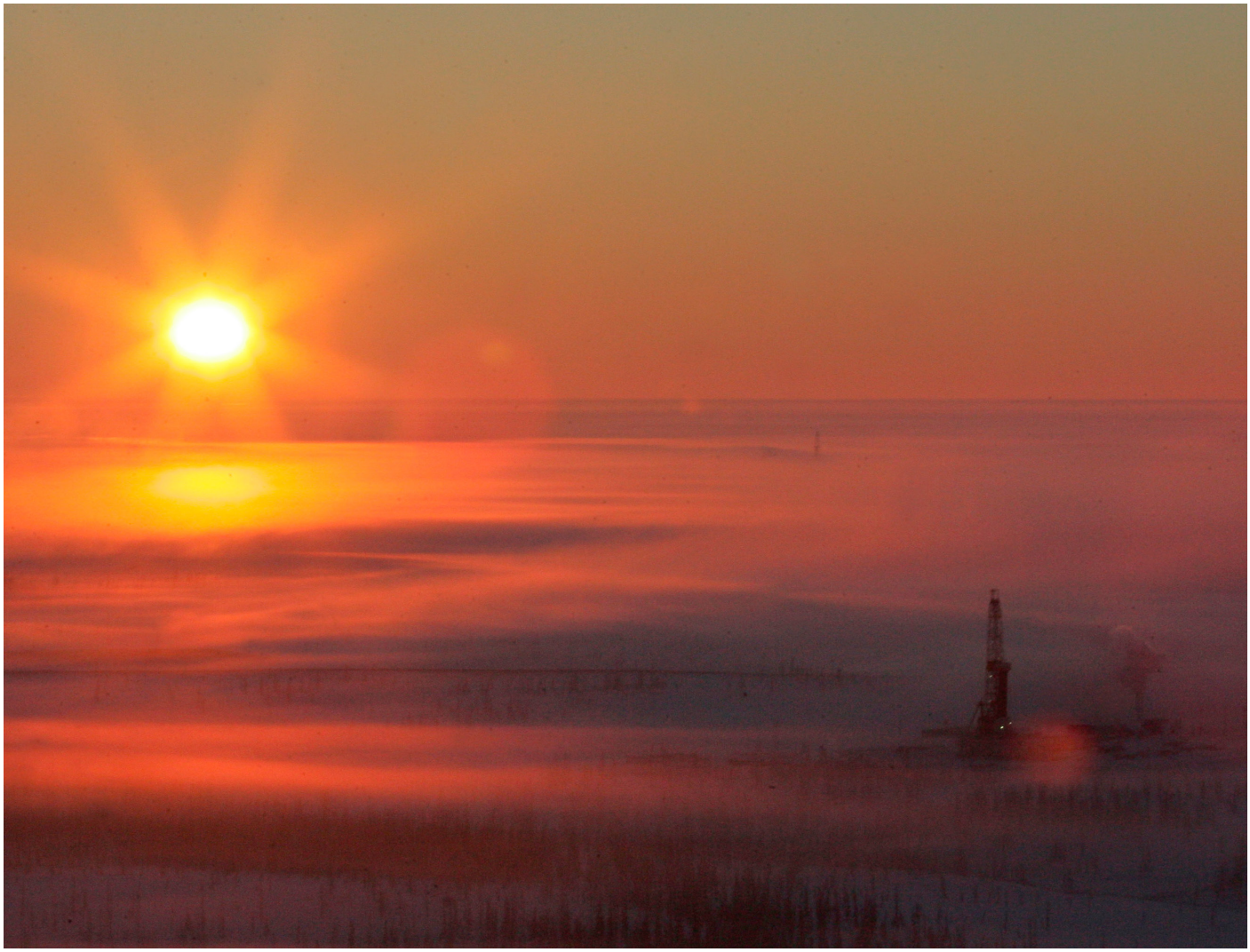


Tackling apathy and denial

Why do so many people switch off when it comes to climate change? How can psychology help to generate a more constructive response?

By **Renee Lertzman**, climate, energy and environment consultant

For those working on the front lines of climate action, it can be bewildering why more people are not taking action to protect themselves and their planet from the myriad threats posed by climate change. Despite what is currently known about these threats, humans continue to be slow in responding to the evidence.

