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# COMMUNICATING ON CLIMATE

*13 Steps and Guiding Principles*

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ecoAmerica

## COMMUNICATING ON CLIMATE

*Let's face it, we've all had times when talking about climate change has felt like a difficult task that results in dissonance and disagreement. For most people, climate change is an abstract subject tainted with divisive political positions. We've heard bits of guidance from select experts that we've tried to employ, such as getting the message and the messenger right. To some people, this means having scientists explain climate science to politicians. To others, it means having faith leaders talk about climate change in church. But there's more to it than that.*

*The truth is, we can all be effective communicators on climate change. Most Americans know that the climate around them is changing, and they are concerned. They want information that builds their understanding and confidence in ways that are consistent with their values and beliefs. If you truly understand and connect with those concerns, you can provide them with answers that they in turn can communicate to their networks.*

*These general guidelines work with any audience. They draw on research and real life experience from by ecoAmerica and others in creating effective programs that engage people on climate change. The first step, however, directs you toward specific audiences. Conservationists have different concerns than health care professionals or businesspeople. Grounding yourself in their specific concerns, versus your own or more general concerns, is the key to bringing out the realities of climate change.*

*Further information and additional research studies can be found at [ecoAmerica.org/research](https://ecoAmerica.org/research), on the [ecoAffect.org](https://ecoAffect.org) blog under the research section, as well as on [ClimateCommunication.org](https://ClimateCommunication.org), [ClimateAccess.org](https://ClimateAccess.org), [ClimateChangeCommunication.org](https://ClimateChangeCommunication.org), [ClimateNexus.org](https://ClimateNexus.org) and others. We welcome your comments and suggestions.*

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## THE 13 STEPS

1. *Start with people, stay with people*
2. *Connect on common values*
3. *Acknowledge ambivalence*
4. *Scale from personal to planet*
5. *Sequence matters*
6. *Use “facts,” not science*
7. *Inspire and empower*
8. *Be solutions-focused*
9. *Describe, don't label*
10. *Have at least 1 powerful fact from a trusted messenger*
11. *Prepare don't adapt*
12. *Speak from the mountaintops, don't fight in the trenches*
13. *Message discipline is critical*

## 13 STEPS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following are the 13 steps to crafting an emotionally resonant, personalized, and effective message on climate change.

