

CLIMATE SOLUTIONS: WORKING PAPER 2

BUILDING BRIDGES & BONDS BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE BELIEVERS & SKEPTICS

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SUMMARY

A large number of people today may be skeptical of a changing climate—but may very soon be facing increasing challenges caused by the reality of a changing climate. Climate change believers, scientists, and activists can offer assistance in helping skeptics be prepared. But how can we come together to work together positively and effectively?

What is the Problem?

Those most affected and in the greatest need will be people in marginalized communities, diverse ethnic communities, communities with low government support such as small rural communities, and tribal nations. It is essential that these communities are supported in adapting to the changing conditions.¹

How do we solve it?

Each one of these communities of people is unique and will need a different approach to climate communication. But, one thing is certain: These community members need to be actively involved in the process if they are to be climate-ready.

"Adapting everything we do to a new and changing climate is a shared responsibility. No one person, group, business, or government can do it alone. Yet to date, much of the talk about adapting to a changing climate has happened amongst governments, decision makers, and the business community.

"Climate-Ready Communities: A Guide to Getting Started has been developed to take the climate change adaptation conversation from the boardroom table to the kitchen table. It's all about supporting communities to have their own conversation about how the things they value will be impacted by climate change, and what they can do to continue to thrive."¹

Background: For the past 12 years, my team and I have been working with groups of community members to develop climate action plans. The process starts during a conversation with a small but diverse group of people who represent a community as a whole. These conversations naturally evolve into a needs assessment to identify the challenges that the community faces with a changing climate. After creating a list of challenges, our next job is to help them prioritize the challenges. However, our job is not to prioritize the challenges for them.

This climate conversation is a two-way learning street. Our team learns a lot about the community. We learn who they are, what their beliefs and values are, and we also learn what their wants, needs, and concerns are. We do this by asking questions, listening, and talking with the community members—not at them.² With what we learn, we can better shape our message to best suit this group and their concerns about their climate challenges.

The community members learn from us in different ways. Some of them with little climate knowledge learn in small steps. Some with a greater degree of climate knowledge will learn how to put together more complex pieces of the solution to their climate puzzle. Some are climate skeptics and really want to teach us a thing or two!

At the end of a community climate conversation—or a series of them—one thing that we can all identify with together, is a prioritized list of their actual challenges and needs. We might not all share the same belief about why the community is facing these challenges, but when everyone's well is slowly drying up, or it's been 110°F for an increasing record number of days each year for the past five years, then we all have something to agree upon.

After creating the list of prioritized challenges, we return to our offices and research solutions with proven track records for solving them. We then return to the community with practical activities—that they can all relate to. If we do a good job, we will begin developing a trusting and long-term relationship. This is called building bridges and creating bonds: People from two different sides of an abyss meeting in a middle ground that benefits them all.

A summary of this assessment process can be found in the introduction to [*A Field Guide to Community-Based Adaptation*](#).³

HOW YOU CAN DO THIS PROCESS WITH A COMMUNITY:

Preparation: The goal of a climate conversation with a community is not a lecture, the goal is to listen. That said, if you are well prepared with background information, you will be better able to:

1. Answer climate questions that the community may have.
2. Have your goals and message written down so that you can make notes during the initial conversation for adapting them to best meet your community's needs.

Steps one and two will help organize your preparation.

THE STEPS

Step One.

Identify which community you plan on working with. The more highly specific you can be, the easier it will be for you to develop an effective communication style and a toolkit.

Let's look at some ideas of different types of communities:

- remote, rural agricultural communities
- local governments in small communities
- individuals and households
- young adults
- older adults: retirement communities, nursing homes
- community based organizations, local nonprofits, church groups
- disadvantaged vulnerable communities
- diverse ethnic communities
- Indian Nations
- Latino American communities
- African American communities

Each one of these groups will have remarkably different needs, hopes, and challenges. So you will need to recognize and incorporate them in the development of your message to create a good working relationship. You must also bear in mind that there may be cultural and language differences, literacy differences, and different learning styles—and these need to be incorporated too.