Across governmental, private and public sectors, this conundrum is often addressed by focusing on the best means for communicating about climate change, and how to spark new behaviour in people – everything from political engagement to lifestyle changes. In recent years, we've seen a considerable proliferation of initiatives, studies, articles and projects dedicated to achieving this.

However, underlying many of these efforts are assumptions about the nature of engaging and mobilising, as well as the role of the individual in meeting these challenges. In light of increasing urgency and need, we now have the opportunity to

◀ The Vankor oil field in eastern Siberia, Russia. Dependence on fossil fuel income often goes hand-in-hand with climate denial. In the Pew Research Center's latest Global Attitudes Survey, Russia scored lowest out of 38 countries in its perception of climate change as a threat

carefully consider our approaches – and, importantly, review emerging research into the central role of 'affect', emotion and social interactions for climate change action.

Effective communication

Our thinking on effective communicating with individuals tends to fall into one of four dominant orientations: behaviour, framing, systems and emotions. This is also referred to as the 'quadrant of engagement'. This is a broad map, recognising that in the real world, these approaches often overlap. That said, more often than not, many of us become mired in one or two of these approaches.

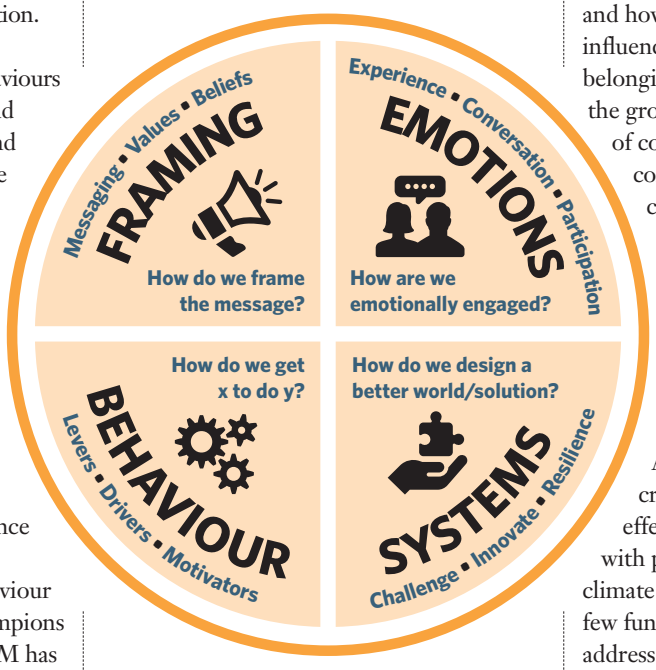
First, we have the behaviour orientation. This tends to emphasise the power of behavioural economics in shifting behaviours – from 'nudging' to using incentives and rewards to stimulate desired actions, and fees and penalties to punish undesirable ones. This way of thinking about engaging individuals has become deeply entrenched in many organisations. Yet research shows that individual behaviours are largely shaped by social contexts and underlying (largely unconscious) emotional drivers.

One example of how behavioural science has taken hold of climate communications has been the prevalence of community-based social marketing (CBSM), a protocol for sparking behaviour change through the use of teams, champions and ambassadors. In many ways, CBSM has become a stand-in for most approaches for behaviour change. When we speak about drivers, levers and motivation, we know we are usually in this quadrant, referencing behavioural economics, language and frameworks.

Next, we have a focus on framing. This approach is epitomised by using values-based framing to convey and persuade people to take climate action. The underlying thinking is that, given how climate and related issues concerning energy resources have become deeply ideologically charged, using the right kinds of 'frames' – phrases, language and words that resonate for specific communities, sectors and populations – can gain more traction.

Many research teams and centres around the world focus on framing and messaging as key levers for reaching individuals and sparking greater levels of engagement in climate issues. Often surveys are used to elicit the 'magic words' to use. This quadrant has been more recently influenced by the interest in storytelling, recognising how stories and narratives are powerful modes for conveying complex and potentially abstract information.