1. **Start with people, stay with people.** Doing homework on your audience and their work and concerns demonstrates respect. If you can connect what they care about to climate change in their own words, they will listen to you. If you research to understand their needs and relate to them where they are, it will open hearts and minds. Start from their perspective, and infuse what they care about throughout the entirety of your conversation or communication.<sup>1,2</sup>
2. **Connect on common values.** Many people talk about the science of climate change, the causes and consequences, and what must be done to address the issue. However, if you want people to care and act, you need to make the issue relevant to them. Connecting on values that bring us together – family, community and America – opens up emotional and motivating bonds that humanize yourself and form the foundation of a productive discussion on climate change.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>
3. **Acknowledge ambivalence.** Not all of us have the same information on climate change, and many Americans are focused on other priorities. If you start out assuming everyone knows, or should know, or cares, or should care as much as you do, you will lose much of your audience. A simple line like, “Some people are worried more about climate change, and some people are less concerned,” will allow people to be comfortable where they are, and listen to you with an open mind.<sup>1</sup>
4. **Scale from personal to planet.** People understand what they can see around them with their own eyes. If you talk about Superstorm Sandy or wildfires in the Rockies, people get that. Then you can scale up to other areas of the country or the planet. Starting with global catastrophe leads to fatalism, since many people can’t see how their actions could address such a big problem.<sup>1,2</sup>
5. **Sequence matters.** Research reveals that you can take the same set of six facts, arrange them in different ways, and end up with very different results. Connect on common values, acknowledge ambivalence, and scale from personal to planet. If you start with the negative and impersonal, it’s very hard to get to the positive, personal and relevant. Try going the other way.<sup>1</sup>
6. **Use “facts,” not science.** Every time you read about science, it’s refuting some other science. We have our scientists, and the other side has theirs. Everyone knows scientists argue, and that science can be mutable. Talking about science opens the door to question and debate. It’s better to assume the science, and talk about the facts. Over 80% of Americans notice that the climate and weather are changing. Talk about the facts of warmer summers and droughts. After all, you don’t talk about the science of smoking cigarettes - you talk about health.<sup>1,2</sup>
7. **Inspire and empower.** The most important thing to do to get people to engage on climate change is to convey a sense of hope and potential. Many of us avoid the subject because it can be depressing. America has doubled the supply of solar energy in just the past 2 years. America has solved great challenges before, and we know we can solve this one too.<sup>1,2,5,6</sup>
8. **Be solutions-focused.** If climate change is as large of a problem as we say it is, Americans will expect us to offer (and will respond better to) practical solutions that match at scale. Even if you talk about light bulbs, it’s about what can happen when all of us change them. Show the path to achieve your solution. Will it seem realistic? Overwhelm problems with solutions, presenting five solutions for every 1 problem, ensuring you focus on solutions actively in place all around them. Doing so will quell any feelings of futility and fatalism, while at the same time motivating them on what is possible. Avoid suggesting people sacrifice. Americans have shallow tolerance for more problems; they are strapped for time, resources, and money. Offer a path to a better life, not a lesser life.<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup>
9. **Describe, don’t label.** Labels are code words that bring up other, sometimes negative, associations. Abstractions don’t have the same power as do concrete terms. A lot of climate change terms, like “mitigation,” don’t mean much to Americans. Rather than talk about “alternative energy,” talk about wind and solar power. Rather than “ecosystem collapse”, talk about the plants and animals that we depend on to survive. The most persuasive language is vivid, familiar, and descriptive.<sup>1,6</sup>
10. **Have at least 1 powerful fact from a trusted messenger.** One or two facts with a lot of emotional power can add significant weight to your message. Highly trusted messengers - different for different audiences - lend credibility and importance. Find a great, relevant quote from someone your audience knows and trusts.<sup>1,7</sup>
11. **Prepare, don’t adapt.** Adaptation is a disempowering term that leads to fatalism and resignation. You can’t do anything about it, so just adapt. Preparation, on the other hand, leads to action. Preparation implies there’s a problem that we can do something about. Americans know how to prepare, and part of preparation is risk mitigation.<sup>6,8</sup>
12. **Speak from the mountaintops, don’t fight in the trenches.** Focus on the big picture, on what’s important, on working together to achieve common good. Arguing details turns off your audience and distracts from the important point. Whether the drought is the worst or the second worst ever is not the point. The point is the trend, the big issue, and the solutions.<sup>1,2</sup>
13. **Message discipline is critical.** Simple messages, repeated often, by trusted messengers are powerful. Follow the rules above, be consistent, and don’t be afraid of repeating critical points. Explaining the same thing in different ways may be more confusing than it is enabling.<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Climate Truths," ecoAmerica, 2009

<sup>2</sup> "American Climate and Environmental Values Survey," ecoAmerica, 2011

<sup>3</sup> "The Psychology of Climate Change Communication," Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, Columbia University, 2009

<sup>4</sup> "Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Shared Values," World Wildlife Fund, 2010

<sup>5</sup> "New Rules, New Game – Communication Tactics for Climate Change," Futerra Sustainability Communications, 2011

<sup>6</sup> "Climate Impacts: Take Care and Prepare," ecoAmerica, 2012

<sup>7</sup> "Engaged Nurses, Healthy Americans," ecoAmerica 2012

<sup>8</sup> "The American Public's Preference for Preparing for the Possible Effects of Global Warming: Impact of Communication Strategies," Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, 2013

## PUTTING METHOD INTO PRACTICE

### A Hypothetical Example Using the 13 Steps

#### 1. Start with people, stay with people:

Janine begins by showing understanding of and appreciation for her audience, and connects with their values throughout her speech.

**2. Connect on common values:** Janine builds rapport by connecting with her audience's values through a community treasure.

**3. Acknowledge ambivalence:** Here, Janine carefully introduces climate change, respects the potential spectrum of audience attitudes, and allows people in the room to hold differing beliefs.

