about systemic change.

➜ As experts on transport, we also play our part:

» We assume the information deficit model to be accurate and miss the opportunity to use sophisticated strategies of information transfer that deepen how people think.

» We may focus on telling compelling personal stories. However, such stories can also fail to engage people in more productive deeper understandings.

Fast thinking, an unhelpful information environment and unsophisticated strategies for relaying information can surface and reinforce understandings of complex issues that are too shallow and don't align with best evidence for collective wellbeing.

What does this mean for building public support for public and active transport?

➔ This makes it hard to build support for effective solutions that require systems change.

➔ However, shared public understandings (called cultural models) are not monolithic.

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

➔ Both dominant shallow and recessive deeper understandings show up in our public narratives and discourse.

FOR DEEPER INSIGHTS, GO BENEATH the SURFACE...
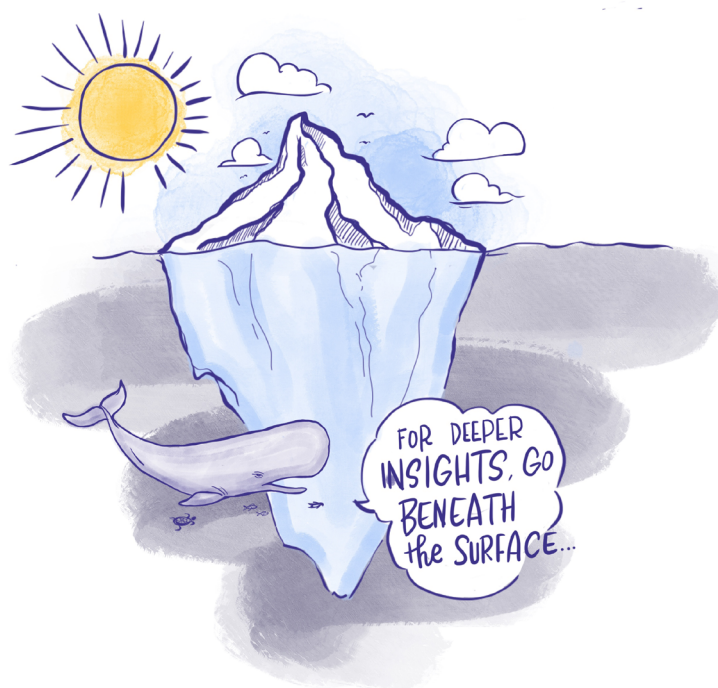
It is possible to rebalance these narratives and hence improve people's understanding

➔ Over time, through strategic communication by technical experts, communicators and advocates across a field of practice, recessive narratives that support more helpful evidence-based understandings can be surfaced and become more dominant in the public narrative.

➔ Research shows if narratives change in this way, over time, the public's understanding and appetite for new solutions can also change.

Moving from individual behaviour to supportive systems and structures

As part of building healthy communities and creating a stable climate, public and active transport needs to become the default way of moving people around urban environments. This requires:

➔ significant changes to our existing urban transport systems and structures

➔ moving people's understandings (and associated narratives) away from individual behaviour as the cause and solution (e.g. people choosing to ride bikes or drive cars)

➔ lifting people's gaze to understand how existing transport systems and structures impact different people and the planet and why we need to change them.
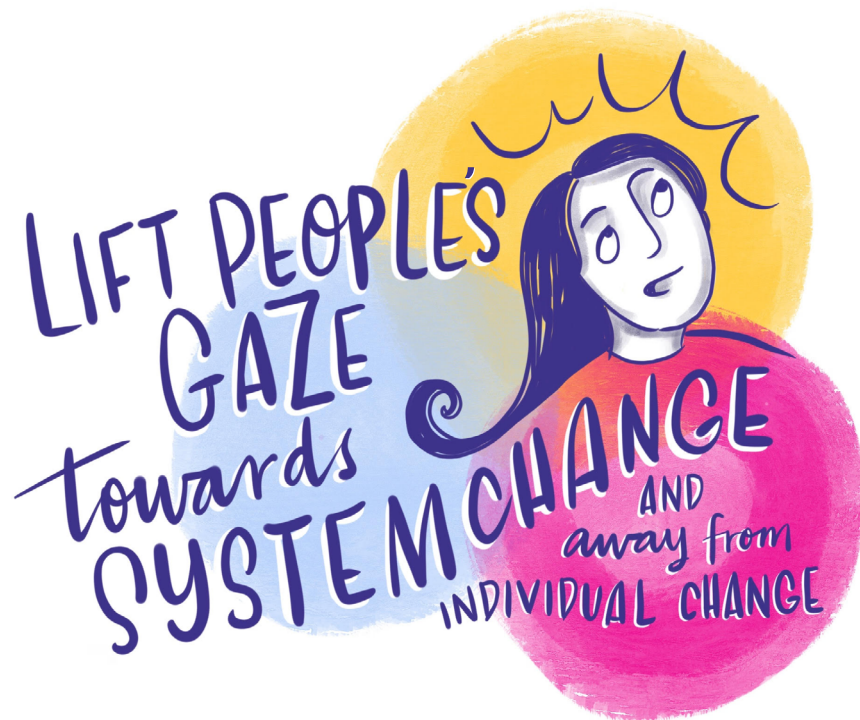
The five building blocks of strategic communication help us do this work.

