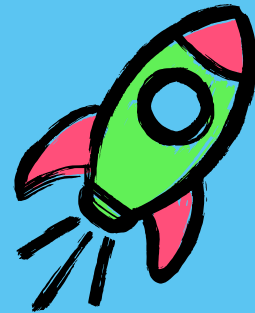


Revealing Hard Truths

A short introduction to communicating
about climate change



Introduction

Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for anyone who is interested in engaging people in their lives about the topic of climate change. This relates to your family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, stakeholders, funders, grantees, audiences, participants. In other words, the people in our lives, whether that's thousands of members or a few key funders. This is intended for those whose work and practices focus on climate change, as well as those who are new to the climate space and learning how to become more skilled at communications.

What this guide is not

This guide is not a comprehensive resource on this complex topic. It is intended as a simplified overview of key points, reminders and concepts, and not inclusive of all research and insights. This guide is not an academic paper or literature review.

Why do we need this guide?

Many of us are finding ourselves in situations where we need to address our climate crises, and yet those we work with or know may be in different places in their journey. Having guidance and "guiding principles" can help us do the most important action when it comes to addressing climate change: skillful communications that enable and lead to our capacity to face what is happening, and choose what kind of action we will take.

This guide is based on a body of work created by Dr. Renée Lertzman. Dr. Lertzman, with the support of the KR Foundation and a few donors, created a resource to help people grow as Guides for Change.

Use this guide to transform the way you approach challenging conversations with your community and stakeholders, anyone you seek to engage and bring along in our collective and shared responsibility to usher in a new way of living.

What is impact?

The answer depends on whom you ask. Many organisations use the word 'impact' loosely, without a good definition. Here are a few regularly cited definitions:



Climate Conversations: Why Are They So Difficult?

It's not easy. We've all been there before, trying to convince our family members, friends, neighbors, managers, colleagues and so on, that they should think about their impact on the climate... and have been met with resistance and defensiveness. Perhaps you have noticed that the people you are speaking to were even more resolute in their position throughout your conversation or interactions.

We know this experience and it is common.

Those of us who broach this topic do so because we care about: the environment, healthy communities, or future generations; or we simply want to help our loved ones feel better. We sometimes presume that people who make choices that are different from our own do not care. However, this isn't usually the case. The real story is that many of us are caught up in "tangles" (competing feelings, beliefs and concerns) and dilemmas that make it hard to broach. Add that the impacts of climate change can be emotionally simply terrifying to contemplate. And what makes it all even more difficult is a sense that there is not much one can do. A feeling of powerlessness can take over, which then paradoxically leads many of us to shut down, turn away, and shift our attention to something else that is easier to focus on.

It is vital that we situate climate change psychologically. The issue can bring up overwhelming, intense feelings, concerns and dilemmas. We are just beginning to understand the psychology of climate change—and it is not only about feeling potential anxiety, grief and loss. Climate change

can represent profound change and threaten our sense of identity, safety and security in the world. More often than not, people want to avoid or ignore the impacts of their behaviors because they are overwhelmed, conflicted, distracted, or insecure about the efficacy of their actions. They frequently say, "What difference will it make if I change my personal behaviour?" It is easy to feel individual actions have negligible effect on the issue at hand. And it is not your job to convince anyone. That is the first key rule about having climate conversations.

A frequently used strategy in sustainability and climate change efforts is to use communication styles that can, paradoxically, have an effect opposite to the one we want: changed behavior. These unhelpful styles are documented in the field of motivational interviewing, the most evidence-based approach in public health for effective behavior change. These include:

- Persuading
- Judging
- Pressuring
- Informing/Educating
- Scolding
- Shaming



How many of these have you tried? How do people respond?