**4. Scale from personal to planet:** Janine makes climate personally relevant by pointing to the local impacts, then scales up.

**5. Sequence matters:** By this point in her speech, Janine is able to ease into talking to her audience about climate change because she has followed the first four steps to open up the conversation (and her audience's minds).

**6. Use "facts," not science:** Janine talks about the drought; the water level is down, fish are impacted, and water supplies are diminished. Here Janine points to irrefutable facts that her audience can see with their own eyes.

**7. Inspire and empower:** After discussing the impacts of climate change, Janine moves quickly to motivate her audience. She does this by conveying hope, potential, and ability.

#### Janine Robert's Speech to the Rotary Club of Sioux Falls, IA

Hello, and good afternoon. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. I am a big fan of your mentorship program here in the local high schools – it's a perfect example of the business community playing a leadership role to improve our civic life.

Today I am here to talk about one of our city's treasures, the Big Sioux River. Most of us have grown up fishing or rafting there, or just walking along its banks. I bet if I asked, each of you could recall several wonderful memories with family and friends along its shores, or wading in its waters. My husband and I have spent weeks fishing there with the kids.

Who has been to the Big Sioux River lately? For those of you who have, I think you'll agree it's not hard to see that the river isn't what it used to be.

Now I can bet we have many differing opinions in the room on what or who's to blame for these changes in our climate, and I would also wager that we can all agree we need The Big Sioux River! And, it needs us.

There is change happening right in our backyards, in the backyards of all of Iowa, and throughout the country. The water level is down, and higher water temperatures are impacting fish counts and fish health. Our main source of clean drinking water is diminishing.

We have the opportunity and ability to do something about it. We can help restore and protect not only the Big Sioux River, but also our livelihoods and our nation, for ourselves, our children, and future generations.

The good news is that there are already leaders in this community who have started to do something to help. Some of the high schools in your mentorship program are helping to plant trees near the river, the Mayor has implemented smart water use, several of our churches and church goers have taken The St. Francis Pledge to lead by example in reducing their impact, and solar power is a rapidly growing industry in the state. According to the Argus Leader, the solar power industry in Iowa grew 33 percent in just one year. These are just a few examples of the many meaningful and powerful things we can do to prepare for and help prevent further climate change.

And so I am asking you, as leaders in the business community, to be part of the solution. Solutions can be accessible, effective, meaningful, and good for business. Whether it is making your operations more efficient or planting native plants in your garden, there is something for everyone to do. In fact, there are over 100 ideas listed in the materials you have in your hands. I am happy to discuss them with you.

Finally, you have the power to set a new example, to help prepare and protect our community from the impacts of climate change, and to work to preserve our treasured natural heritage, the Big Sioux River. Join me in being part of the solution.

Individually we can make a difference; collectively we can do so much more.

Thank you. I look forward to collaborating with you.

**8. Be solutions-focused:** Janine is showing that solutions are accessible and meaningful. Notice that she avoids asking her audience to sacrifice.

**9. Describe, don't label:** Throughout this speech, Janine is using concrete and descriptive language that is familiar to her audience. She avoids technical terms or abstractions, like "mitigation."

**10. Have at least 1 powerful fact from a trusted messenger:** Janine doesn't weigh her speech down with numbers (which cause people to tune out). Instead, she inspires them with 1 powerful fact on the statewide increase in solar power.

**11. Prepare, don't adapt:** Janine uses the term "preparation" instead of "adaptation" to inspire action. She knows her audience understands the term, which conjures up proactive and preventative steps that scale.

**12. Speak from the mountaintops:** Janine increases the momentum she has built up in the room. She talks big picture, and focuses on common good. In the question and answer session that follows this speech, Janine will be sure to avoid argument, specifically on details.

**13. Message discipline is critical:** Message consistency makes it easy for audiences to understand, remember, and share. Janine stays on point, and is clear and consistent.



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*start with people*

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ecoAmerica grows the base of popular support for climate solutions in America with research-driven marketing, partnerships, and national programs that connect with Americans' core values to bring about and support change in personal and civic choices and behaviors.

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