The five building blocks of strategic communication

At The Workshop, we have developed a framework to communicate in ways that help experts, communicators and advocates put evidence – whether that be from science, mātauranga Māori or lived experience – at the heart of decision making. We call this the five building blocks of strategic communication. The building blocks are based on research from multiple disciplines. We use these building blocks to frame our findings and provide practical advice.

the 5 BUILDING BLOCKS

STORYTELLER

PROVIDE a DEEPER UNDERSTANDING, HOPE and the DESIRE to ACT

VALUES

better EXPLANATIONS
A + B = C

VISION
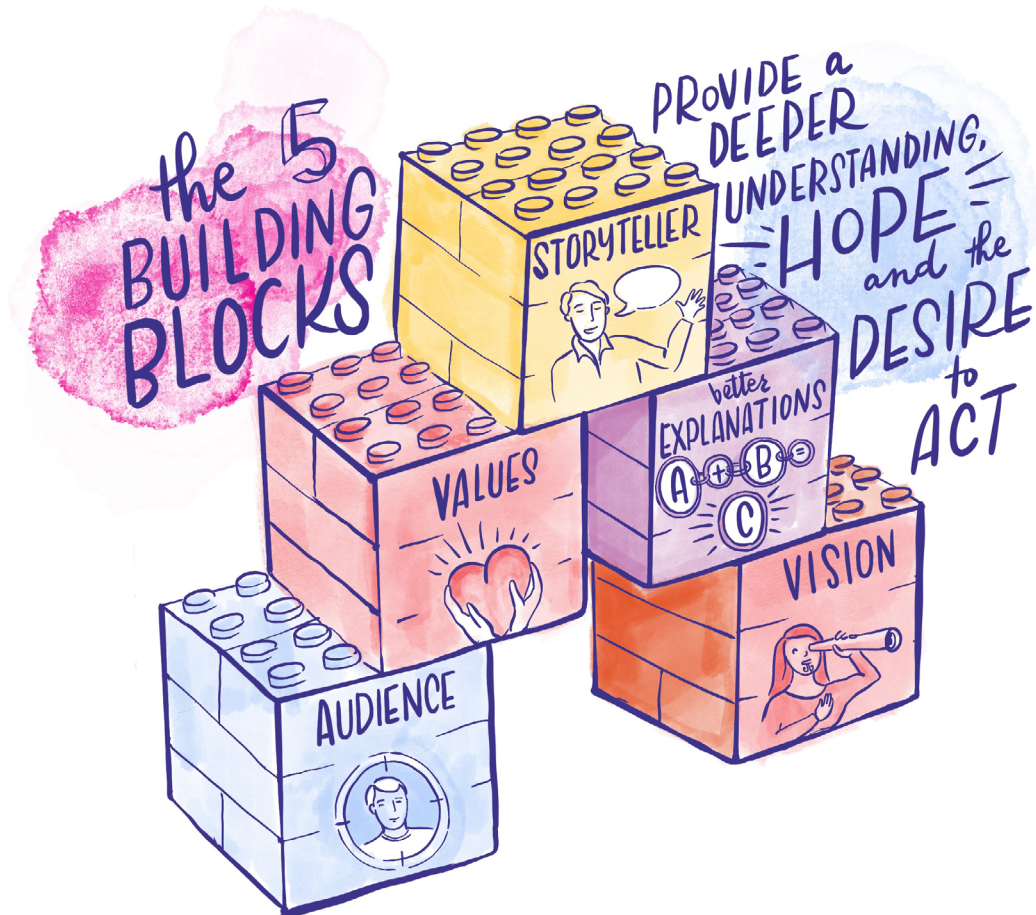
AUDIENCE

Block 1 Knowing your 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 are opposed and unlikely to be persuaded

➔ people who don't have a fixed view or who have mixed and sometimes competing views on transport modes and mode shifts (the persuadables). *This tends to be the majority of people.*


Principles on knowing your audience

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

➔ Avoid using your time and resources on the firmly opposed. Focusing on those who are firmly opposed lends itself to myth busting and negating their arguments. This amplifies shallow explanations (see pillars 2 and 4 for more information).

➔ Test your communications first on people who are persuadable as well as your base.

➔ Don't only test your communication on the base. They are already persuaded and will usually agree with and share any message – even ones that embed shallow thinking.

➔ Don't measure the effectiveness of your communications by how the firmly opposed respond. Don't be afraid of messages that are unpopular with people who are fixed in their opposing views.

➔ Effective strategic communications will activate your base and convince people who are open to persuasion.

## Block 2 — Lead with a concrete vision for a better world
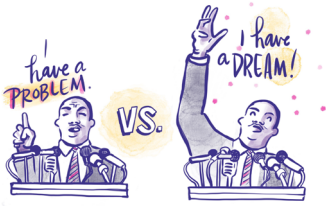
Transport mode shift requires people to support significant changes to an embedded transport culture in New Zealand. People's thinking tends to default to the status quo (normalcy bias). As such, contentious debates about small changes to operational detail has become a constant issue for transport.

Leading your communications with a clear picture of the better world creates an invitation for people to positively consider the evidence and the wider changes needed to support mode shift. Starting with a vision makes it easier to work into the detailed action to achieve that vision. To give people hope that achieving such a vision is possible, detailing the pathway to get there and agents who can make it happen are critical.