Our relationship with human practices that contribute to climate change can be very complicated. For example, for certain cultures in the world, air travel is often culturally synonymous with status, adventure, and privilege. Or perhaps, as we discovered in our air travel-focused program "Grounding in Faith" in partnership with GreenFaith, air travel can be tied to spiritual practices, such as making pilgrimages to sacred sites. We may have dietary needs and cultural traditions that impact our choices; we may have limited options for commuting, traveling or where we get our energy from. These are obviously massively systemic issues. When we begin to communicate about these topics, we come up against a lot of resistance in the form of what's known in psychological fields as "defense mechanisms." These are often unconscious strategies for managing anxiety and feeling threatened. It may take the form of blame, shame, projection, avoidance and denial. This is completely understandable and should be expected.

Based on studies and evidence from psychology and motivational interviewing, we know that persuading, educating, cheerleading or doing a "sales pitch" around charged topics turns people off. This is because the goal is often about pushing our agenda on others. People are more open and receptive when they feel they are being approached with genuine curiosity and openness. By meeting people with an attitude of curiosity,

What Kind of Changemaker Are You?



compassion, and humor, we will be much more effective communicators.

However, for many of us it is unclear how to proceed. If these issues bring up such complicated and charged responses, what is the way forward?

The first step is becoming self-aware about how you are showing up.

Are you tending to be a *Righter*, *Cheerleader*, or an *Educator*? It is very common for us to fall into one of these modes of communicating. We may feel that it is our job to make the moral case for why we need to act, why it is "Right" (aka "*The Righter*.") The "[Righting Reflex](#)" is the term by the founders of Motivational Interviewing, Steve Rollnick and Bill Miller. We may feel it is our job to educate and provide people with information. Or, we may feel we need to be Cheerleaders and keep people feeling positive and upbeat. Often, we come at people with a sense of moral and ethical fire, as if to say, "What is wrong with you, unless we act, we are facing grave and dire consequences. (Don't you care?!)"

We invite you to consider approaching your communications from a very different angle.

And this is by being more of a Guide.



A Guide sees their role as evoking from the others (this can be an individual, a group of people, a large audience, millions of followers) their own connection with the issue, their own volition for change, and yes, their own motivation. The way to evoke meaningful reflections from others, all comes down to how we ask questions, how we listen, how we hold presence, and how we manage our own anxiety and urgency.

This starts with inquiring into the other person's experience first. **In other words, we wish to flip the script on how we approach climate communications entirely.** It is far more important to focus on how the other person is feeling, perceiving and relating to this content, than for you to share information—until you are asked for it.

Asking open-ended questions, before launching into telling, educating, and awareness raising, is integral to an engaged conversation.

The more open, honest, and vulnerable you can be, while remaining vibrant and aspirational, the more productive your conversations will be. If you demonstrate genuine empathy and understanding for other's experiences and point of view — you will have a much better chance of advancing the interaction. This can be very hard when the stakes are high and our passion and commitment are strong. While we know that we must make changes quickly at individual, collective, and systemic levels; we need to bring others along with us skillfully.

The Three A's

"The Three A's" developed by Dr. Renée Lertzman is a framework to help us stay open and connected with how others are responding to these issues; as we connect the dots between actions and climate change. We review these "A's" because as you engage in your climate conversations, you will want to be paying very close attention to what may be happening for those you are communicating with. This framework is intentionally simplistic. Naturally, people will have all kinds of feelings and responses, from grief and sadness, to confusion and overwhelm. It is never just one of these three things, but they capture the main essence of the most common tangles people experience when confronting the climate crisis, in very unique and different ways depending on background, demographics, personal context, political, social and cultural factors. These A's are shorthand to remind us to pause, listen and sense into what may be happening for those we are communicating with. This is fundamental.

- **Anxiety** of all kinds bubbles up for people when they think about behaviors that contribute to climate change. Our capacity, neurologically, to process information is actively impaired when we have any kind of anxiety or stress. By acknowledging

people's anxieties, we can communicate about the connections among: our behaviors, our health, our climate, and our environment — in a way that allows people to absorb the new information.

