



Supporting and motivating communication change in the climate change and sustainable development sectors

by Kim Treasure, Science Shops Wales

Kim Treasure considers the best way to communicate in order to secure the wider participation and engagement necessary to achieve behaviour change. With reference to behaviour sciences research, she explains why communications on sustainability and climate change should consist of messages that are easily understandable, solution-driven, positive and humorous.



How do we in the sustainable development community encourage wider participation from communities currently absent from networks and meetings? How do we communicate awareness of climate change, peak oil and questions of resilience

in a way which engages communities to change their behaviour? To start to identify solutions it's worth considering our own communications processes, and message content, together with research from the field of behaviour sciences and case-studies from other sectors.

It is well documented in behaviour sciences that our experiences help shape personal beliefs and value systems. Over the course of a lifetime, cumulative messages, responses and experiences create a set of beliefs, a 'mind map' of the world. Your mind map will not be the same as mine, although we may share common points and values. Our mind maps support us to shift through the plethora of communications and messages which regularly come our way. The way we communicate to the world, and the way we receive communications, is shaped by our mind map.

In such a diverse world of mind maps, how do we effectively communicate to motivate behaviour change? How do we communicate the impact of climate change, without scaring people into inertia? If many people do not even understand the difference between climate and weather, how do we develop our communications processes and associated programmes to motivate and support people to reduce risk to themselves, and their communities?

The behaviour change research is there, and the answers are simple enough but as always, it's the implementation which is the challenge.

First, consider that much of the communications around climate change is punitive and negative. At one recent event I heard someone present as fact that we have 5,000 days to make a change or suffer severe consequences effects from climate change. This was not a helpful supportive communication. This type of authoritative position is not only dangerous to mental health, but also creates resistance to change. Some people react by thinking, 'if it's hopeless I'm just going to enjoy myself'. And in many ways, who could blame them?

The concept of climate change is scary enough; communicating negatively, even with the situation as urgent as it is, is not going to affect the required behaviour change. We as a sector need to consider how we communicate our messages; ongoing campaigns with easily understandable messages and solutions are needed, together with positive action, not doom and gloom.

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Consider the concept of the 'greenhouse effect.' Research shows that most people don't understand this analogy. The word 'greenhouse,' normally refers to a pleasant place to grow plants.



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In this context, however, it's used as an analogy to express a complex and threatening phenomena. In fact, I've heard more than one person say greenhouses are the cause of climate change. So the mind map of at least some of the general public is confused by this analogy. To support and assist people to alter their behaviour, communicating with easily understandable concepts, images and analogies is essential.

All of us working in the area of climate change and associated mitigation programmes need to present our communications in a more inclusive and solution focused way; such a change to our behaviour is essential to affect behaviour change in others. The combination of expert knowledge, together with the experiential knowledge of community members, is vital to identifying and embedding sustainable solutions. Negative top down messages create separation, not cohesion.

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If we focus on communicating solutions, even in the face of overwhelming threats and fear of the future, shift to the positive can happen. For example, take the Welsh Assembly Government innovative step of embedding sustainable development considerations into all policies and legislation. Yes, implementation remains a challenge, but the fact is that it is only one of three countries which took such step. We should be celebrating and communicating such a brave decision at every opportunity and encouraging further developments, and solutions on how to implement such a policy.

A case-study of such a shift in communication using the problem/solution formulae is found in

the anti-poverty movement. A few decades ago, overseas development charities raised money through focusing on 'the poor starving people in Africa'; it seemed that hardly a day went by without an emergency appeal in response to famine, flood or civil strife. Not only was the message born out of the negative, it was an affront to the people in Africa and their dignity. Donor fatigue set in, revenue dropped, which of course worsened the situation for those most in need. Overseas development organisations had to reevaluate their communications mode and content. How were messages impacting on people? Did they motivate or deflate? Following a period of self-reflection and consultation, the message shifted towards the much more positive solution focused approach of 'helping people to help themselves.' We in the sustainable development movement urgently need to do the same. We need to develop and deliver solution-driven messages which motivate and support change, challenging as this may seem. In behavioural sciences speak, we need to support people to 're-frame' aspects of their mind maps.

Finally, consider the use of humour. Life is just too short without it, and what a difference humour makes towards ensuring people receive and understand the message. Now more than ever people need more humour in their life, and they want more. Work by Cynnal Cymru – Sustain Wales supports this notion – check out the Eco-Worriers film on their website⁽¹⁾. Yes, it's hard to see the funny side of these grave issues but ask yourself, which communications (printed or TV or otherwise) are usually most discussed in social gatherings?

All stakeholders need to communicate responsibly, creating motivating messages with easily understandable solutions and suggestions for actions. So please, go easy on the rhetoric and negativity. The issues we face are complex and urgent; and solutions will not be a one size fits all. Communicating the negative through a positive message is never going to be easy, but behaviour sciences tells us it can be achieved by being aware of how we communicate, the content and impact of our communication and the



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strategic use of humour. A little levity can go a long way. Hopefully we can yet avoid being labelled the 'age of stupid.'

Kim Treasure is the Strategic Development Officer for Science Shops Wales and holds a B.Sc. and M.Ed. Her work background is in community developing and engagement, and supporting the participation of communities often absent from public and policy fora. The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of Science Shops. Thank you to Elizabeth Legge for help with this essay.

References

(1) Cynnal Cymru-Sustain Wales, 2009, [Eco Worriers](#)