Key findings and principles

➔ **Sell the cake, not the ingredients.**

» Build a vision of a mobility culture. What does that look and feel like for people's day-to-day lives, people's ability to move about, the environment without needing cars? Make it concrete and believable.
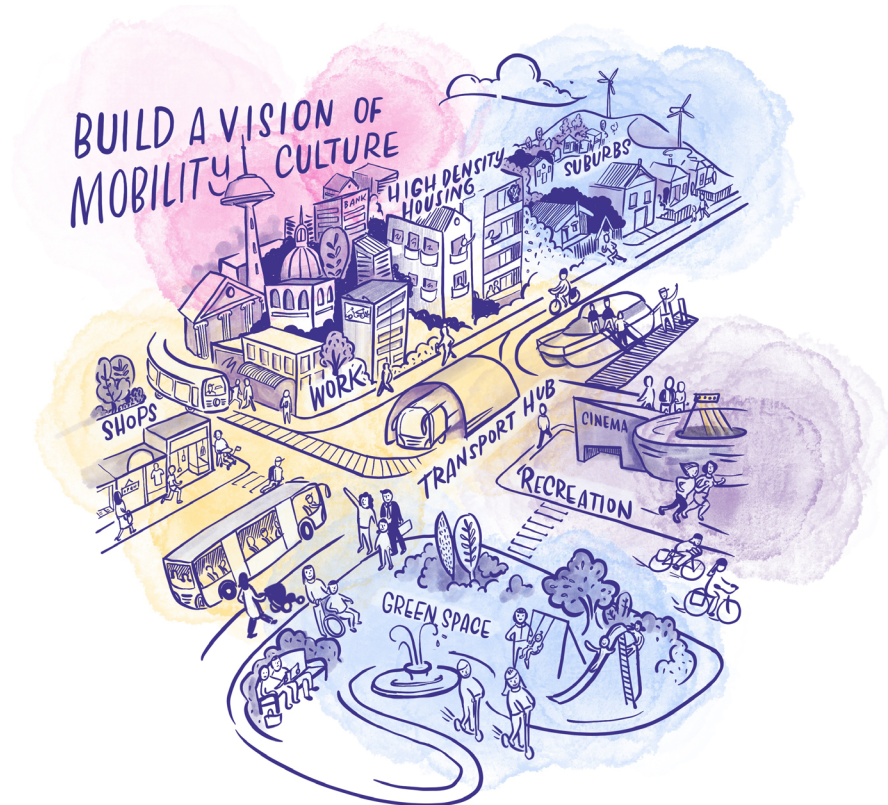
» Lead visions with environmental and people-centred outcomes, not economic outcomes.

» Envision the entire city. Do not talk about transport policy in isolation. Include town planning, housing, social spaces, health and other services.

» Avoid leading with technological solutions (e.g. e-scooters) – these become distracting or exclusionary.

➜ Be inclusive of all people and their needs.

» Envision a society in which mobility systems helps all people participate without needing to rely on cars. Create inclusive visions in partnership with those most negatively impacted by the current system. This is likely to improve engagement also.

➜ Work in partnership and in relationship with mana whenua.

» Build a vision for urban environments that embraces a positive Treaty relationship.

➜ Show credible human-driven pathways to achieving the vision.

» Name/identify the steps to achieve the vision. These may be smaller local-level changes such as a new cycle infrastructure, a new pedestrian crossing, lower speeds.

» Put people in the picture. You can increase people's sense of control and agency if you clearly identify the people who can act to achieve the vision, e.g. people in our local government, the local community.

» Name who created the problem or is preventing a solution to the car-centric system we have. People lack understanding of how problems came about. They default to either individual choice or thinking it is natural.

➜ Provide social proof.

» Use prototypes and experiments (e.g. car-free spaces and days) to help people glimpse an alternative system. Ensure these prototypes deliver benefits to those the system currently disadvantages.

Avoid	Replace with
Leading with technological or policy fixes or economic outcomes.	Leading with a concrete realistic vision for what a new mobility culture feels like in people's everyday lives and for the environment.
Developing the vision with only one type of audience.	Creating inclusive visions in partnership with those most negatively impacted by the current system.
Making unclear visions without clear pathways and steps to success.	Naming the concrete smaller steps to achieve the vision, e.g. how a parking change now can help achieve the longer-term vision of urban mobility.
Focusing on the lack of action that has occurred.	Providing social proof, e.g. prototypes where changes have already happened. Make people realise what they have already achieved.
Leaving out people and agents of change.	Showing the credible pathway to the vision by putting people in the picture.
Myth busting or negating someone else's story.	Staying focused on your vision.

DON'T MYTH BUST
(it reinforces the myth...)

NOT THIS. NOT THAT.

this!

VS.
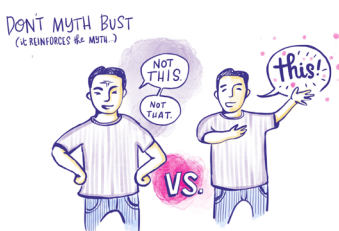
Special topic: Engaging and consulting for an inclusive vision of urban mobility

➔ **Use consultation to develop inclusive and wide-ranging visions where people move easily around a city using public and active transport.**

» Involve communities to understand their needs and priorities for the future as opposed to immediate concerns (e.g. population growth, not current parking concerns).
» Avoid building consultation around arguments already heard.
» Avoid over-consulting, where the public cannot usefully contribute or where they are only being asked for superficial feedback.