- **Ambivalence** is probably one of the most important concepts to understand in our work on education, climate, and behavior change. Many people experience ambivalence when confronted with change of any kind. Ambivalence is the competition of desires within all of us; The desire to retain the behavior that they have always known competing with the desire for change. There are understandable “double-binds” that arise for many people. A double-bind is when you feel pulled in different directions and cannot win. When you listen, and draw out these double-binds, you can engage in problem solving together. Often simply saying, “Of course,” can allow for a deeper and more honest conversation. We all fear being judged and criticized, so signalling that you are not going to attack, blame or shame is important.
- **Aspiration** is about feeling excited, aligning our actions with our values, and becoming the best person, community, citizen, and changemaker we can be. When we signal “bright spots,” we activate aspiration within

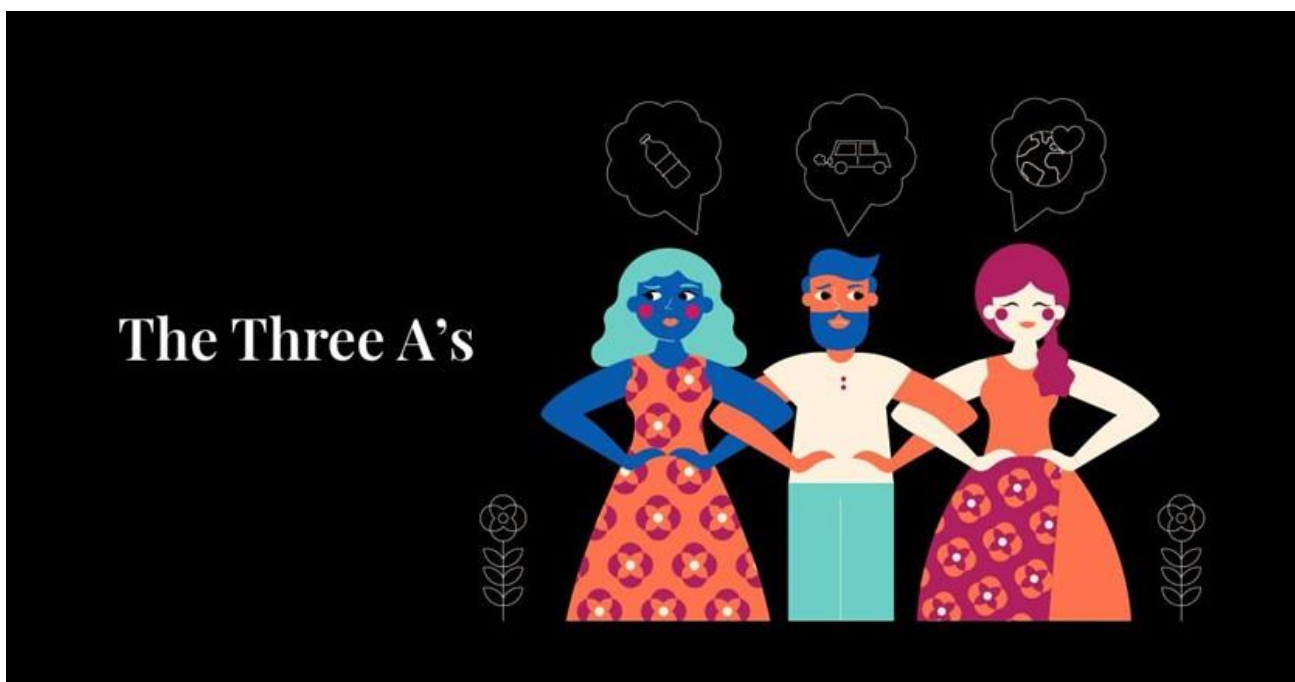
ourselves and remind one another that what we are doing is a step forward. The key is to do this in the context of the other A's so we are not only focusing on aspiration. (This is the tendency of the cheerleader, which is to push positivity rather than holding space to listen.) We must aspire to address all of the feelings and experiences, in our interactions.