For example, members of a remote, rural agricultural community might have their own conflicting concerns. If they are a conservative community, they might be skeptical of aspects of a changing climate, but at the same time, they may be getting increasingly concerned about the growing problem of insufficient water for their crops.

Another, but quite different community example could be young adults who understand the challenges of climate change, but might be angry that they are inheriting a problem that older generations created. Consequently, they might be quite demotivated and immobilized.

So engaging with each of these different groups will require an understanding of the root of their skepticism or frustration, so that you can have meaningful, two-way communication.

Step Two. Do your background climate research. Before you meet with the group, research the basics of what climate change means for the community now, and what the projections are for the future. Heat waves, wildfires, drought, flooding, hurricanes? There are several prediction tools available. One of the best is [The Climate Explorer](#),⁴ developed in partnership with NOAA.

Step Three. Know what your goals are and the message that you hope to deliver. You may need to modify these substantially depending upon the audience. But you don't need to deliver your entire message in the first meeting. The first meeting should be simply a conversation, getting to know people, understanding what their perception of their challenges are, and beginning to gain a little information about their values and prejudices.

The information that you gain in the first meeting will guide you in modifying your message to best fit community perception, needs, and values. The first meeting is a conversation, not a lecture. Two ears, one mouth!

Over several meetings, you can allow your message to further evolve and develop to be appropriate for the community. As you learn more about them you may realize that you may only be able to get a portion of your goals accomplished in the first climate action plan. As trust develops with the community, then you may be able to suggest a phase two climate action plan in the future.

A successful message "means remaining true to the underlying science of the issue, while tailoring messages for the existing attitudes, values, and perceptions of different audiences, making the complex information understandable, relative, and personally important." ⁵

"To break through the communication barriers of human nature and partisan identity, messages need to be tailored to a specific audience, using carefully researched metaphors and examples that trigger a new way of thinking about the personal relevance of climate change." ⁵

THE CLIMATE CONVERSATION

Step Four. Work with an intermediary. Find a trusted member of the community or a trusted organization who will 1) help you put together a group for an initial climate conversation, and 2) can be an interpreter between your message and their needs and values.

"Many studies have shown that people more easily trust those who share similar political views, backgrounds, or life circumstances. For communications strategy, this means it is important to identify potential change agents and opinion leaders who are known and trusted by the target audience. They can serve as the primary messengers, or as secondary interpreters of knowledge and "champions" of change. They may also act as first adopters of a technology or behaviour, and serve as models for others. Often existing groups – neighbourhood associations, churches, youth groups – can be engaged by a compelling opportunity to make a difference." ²

"One way to reach audiences is to recruit their influential peers to pass on selectively framed information about climate change that resonates with the background of the targeted audience and that addresses their personal information needs." ⁵

Step Five. Mind Your Manners.

In your climate conversations, it is important to respect the beliefs of the members of your audience and simply find a way to work together. By listening to members of your audience you can learn about their skepticism and their position on issues, but you can also find out about what beliefs you have in common with each other. Building on those beliefs could be your entrée into forming a bridge.

You will also find that by focusing on their values and their needs—rather than just the facts—that they will become more comfortable with your message.

"Do not expect to sway people with facts alone; explain how your message fits with their values and priorities. Be open to different perspectives as well: people may share your concerns about the climate but disagree with your preferred solutions. Social norms and personal values, emotions and experiences play a much greater role in shaping perceptions of climate change than knowledge about climate science and potential responses to climate change. If a message is to change minds and behaviours, it needs to fit the needs and priorities of the target audience." ²

"Start with what people value most. People are most likely to engage in a conversation about climate change when there is a clear link with things that they value, are interested in and care about.

"At a practical level, this means that your climate change conversation should not begin with a presentation about climate change, or any other information that you think might grow awareness or change attitudes.