➔ **Most gains in consultation come from concentrating on the benefits of alternative transport modes. Most people will choose public or active transport over a car when infrastructures supporting active mobility are available.**

» Help people see the bigger picture, e.g. reducing pollution from roads.
» Show what has already been achieved.
» Avoid leading with cost discussions – it defaults people into small technological and technocratic fixes or arguments about cost.
» Avoid individual choice – it surfaces moralistic ideas about who drives cars and who doesn't.
» Avoid 'fill them up' approaches to the provision of information, with the goal of making people change their behaviour.

➔ **Focus on building a vision with environment first, followed by people and community, followed by work and economy to ensure people think about collective wellbeing first.**

» Avoid starting with imagined real-life constraints – help people think not only "What if?" but also "Why not?"

➔ **Use collaborative dialogue techniques and deliberation to develop visions where power dynamics and conflicts are expected and designed for.**

Block 3 — Connecting with what matters to people: values that motivate

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 urban transport ("cars are the most efficient means of transport") and what solutions are needed ("more roads").

People often talk about engaging with people's values to better communicate. However, people hold a very wide range of values, and often communicators misinterpret what values most people hold most dear. Our perceptions about what most people value most highly are often incorrect due to our dominant cultural narratives and discourse that surface values relating to wealth, success or protecting our in-groups.

Researchers show that what really matters most to most people is taking care of each other and the planet, discovery, creativity and reaching our own goals (also known as intrinsic and collective values). These are also the values that are most likely to motivate people to support improving our systems to achieve planetary and population-wide wellbeing.
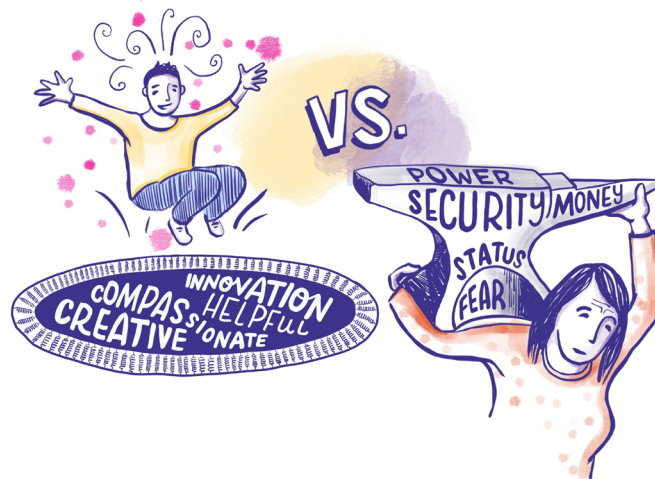

Researchers suggestions for strategic communication

» We move away from using individualistic values to motivate people to find solutions to inclusive urban travel, climate instability and road safety.

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

» We focus on shared intrinsic values like protecting the environment and reaching our own goals to encourage people to act collectively as citizens.

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

» We avoid appealing solely to fear and guilt (e.g. walk to prevent poor health, car drivers are the problem).

» We explore different intrinsic values for different audiences.

Some values for public and active transport mode shift

➔ **Fairness across places and generations/opportunity for all:** Leading with this value emphasises the importance of giving everyone access to transport to foster positive human health and climate stability.
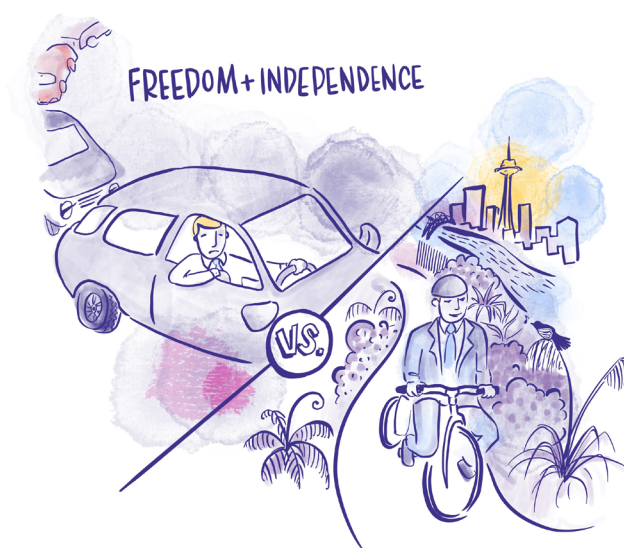
What does this sound like?

