The Workshop

How to Talk About
Climate Change
A Cheat Sheet

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About this cheat sheet

This cheat sheet is for people preparing or planning communications to promote meaningful climate action. It's designed to be used together with our message guide to talking about climate change, where the key concepts we reference here are described in detail. Think of it as a quick memory aid to remind you of the key principles. Please refer back to the message guide whenever you need more details. This cheat sheet is based on research conducted by The Workshop on behalf of Oxfam New Zealand and was funded by Meridian Energy.

Big picture: moving from individual to collective action

The goal is to make climate positive action the default – this can only happen through systems and structure changes brought about by collective action. As communicators, we can motivate collective action by:

➜ lifting people's gaze from individual consumer action to systems change that resets the default action to be climate positive

➜ helping people focus on upstream factors like urban design rather than downstream impacts on, for example, personal choices about transport

➜ framing stories about individual action as a stepping stone to collective action, i.e. inspiring people to act together to demand governments give them better infrastructure.

To motivate collective action, people need to understand 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.

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:

➜ A good message will activate your base and convince people who are open to persuasion.

➜ Don't only test your message on the base. They're already persuaded and will agree with and share messages that don't work with persuadable people.

➜ Test your messages on people who are persuadable.

➜ Don't try to persuade the firmly opposed, and don't measure the effectiveness of a message by how they respond to it.

➜ Don't be afraid of messages that are unpopular with people who are fixed in their opposing views.

Key principles of a good climate action message

➔ Lead with a vision.

Give people a positive vision of a world that has responded to climate change – 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 who can make the change.

Emphasise the potential for humans to solve climate change by being clear about the human agents creating the problem and who can solve it. Focus on the bad choices and behaviour of an agent instead of labelling them as "bad people". Make it clear they could make different choices to solve the problem.

➔ Avoid negating or myth busting.

Avoid negating or myth busting climate change denial. Repeating myths or opposing stories in order to negate them reinforces them in the minds of some persuadable people. Instead, tell your positive story for action.
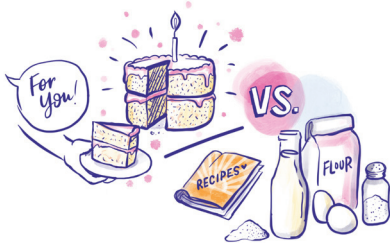
➔ Sell the cake, not the ingredients.

Tell people how the proposed change will make a positive, tangible change. Don't lead with the technical or policy details of how to get there e.g. carbon pricing.

➔ Show people they are not alone.

Let people know that they are not alone in wanting a better world for all. Show that many people care and are taking action. Avoid focusing on lack of action. Talk about what needs to be done, and highlight people already doing it.
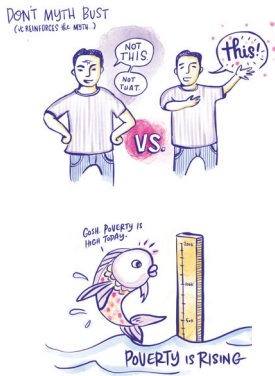
Avoid	Replace with
Leading with the policy ask.	Leading with the better life or world that will result.
Leading with facts.	Leading with a positive concrete vision and shared helpful values.
Myth busting or negating someone else's inaccurate information or story.	Staying focused on your accurate information 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

Research shows we need to engage people with shared helpful values to motivate positive climate action. Intrinsic values – things that are important and valuable in and of themselves – are more effective at motivating climate action than extrinsic and individualist values or fear.

Unhelpful values to avoid:

» Individualistic motivations like status or reward. If you use celebrity messengers, check that they are not invoking extrinsic values like social status or achievement.

» Fear and guilt, e.g. "failure to act on climate change will turn Earth into a living hell".

» Economic values like cost-effectiveness or value to the economy or the economic value of the environment, e.g. "The oceans provide income to people through fisheries."

Helpful values to use:

» Shared sense of community to inspire climate action, e.g. "we're all affected by climate change, and together, we can demand real climate action from our government.".

» Shared, intrinsic values like compassion, justice and innovation.