Initiating Your Conversations



There is no actual formula to have a good conversation or interaction about climate change. Whether you are an individual seeking to engage your stakeholders, managers, colleagues, friends or family, or an organization, governmental agency, start-up, or impact business, we are in the position of communicating about what is going on and what we can do about it. And this can lead us into predictable patterns of either truth-telling, informing, pushing calls to action, or focusing on a specific activation or event.

While there is no one “right way,” however, we can offer a few best practices and guiding “steps” that may help you have a productive interaction. To prepare for your conversation, reflect on what the three A's might be for the person,



group, stakeholders, audiences, followers, communities you seek to engage; whether it is a friend, family member, spiritual leader, manager or partner, or groups. Really consider their context and put your own agenda aside. What might these issues and behavioural changes (whether it's about food, transportation, political action, energy usage, and so on) evoke?

Step 1: Listen and interview. Understand your people, audiences and stakeholders at a much deeper level than before. Pay attention to what is under the surface, and tune into those "Three A's." If you are an organization, this means hosting listening sessions and training people in reflective listening and facilitation. It means designing your surveys and instruments to be more nuanced. Ask clarifying questions and refrain from adding your own views or experiences. Seek to understand their point of view. Try to evoke feelings from the other person. Let them know you are not judging, shaming or attacking them. Let them know that you're eager to learn where they're coming from.

Example:

What's your experience with [the behavior], have you ever considered the climate impacts? What's your relationship with [the behavior], how do you feel about how much you do it?

Step 2: Acknowledge what you are hearing. Oftentimes we assume reflective listening only happens in an 1:1 interaction. This is not the case: we can also simulate a good sense of empathy by using wit, humor, and rhetorical questions. In conversations and interactions, this is also called *Reflective Listening* or *Active Listening*. The key to this is simply ensuring those we communicate with, know that you have heard and understood, and are being listened to. Ideally, when responding, incorporate the Three A's. Use reflection, summary, and open-ended questions.

Example:

Yes, these are challenging dilemmas. It sounds like you are doing your absolute best to live a good life and live in alignment with your values. I hear that you are open to changing your behavior but you feel

overwhelmed with implementing the change. I also hear you saying that you are excited to make some small lifestyle changes to address our climate crisis. Can you think of a scenario where you make small changes over a discrete period of time?

Step 3: Explore and engage openly with ambivalence. Ambivalence is literally when we feel pulled in conflicting directions. For example, I care deeply and want to move towards doing something about environmental protection, but I may also feel overwhelmed, low on time and worried about what people in my life may think. This is ambivalence, and is not the same as indifference. It is where people get caught in tangles. We often assume we need to skip over where people have ambivalence. It is the opposite. The more we can openly engage and name it, and giving our conflicts a voice, the more we are able to navigate and work through whatever is getting in our way of acting and aligning ourselves with our values.

Here are some ways we can explore ambivalence with people.

- Ask permission: "Would it be OK if we spent a few minutes talking about ___?"
- Ask disarming, open-ended questions: "What are some of the advantages of maintaining the status quo?"
- Ask reverse open-ended questions: "On the other hand, what are some of the reasons you see for making the change?"
- Summarize both sides of the ambivalence: Starting with the reasons for NOT changing, followed by reasons for changing: "So, you are already dealing with so much, like ensuring your family is taken care of, but you also recognize how important it is to be mindful of how we live and how that impacts on climate and the environment."
- Confirm: "Am I getting it right?" or "Am I following you?"
- Ask about the next step: "What do you see as the next step?"
- Show appreciation: "Thank you for your willingness to talk with me about ___."
- Voice confidence: "I can tell that, if and when, you make a firm decision to change

in this area of your life, you will find a way to do it!”