"No matter where we live or what our situation, all people – the elderly, disabled people, young people – should be able to move easily around our city in ways that build our health and take care of the planet."
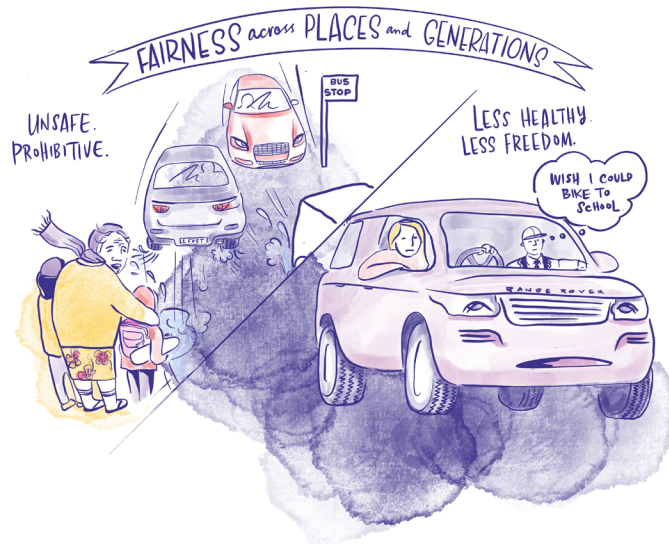
➔ **Freedom and independence:** Previously associated with car use, consider using these values to describe the provision of active or public transport options to meet our needs. Be careful to frame infrastructure support as part of the story, and avoid surfacing individual choice/behaviour change.

What does this sound like?

"We all have different lives and different needs – getting children to school, people getting to work on time, elderly people getting around their community. Good public transport, protected cycleways and walking paths can help us all move about our city independently and have fun on the way!"

➔ **Harmony with the environment:** Dominant frames place the environment as subservient to people. Be intentional about framing people as living within an environment that must be taken care of to take care of us.

What does this sound like?
"We can continue to enjoy our lives in harmony with our planet if we can all access less polluting ways to move around our cities."

Values drawn from climate change research to consider

➔ **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 planet. What happens to the climate reflects and affects our health – 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."

Researchers have also found that appealing to scientific authority is not helpful.

Values to avoid

➔ **Using economic values:** The cost of systems change is big. Leading with economic arguments pushes people into thinking about what is being spent on alternative transport systems rather than seeing these systems as an overall investment in urban experience improvement. Cost-effectiveness and economic progress values encourage smaller, technocratic, managerial innovations in transport.

➔ **Using identity/sense of belonging values:** Be particularly wary of invoking in-group/out-group values, e.g. by promoting the virtues of "cyclist identity" or "people who choose to cycle" over other people's behaviours and lifestyle options. Leading with "car culture" as the problem may also surface such in-group/out-group thinking.

➔ **Using safety or security values:** These values were used to help build a car-centric culture, e.g. cars to help people escape dangerous urban environments and live in suburban safety.

Avoid	Replace with
Making why we should mode shift because of cost/economics, safety or personal choices or individual behaviours.	Fairness for all people who want to travel, freedom and independence for all people, living in harmony with the environment.

## Block 4 | Provide better explanatory pathways

To surface better understandings for people about transport issues, we also need to provide better explanations, including pathways from problem through to solution. A good explanation in strategic communication works with people's fast-thinking brains and is an invitation for people to slow their thinking down.

The language we use, the frames we draw upon, the metaphors we choose and the causal chains we present are critical in giving people better explanations about transport. Our better explanations need to:
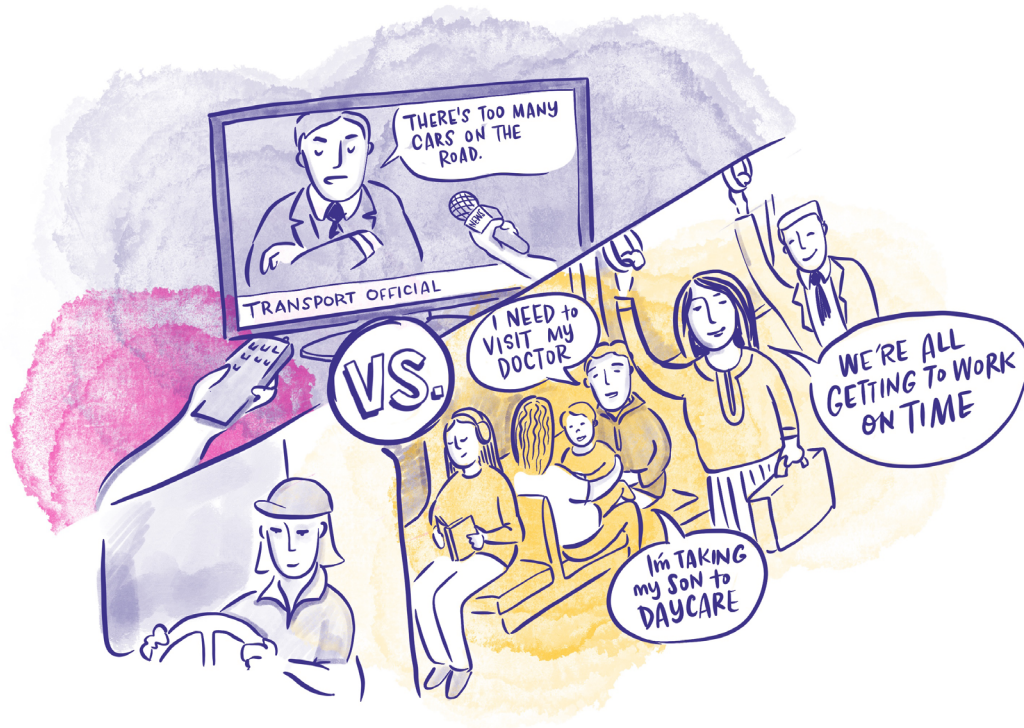
» use effective simplifying models

» avoid repackaging unhelpful, dominant understandings

» show cause, effect and solution clearly, not just describe the problem.

