

# The Rhetoric of Climate Change: How Do We Talk About It?

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## I. Common myths about communication, climate change, and social change.

(adapted from Moser and Dilling, 495-498).

### **A. The Rationality Problem**

*"If only people understood the problem, they would change their behavior."*

*"Communicating climate change means convincing people of the reality of the problem."*

*"(Scientific) uncertainty is the main obstacle to action."*

*"Appealing to people's rational side is the most effective way to communicate."*

### **B. The Emotion Problem**

*"Maybe if we just scare people more, they'll get how urgent climate change is."*

*"What we really need is a big disaster."*

### **C. The Efficacy Problem**

*"Let's wait for a 'knight on a big white horse' to lead us forward."*

*"Climate change is a unique social challenge – we've never had to deal with anything like it."*

*"'Good' values will produce 'good' outcomes for the climate."*

## II. Obstacles to addressing climate change

### **A. Physical obstacles**

Lack of immediacy (time and space)

Causal links difficult to observe

Tragedy of the commons

Disparate impacts/injustice

### **B. Cultural/Communicative Obstacles**

Media practices – "balance as bias," economic pressures on quality of reporting

Focus on science – deflects attention from solutions, moral dimensions

Distrust of institutions – political parties, media, universities

"Green backlash" – skepticism about environmentalists' claims, alarmism

"Attention economy" – information overload, knowledge/ignorance paradox

Perceived threats to cherished values, habits, self-interest, "our way of life"

### **C. Political/Systemic Obstacles**

Economic interests

Distribution of power

### III. So, how should I/we talk about climate change?

1. Cardinal Rule: Know your audience.
  - What do they know/not know? What are their interests, motives, desires, goals?
  - What are their values? Whose opinion do they respect?
2. Identify credible *messengers*.
3. Focus on *local/observable* impacts.
4. Focus on *immediate* impacts.
5. Focus on potential impacts to *human health* and *one's children*.
6. Focus on *solutions*, not just problems.
  - “People want to know what they can do, that they are able to do it, and that others are doing their share as well” (Moser and Dilling, 505).
  
  - Displaces focus on “scientific consensus”
  - Can help overcome “wallowing in fear,” paralysis
7. Link personal action to communal and political action.
  - Increases perception of efficacy
  - Facilitates structural changes
8. Link climate change to related issues (air pollution, sprawl, energy, saving \$\$).
  - May raise salience of climate change for some audiences
  - Can illustrate added benefits of climate change solutions
9. Create opportunities for communication among peers
  - Establishes a non-threatening learning environment
  - Creates context for social support, accountability
  - Increases perception of efficacy
10. Tell stories.
  - Stories give context to dry facts
  - Stories provide connections between past/present/future
  - Stories give people a path for action

Creating a Climate for Change: Communication Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change,  
Susanne C. Moser and Lisa Dilling, eds., Cambridge University Press, 2007.