Demonstrating empathy is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal when it comes to talking with our community about charged topics like air travel, food choices, and energy consumption. In her [TEDx talk](#), author Marta Zaraska of Meathooked begins with sharing the disarming data that a large percentage of vegans and vegetarians still eat meat, especially after they’ve been drinking. She then tells a story illustrating the “[meat paradox](#)”—the cognitive dissonance that leads people to consume more meat when confronted with the facts about its negative impacts. Marta explained in an interview that she always opens with this kind of preamble because it helps disarm the audience about the topic. People relax because they know that she is human and won’t be pointing fingers or acting as a cheerleader for vegan lifestyles.

Our recommended approach is based on the recognition that most people, when given the opportunity, will elect to do things that are considered beneficial, healthy, or pro-social. However, we are often caught up on “tangles,” of which we aren’t fully aware. This is referred to as cognitive dissonance. **This is why it’s vital we pay attention to those Three A’s.**

When we begin conversations—mindful of what others may be wrestling with — and put aside our assumptions, we are in a better position to guide and support others toward alignment with our most deeply held values. We can do this together in conversations and compassionate interactions.

Good Luck!



Further Resources

- [Project InsideOut](#) - nonprofit resource for changemakers
- [Our Guiding Principles](#) - PDF overview of Becoming A Guide
- [The Secret to Talking About Climate Change](#) - a short animated video produced by the Alliance for Climate Education, based on Dr. Renee Lertzman's research and Climate Psych Labs delivered to young people (high school) in the United States.
- [MINT](#) - resource about Motivational Interviewing.
- [How to Turn Climate Anxiety into Action](#) - Dr. Renée Lertzman's TED Talk
- [The Most Important Thing You Can Do To Fight Climate Change Is Talk About It](#) - Dr. Katharine Heyhoe's TED Talk

About the Project



Project InsideOut

Project InsideOut is an initiative set up to serve the advocacy community of changemakers. We leverage the insights of neuroscience, social sciences, trauma psychology and practices in public health to create a methodology and approach that can be tailored to whatever existential issue you are working on. We run learning journeys, masterclasses and are often engaged by charity organisations to design programmes and trainings.

We have a set of core beliefs that inform our work and approach:

1. It is more effective to “guide” change rather than “drive” it.
2. The global issues we face are structural as well as psychological.
3. Psychology offers a vital and integral element of this work but is not the whole picture.
4. People care deeply about the planet, but are overwhelmed, conflicted, and often paralyzed; it is our role as changemakers to help unlock and guide this care.
5. Education alone is insufficient to transform the world. Theory must be translated into action.
6. We respect the integrity of every human being and that each person is self-determining.
7. We do not aim to “motivate” people, we guide, partner, catalyze and unlock each other.
8. We strive for humility, compassion, and care in all that we do and we take responsibility for when we get it wrong.

Project InsideOut, with a group of leading psychologists working at the intersection of climate, sustainability created 5 Guiding Principles that underpin this work. These make up the playbook for Becoming a Guide making and leadership needed for our work today, at scale and quickly. Each principle reflects evidence practices and prevailing wisdom that has stood the test of time. These Guiding Principles are: Attune, Reveal, Sustain. This is reflective of a relational approach to working on existential planetary crises, such as climate about our Guiding Principles [here](#).

Author



Dr. Renée Lertzman

Dr. Renée Lertzman works at the intersection of psychology, climate change, and organizational change. She partners with organizations across governmental, public and private sectors, and designs programmes, trainings and advising for changemakers to evolve as "guides." She is a TED speaker, public speaker, writer and thought leader. Dr. Lertzman has dedicated the past thirty years to the study and practice of how psychology can inform our existential work on climate, environment and conservation. She has a PhD in social sciences from Cardiff University, and a Master's in Communications from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. You can find her TED talk [here](#) and her award-winning project, Project InsideOut, [here](#).



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