Frames

Frames are pre-packaged explanations or stories about how the world works. They are part of our fast-thinking brains, are employed unconsciously and are often shared across a culture. Frames may be more or less helpful in relation to surfacing better understandings. We cannot avoid frames or negate or myth bust unhelpful ones, but we can replace them with better ones.
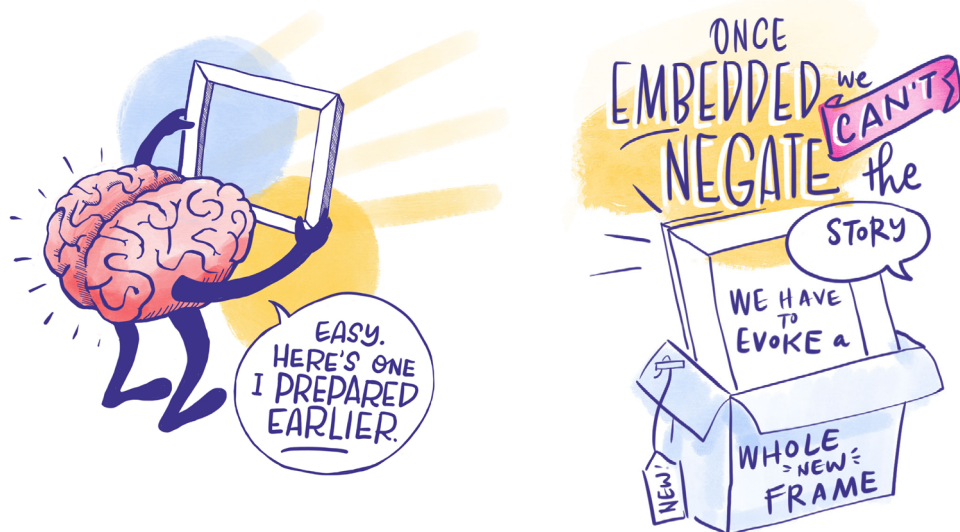
| Unhelpful	Reframe
Negating or myth busting frames. This reinforces the explanation in the minds of some persuadable people.	With tested helpful frames.
Too many cars (the problem).	Too much inequity, only some people can move easily around a city. We need all people to have their transport needs meet.

Unhelpful	Reframe
Transport as a source of economic growth.	Public and active transport infrastructure as an investment in the common good/delivering equity.
Transport systems – moving more vehicles on roads.	Everyday mobility culture moving people around cities, enabling the optimal daily mobility solutions for individuals and the environment.
Smart technology. Emphasis on technological fixes can distract the underlying causes of the environmental or transport system problems.	Protecting the environment.
Transport as a component of a sustainable attractive city. This frames mode shift as a luxury consumer good that is nice to have.	Public and active transport infrastructure as an investment in the common good/delivering equity.

Consumer choices, e.g. choose to ride/walk/take a bus. Tells a story about individuals as consumers choosing different transport modes. Leads to moralising different modes, not the delivery of better structures for all citizens. Can worsen inequities.	Infrastructure to make the city itself more eco-friendly and easier to navigate without needing a car.

FREEDOM + INDEPENDENCE

VS.
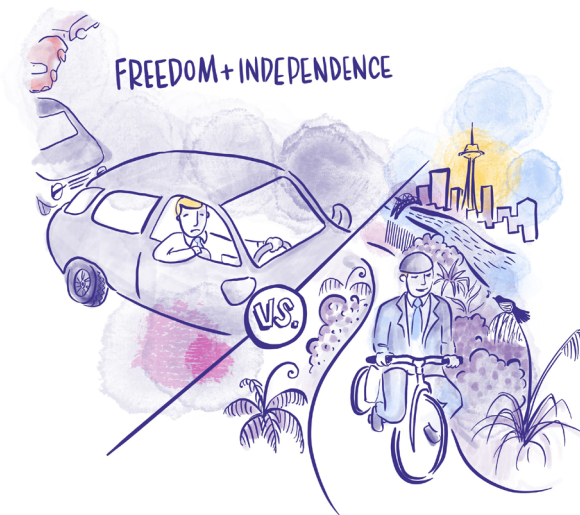
Meeting demand. Focuses thinking on what those people who can pay are willing to pay rather than what people need (and, in some cases, may not currently be able to afford).	Accessibility gains, e.g. meeting the needs of all people (children, older people, those with disabilities, people who currently have to drive) to move around and access the city.
The word 'sustainability'. Surfaces moralistic ideas about transport choices, leads people to focus on technological and behavioural solutions.	Define 'sustainable' in explicit concrete terms about systems change or choose another frame.
Prosperity/growth.	Mobility as a health issue. Benefits of walking and active transport. Effects of congestion and air pollution.

MOVING FOR HEALTH

GETTING TO WORK ✓CHECK WORKING OUT ✓CHECK!

|	
Transport in isolation.	Town planning, housing, social spaces, health and other services that contribute to equitable access to wellbeing and efficient use of transport resources.