» The intrinsic value of the environment, e.g. "the oceans are home to unique and irreplaceable natural wonders and ecosystems like the Great Barrier Reef".

Some tested values for climate action

Researchers[1] found that four intrinsic values moved people in the US to think more productively about climate change and increased support for 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."
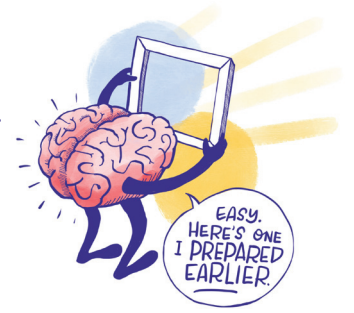
The same research found that appealing to scientific authority was not helpful.

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. They are prepared ways of looking at the world and mental shortcuts we take to make sense of information quickly.

Unhelpful frames to avoid	Helpful frames to use
Far-reaching impacts, e.g. polar bears dying.	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.
Negative appeals, e.g. to fear or guilt.	Strike a balance between seriousness/urgency and hope.
Crisis and catastrophe or fear framing. This may activate the base, but research suggests it is unlikely to also motivate persuadables.	The ability of people to solve this challenge and urgency to accelerate action.
Cost-benefit and trade-off/choices frames and anything that frames climate action as a money saving exercise.	Adaptation and progress frames, e.g. our ability to adapt and progress and solve this problem and that we are already taking action.
Telling people we should act now because it will cost more later or that we need to trade something off.	Telling people we are already adapting and making progress on climate action and others need to get on board or be left behind.
Framing the protection of nature as a matter of human dominion or control over the environment.	Framing the protection of plants and landforms as an ethical issue.

Other frames to use

➔ **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.

Metaphors

Metaphors are another way our brain takes shortcuts to grasp complex and abstract ideas quickly.

> ## General principles:
>
> » Use tested helpful metaphors. Avoid untested 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:
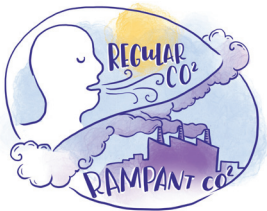
➔ **Heat-trapping blanket of CO_2 simplified model,** e.g. "when we burn fossil fuels for energy, the carbon dioxide that is released builds up in our atmosphere and acts like a blanket that traps heat around the world, disrupting our climate".

➔ **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".	Productive tested metaphors, e.g. "heat-trapping blanket".

Facts and causal stories: better explanations

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

➔ Ensure facts serve a productive purpose, i.e. to 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.

How to use an explanatory chain:

» Identify the cause of the problem upfront.

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

» Clearly identify agents when explaining the cause and effects.

» End with broad repercussions.

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.

Messengers

Research suggests we should use:

➔ a wide range of messengers

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

➔ intergenerational messengers, e.g. young people or children talking to their parents.

Putting it all together

Step 1: The elements of your story

WHO

➜ **Who are you putting in the frame?** Be clear on the characters and agents in your story. Whose vision is this? Whose values? You can name groups (New Zealanders) or use a specific character (the reader, a child). Who caused the problem? Who can fix it?

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? e.g. using the value of innovation – "working together has solved many big problems in the past, we can rise to this one".

BARRIERS

➜ **Specify the barriers to achieving the vision** – what is standing in our way. Attribute cause and effect, use your facts and name agents. There may be multiple causes, barriers and effects. Try to keep it simple.

HOW

➜ **Solutions** – making it clear how they relate to the cause of the problem, e.g. "we can limit 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 limit warming to 1.5 degrees and redirect their attention and resources to support people who are already building a new economy based on renewable energy". Be clear about what the reader can do to help make this happen.

Step 2: Check your language

CONCRETE

➔ **Is your language concrete?** Have you provided concrete and tangible examples?

METAPHORS

➔ **Check your metaphors.** Are they helpful? Think through what your metaphors imply about the causes of and solutions to the problem. Use tested metaphors where possible.

NEGATING

➔ **Are you repeating myths and untruths in order to negate them?** Instead of repeating and negating, replace the myth and lead with your message.

The
Workshop