"Instead, ask people to talk about what is most important to them in their life and community. It could be as individual as caring about family, job security or recreation." ⁷

In their excellent paper *Let's Talk Communities & Climate*, ⁶ ecoAmerica recommends staying above the fray:

"Focus on the big picture, on what is important. Do not get caught in a trap of arguing or preaching about details or be sidetracked by an individual in the audience who tries to poke holes in your thesis. Avoid arguing, which distracts from your message and causes you to lose your audience. Be prepared to pivot back to your positive message.

"The values-based messages tap into people's personal interests and affiliations—communities, health, faith, business, and young adults." ⁶

As a climate communicator, you should focus on engaging with your audience rather than persuading them to do anything. You should be working to understand them rather than judging them. ⁷

Getting to know people in the first meeting will help you reevaluate how to best present your message to them. If there are skeptics in the group, Emma Francis Bloomfield ⁷ suggests using three strategies for engaging skeptics in a conversation:

"1) ask questions and seek to learn more about the root of your dialogue partners' skepticism; 2) accept premises and do not alter but instead embrace your dialogue partners' driving values; and 3) make it personal and redirect existing values to align with pro-environmental policies."

Do not use scare tactics or fear. Focus on the perceptions of the members of your audience. Find out what they feel the challenges

are that they're experiencing in a changing climate, and what their needs are in this light.

"Messages that present catastrophic climate change as a foregone conclusion leave most people feeling helpless, vulnerable or guilty." ²

Rather than using negative messages, you can re-frame them. For example: "though many conservatives have used the economic consequences frame to oppose action on climate change, many environmental advocates now seek to turn this interpretation in their favor by emphasizing an opportunity to revitalize the economy through investment in clean energy technology." Creating green jobs immediately translates the negative economic message to a positive message relative to climate change." ⁵

DELIVERY

Step Six. Identify Your Solution Oriented Activities

Now that you understand your audience's climate concerns, needs and values you can begin researching solutions for them. Although you can search the Internet for your initial ideas for solutions, the highest quality solutions will be those that have shown scientific evidence of having worked to solve the specific challenges that your community members face.

You might come up with a simple solution that appears obvious to you will work. Reading a peer-reviewed, scientific study analyzing the solution may reaffirm your belief of its efficacy. On the other hand, a scientific study might point out that it can be a very effective solution, but not in the highly specific situation that your community finds itself in. If that's the case: keep looking and researching!

In selecting a family of activities for the community climate action plan, you will also need to bear in mind budget, capability, practicality, and acceptance. Most climate action plans are developed and written prior to seeking funding. But it's a good idea to research other similar climate action plans to find out what their budget was to make sure that you don't submit an overly expensive project to a donor that normally funds smaller projects.

Before getting into that level of detail, when you have a selection of recommended activities for the action plan, meet again with the community to hear their thoughts and feelings about your proposed activities. If you've done a good job in understanding their prioritized needs, and return to them with practical, understandable activities that they can relate to, then you've done your job. If they have a negative reaction to one of your activities (and this might be for perfectly valid reasons that you hadn't thought about) you can return to the drawing board and find a more appropriate activity for the community.

When you have an outline of a climate action plan vetted with the community members, then you can begin developing grant proposals, budgets, timelines, and research funding agencies that might be interested. Receiving grant funding can take a while, and community members can lose enthusiasm for a project.

One technique that I have found useful is during this waiting period you can begin working with community members on low-cost no-cost aspects of the action plan almost immediately. This will keep their enthusiasm up.

For example, these could include consciousness-raising about climate challenges and solutions such as at town hall meetings. They could also be educational presentations at local schools, churches, neighborhood associations, and youth groups.

Solutions need to be:

- practical activities that all can relate to
- understandable by all
- acceptable: they fit community values
- fundable: they have a realistic budget
- activities that show scientific evidence of working
- activities with proven track records for solving their very specific climate challenges
- appropriate for community capabilities

[See examples of project activities.](#)

[Learn how to develop a Climate Action Plan with a Community.](#)

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