Metaphors

Metaphors are a simplifying explanation that can help people quickly grasp a better, deeper explanation. A metaphor takes something we understand on a practical everyday level and connects it to the abstract or complex to make sense.

➔ Avoid untested and unhelpful metaphors where possible or consider what explanations they might surface.

➔ Images often contain metaphors – test images before use.

Helpful metaphors for transport and climate change

» Reprogramming – current transport problems are a result of people's design, and moving people can therefore be approached with a new mindset and an ambitious redesign.

» Mass transit/light rail as the backbone of public transport and urban development.

» Heat-trapping blanket of CO_2 simplifying 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".

» 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".
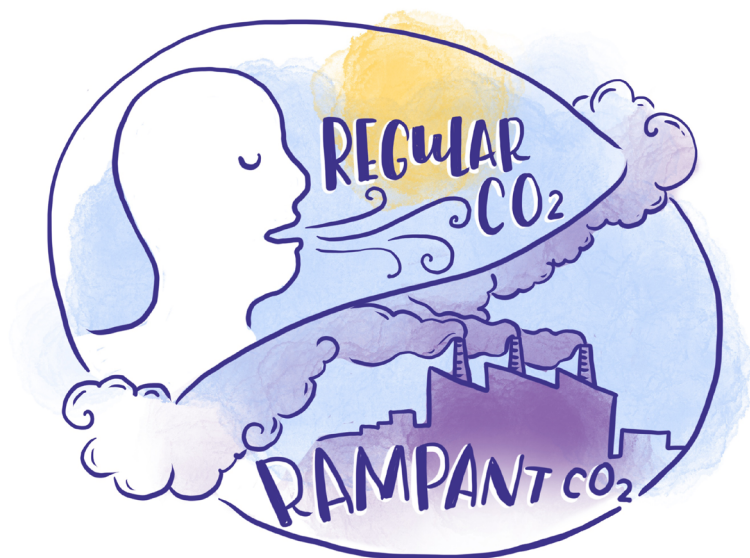
| Avoid	Replace with
Untested metaphors.	Productive tested metaphors or those that surface better explanations.

Causal stories: using facts

Causal stories help us provide better explanations and frame facts. Facts themselves are not the story. They are a character in the story you want to tell about what the problem is, who it affects and how, the need to act, who made it happen and who can change it and how.
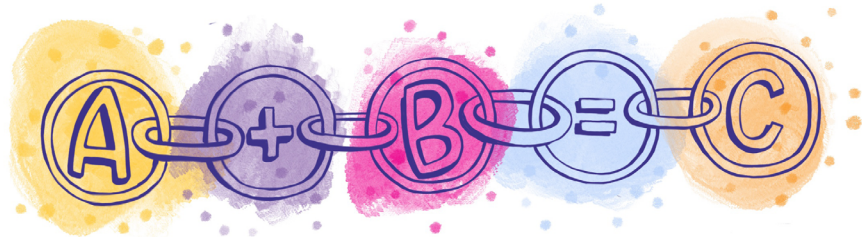
General principles about building causal stories

➔ **Sell the cake, not the ingredients.**

» Start with vision or values.

» Avoid leading with facts on transport – this doesn't surface better explanations.

» Don't lead with the technical or policy details of how to get there.
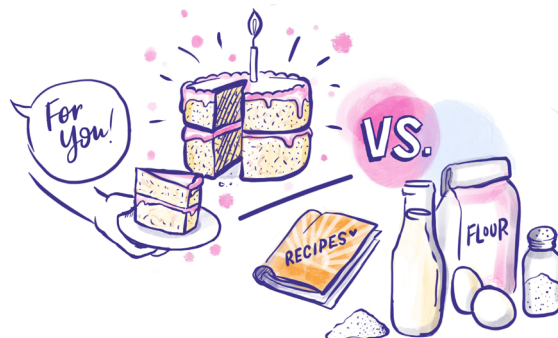
➔ **Ensure that the facts used serve a productive purpose, i.e. to help explain impacts that don't align with people's vision and point to structural solutions.**

➔ **Employ explanatory chains.**

» Identify the cause of the problem upfront.

» Provide general conceptual accounts of the indirect and direct impacts.

» End with broad repercussions.

» Clearly identify agents when explaining the cause and effects.

What do causal stories look like for transport mode shift, using children's wellbeing as an example?

➜ **Sell the cake:** Start with a vision for a mobility culture that moves all children in ways that are positive for their health and the planet.

What does this sound like?
"No matter where they live in a city, kids need to be able to move about freely in fun and healthy ways. To get on a bike, take a bus, walk, or scooter to school, their friends' place, or sports practice across town. A city that is great for everyone to live in and good for kids' health, is one with lots of public transport and is easy to navigate without a car."

➜ **Identify the cause of the current problem:**

What does this sound like?
"We have a transport system focused on moving cars, not people."

➜ **Explain the reasons behind this default, naming agents:** Explain political and industry influences that have set current systems in place.

What does this sound like?
"People in car industries have helped build a belief that cars are the best way to travel, and our policy makers and planners have focused on moving cars rather than providing everyone, including children and people with limited mobility, with what they need to move best around cities."

➜ **Mechanisms and impacts:** Discuss both who has been advantaged and who has been disadvantaged by car-centric policies and how. Use a few simple facts to make these points.

