

10 Do's and Don'ts of Discussing Climate Change



Communicating honestly about your issues and how you would like others to participate is key to success. When addressing climate change, it can be intimidating to attempt this honest communication because we are afraid the person to whom we are speaking may have preconceived ideas that will shut down their willingness to hear our ideas. This page will provide the words and tools to help you gain confidence and open the lines of communication around climate change.

1. **Do: UNDERSTAND YOUR GOAL IN INITIATING A CONVERSATION**

You will likely be asking people to take a specific action related to climate change. For example, you may ask a municipal official to approve funding for a local rain garden, you may encourage your neighbors to install rain barrels to reduce stormwater flooding, or you might convince your watershed association to take climate change into account in selecting plant species for riparian buffer strips they are planning. In each case, your goal is to convince them to take a specific action.

2. **Don't: GET HUNG UP ON WHETHER OR NOT YOUR AUDIENCE "BELIEVES" IN CLIMATE CHANGE**

We tend to think that if only people knew the real facts about climate change, they would change their behavior and do "the right thing." While knowing the facts or understanding the reality of climate can help, it doesn't necessarily lead people to change their behavior. Focus on the outcome you want to achieve with your project (e.g. reducing greenhouse gas emissions, supporting tighter water quality regulations, or building rain gardens).



3. **Do: CONSIDER WHAT MOTIVATES THEM AND LOOK FOR COMMON GROUND**

Is your audience made up of decision-makers? If so, they are likely to be concerned about saving money, meeting legal requirements or protecting investments.

Does your audience have members of your watershed association? If so, they may care about improving quality of life along the lake, they may have a personal interest in the issue, or may be interested in ensuring property values for waterfront homes.

If you are able to understand these motivations, you can present your issue in a light that helps others understand how supporting your request also meets their goals, providing a way to find common ground. To get a sense for the values and interests of different groups of people, check out the report, *Global Warming's Six Americas*, referenced at the end of this guide.

4. **Don't: ASSUME THAT WHAT MOTIVATES YOU ALSO MOTIVATES OTHERS**

Whether your goal is to preserve the environment, save a species of plant or animal, or to reduce the cost of water, it is likely that decision-makers with whom you are speaking don't share the same values and motivations. Before you make your request, determine what is important to the other person and find that common ground.

5. **Do: CHOOSE A FRAME THAT WORKS FOR YOUR AUDIENCE**

The frame that surrounds a picture can alter how viewers respond to it. The same is true of the frames we use when talking about issues. How you frame the issue of climate change for your audience can make your job easier.

Here are some frames to consider when talking about climate adaptation projects:

- **Promotion vs. prevention:** Individuals typically have either a promotion mindset (let's make this flood prevention project even more successful!) or a prevention mindset (let's make sure this flood prevention project doesn't fail). Including both in your messaging can help you engage a broader audience.
- **Gain vs. loss:** Most people will act to minimize loss rather than maximize gain. Simple changes in phrasing that emphasize taking action to avoid losing money, rather than saving money, can make a difference in perception.
- **Now vs. future:** The present matters much more to most people than the future. Focus on actions that can be taken now, or effects they are already seeing rather than what will happen by the end of the century.
- **Local vs. global:** Just as the world's economic condition is of less concern to most people than the job market in their own state, global climate change isn't nearly as worrisome as changes they see in their own community. Focusing on local impacts can increase your audience's interest and concern.

6. **Do: USE ACCURATE LANGUAGE THAT DOESN'T ALIENATE YOUR AUDIENCE**

If you think your audience won't respond well to the term climate change, talk to them about addressing the issue using other words such as larger storm events, droughts, or more extreme weather in general.

7. **Don't: OVERUSE CRISIS LANGUAGE**

Most communication around climate change takes a "Climageddon" approach, suggesting that the world and everything we love about it is doomed unless we stop climate change right this instant. While this does motivate some people, it can have a numbing or alienating effect on others, leading them to ignore or deny the problem as a means of coping with what they are hearing. If people feel the problem is much bigger than their capacity to act, they won't take it on. You can provide an honest view of the issue without suggesting that the world is coming to an end. Presenting problems in tandem with potential solutions increases our likelihood of listening and taking action.

- **Limit the risks you address:** Don't list all the possible problems resulting from climate change. Focus on the ones that are most important for your audience.
- **Acknowledge other concerns:** Claiming that climate change is the most important problem facing the world today can also lead people to feel that you are discounting other important problems they are experiencing or concerned about. Be respectful of other priorities, but make a case for why climate change should concern everyone. Point out how climate change impacts other issues. For example, if someone's primary issue is invasive species, explore how climate change may exacerbate the invasive species problem.

8. **Don't: OVER EXPLAIN**

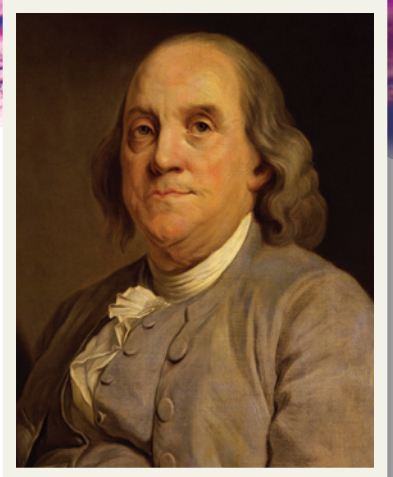
Give your audience just enough information around a few key points. Providing more detail than they need or want increases the perception of uncertainty.

9. **Do: TAKE A RISK MANAGEMENT APPROACH**

This is what we do when making decisions about whether or not to buy medical insurance, or wear a seatbelt. Would you rather buy insurance and never need it, or need insurance but not have it?



As Ben Franklin noted, “Nothing in life is certain except death and taxes.” In your communications, help give people skills or actions to move forward regardless of uncertainties related to climate change.



10. *Don't*: LET THE CONVERSATION BE STOPPED BY UNCERTAINTY

As Ben Franklin noted, “Nothing in life is certain except death and taxes.” Our lives are fraught with daily uncertainty, from the weather to the international financial markets. Yet when it comes to climate change, people somehow feel paralyzed by the uncertainty. It’s important to address climate change in a way that recognizes the uncertainty, but also gives people hope and the skills to move forward. Use examples based in daily experience. These can include a simple decision, like whether or not to bring an umbrella if it’s cloudy but not actually raining, or more difficult decisions like which option to pursue in the face of an uncertain medical diagnosis.

BACKGROUND RESOURCES

The U.S. government’s Climate Literacy Principles provide a basic foundation for understanding climate and climate change. Find them at: http://climate.noaa.gov/index.jsp?pg=/education/edu_index.jsp&edu=literacy

For an overview of climatic changes and impacts in the Great Lakes, check out regional reports by the U.S. Global Change Research Program: (<http://downloads.globalchange.gov/usimpacts/pdfs/midwest.pdf>) or the Union of Concerned Scientists (http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/science_and_impacts/impacts/climate-change-midwest.html)

For more information on audience types, framing, and related topics, see The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: <http://www.cred.columbia.edu/guide/>

To read more about Global Warming’s Six Americas: <http://environment.yale.edu/uploads/6Americas2009.pdf>



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