What does this sound like?
"This means children who live in better-off suburbs with parents who have the time and resources to drive them in a car can get to where they need to go. Children whose parents have less money and time need to use other ways like walking to move around, but the infrastructure to help them do this does not exist."

➜ **Broad repercussions for society:** Using one or two facts, discuss the impact on health, wellbeing, accessibility, equity and the environment.

What does this sound like?
"The effect of the way people have designed our urban environments is that children from low-income areas are hurt and killed by people driving vehicles more frequently than children from better-off suburbs, while children from better-off neighbourhoods have no independent and healthy way of moving about. Regardless of where they live, all children should be able to travel around independently in ways that build their health and wellbeing."

➜ **Solutions:** Provide facts about the needed mobility changes. Describe better health, cost-effectiveness and reduced carbon emissions within a physical and cultural story of active and public transport.

What does this sound like?

"We need people in local governments and transport to move away from a focus on moving cars. Instead, they can invest in the physical infrastructure to ensure all children can travel independently and in ways that build their health. Over the long term, they can build a thriving inclusive city in which all children, no matter where they live or who their parents are, can get to where they need to go."

➔ **Name agents:**

» In the case of mode shift and urban planning, including car-reduced planning, there may be people in specific industries opposing efforts to shift the focus towards public and active transport. Naming these behaviours is important.

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

Other ideas for causal chains: mental/physical health effects, impacts on people with limited mobility, people getting to work.

Avoid	Replace with
Describing the problem with lots of facts about how cars hurts people.	Explanatory chains that start with cause, lead people through effects and end with solutions.
Passive sentences, e.g. "car culture is harming people".	Name human agents, e.g. "people in the car industry are putting barriers in the way of achieving healthier ways to move people".
Labelling politicians or institutions as corrupt, evil or dispositionally broken.	Naming the problematic behaviour and/or naming the new behaviour required.

Block 5   Storytellers

The messengers who convey messages 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.

Perceived expertise matters more than actual expertise.

Building strategic communications on transport using the five blocks

Use this framework to construct your communications:

➜ **Step 1 /** Articulate an inclusive vision, a better future (the what and the who).

Be specific and concrete.

What does this sound like?
"X can be a city where getting on a bike is an easy, quick and fun way to move about and do all the everyday tasks, like doing the shopping, getting to work, taking children to school. Where people with accessibility needs have the same freedom to move about as everyone else. Where the ways we move people, whether on foot, bike, bus or train, contribute to our health and clean air."

➜ Step 2 / Identify helpful intrinsic values (the why).

Identify the helpful values that will motivate people to understand the need for mode shift, e.g. the value of equity or fairness across places.

What does this sound like?
"No matter where we live in a city or what our circumstances are, all people should be able to move easily around our city and get to where we need to go in ways that build our health and take care of the planet."

➜ Step 3 / Provide better explanatory pathways (the who, the how and the where).

You may decide to select a specific frame, e.g. mobility as a health issue – lay out the initial factor that contributes to why we have not reached our current vision (urban planning and transport policies that make driving a car the easiest way to get around), the impacts on different people (physical inactivity, high rates of injuries in children, air pollution), who is responsible for changing it (policy makers need to focus on helping people move around cities in ways that prioritise environmental health and physical health of people).

Present solutions: Attribute better outcomes based on evidence of the cause.

What does this sound like?
"Policy makers need to focus on moving people in ways that positively contribute to their health. This means designing our streets to make cycling and walking and public transport easy and accessible for all people. A mass transit system can be the backbone of this better, more healthy way of moving people."

➜ Step 4 / Present action/resolution (the what now?).

Giving people an action is important once you have motivated them with a vision and solution. This needs to be in proportion to the size of the problem you have described. Be specific, depending on what action you decide you want people to make.

What does this sound like?
"Politicians need to recognise the opportunity we have right now to build a mass transit system that will take us into the future. Ask your local councillor to support this policy." or "We have an opportunity to make our local streets more healthy right now. Let the car industry body know lower speed limits matter to you."

General checklist for communications

Avoid	Replace with
Block 1. Audience	
» Focusing on the opposition and their story. » Only testing with your base.	» Focus on developing messages for the persuadables.
Block 2. Vision	
» Leading with facts, policies or problems. » Myth busting and negating others' story. » Being vague and abstract in your vision.	» Lead with a positive vision (your story). » Sell the cake, not the ingredients. » Make the steps and human agency visible and concrete.
Block 3. Connecting with values that motivate	
» Leading with cost, safety, achievement values.	» Engage people on their most helpful intrinsic values: benevolence, universalism, self-direction.
Block 4. Build explanatory pathways	
» Using frames of too many cars, economic growth, consumer/individual choice, smart technology, meeting demand, 'sustainability'.	» Use frames of fairness across places, a common good, protecting the environment, everyday mobility culture moving people around cities, public health.
» Negating unhelpful frames. » Myth busting incorrect facts and stories. » Using passive language. » Villainising people. » Leading with facts or using single facts that don't frame a systems problem and solution.	» Use better explanatory pathways. » Tell your story, don't rubbish theirs – choose an effective frame. » Name agents. » Name the problematic behaviour and/or the new behaviour required. » Build causal chains.
Block 5. Storytellers	
» Choosing expected or untested messengers.	» Use a range of values-aligned messengers.

The
Workshop