The quadrant of engagement



The third quadrant – systems – concentrates on systems-level change and, in particular, on solutions. This orientation is strongly influenced by the design sciences sectors, notably emerging from the work of Paul Hawken, who in the early 1990s in *The Ecology of Commerce* noted that sustainability is fundamentally a design problem.

This orientation is exemplified by the recent Project Drawdown – a research project that focuses explicitly on addressing climate change through the remarkable capacities we have as humans to innovate and solve design problems. This quadrant is also marked by the use of challenges (such as the Fuller Challenge) and competitions – whether among individuals, organisations, states or countries – to spark engagement and innovation.

The fourth quadrant – emotion – remains the most unexplored in the climate sectors. Yet it presents critical insights that can amplify and support all of the others. This orientation is grounded in the research about how 'affects' – such as desire, anxiety, security, anger, hope, inspiration – are what drive much of our behaviour.

The focus is less on identifying the right values, but on the conflicts or dilemmas that impede behavioural shifts, and how these conflicts are often socially influenced (identity, social norms, pressures, belonging). This quadrant also reflects the growing research into how the power of conversation – whether in-person conversations in groups, or taking conversational approaches to campaign strategies and education – can accelerate both behaviour change and overall engagement in the issues (take Carbon Conversations, for example).

From motivation to empowerment

All of these orientations offer critical insights into how we can effectively communicate and engage with populations at scale in addressing climate change issues. However, there are a few fundamental challenges that we need to address, as well as some gaps in our thinking to date.

First, we need to revise an underlying assumption that we need to motivate people to take action on climate change. This presumes there is a fundamental lack of care, concern or motivation that leads people to remain disengaged and inactive. This assumption directly conflicts with the deeply systemic nature of our challenges. It also presumes that people will act on

all of their most deeply held values, which may include wellbeing, safety, security and protection of nature. This is simply not the case.

In addition, we need to take heed of the lack of rationality when it comes to our behaviours. Issues represented by climate – whether they concern food, transportation, energy resources, industry or political action – can bring up tremendous conflicts for people, particularly between their values, aspirations and desires.

It is no longer as simple as raising awareness about the issues and expecting people to act accordingly. For example, in writing about the meat paradox, researchers Bastian and Loughnan discuss how connecting the act of eating meat with harm to animals can trigger intense cognitive dissonance. As a result, people will not only resist such awareness-raising, but will actually increase their consumption of meat as a way of reducing this dissonance.

is the increased focus on what it means to engage people. The challenge becomes less about how to motivate people to change, and more on how we can engage people to experience themselves as participants, stakeholders and co-creators of their future.

Taking into account the extensive research into the power of intrinsic motivation, we can frame engaging with climate change issues in terms of empowerment, purpose, meaning and mattering. We can design our communications efforts in terms of invitation and inclusion, rather than exhorting people to take steps to change their behaviour.

The science of engagement

We know more now than we ever have about the complexities and nuances of how humans learn new information – especially when that information stirs up confusion, a sense of being overwhelmed, powerlessness, conflict or unwanted emotions.

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Understanding how humans manage psychological conflicts such as guilt, ambivalence, shame, anxiety and uncertainty has yet to fully enter into our work on communicating and engaging with people effectively about climate change. Rather, there is a tendency to focus on raising awareness of the problems, or an exclusive focus on the solutions.

There is a notion that if we can stimulate enough concern and fear, and then swiftly introduce solutions, we can get people to take action more quickly. However, this is not necessarily the case. Often, people need to reflect and process what this means for them, and to be assured that taking action will not threaten their fundamental sense of security and identity.

One of the most promising developments when it comes to empowering individuals

As Daniel Goleman has written: "The brain's basic design offers a prototype of how we handle pain of all sorts, including psychological distress and social anxieties."

Research across neuroscience, clinical psychology and public health offers profound insights for climate change efforts – specifically about how to address topics that may evoke difficult feelings. It is not a question about whether to be negative or positive, but what our work looks like if we take on board that climate change threats are arguably traumatic. If we apply what is known about how our minds process trauma, there are important implications for the ways we communicate.

As neuroscientist VS Ramachandran wrote in the late 1990s: "If confronted with new information that doesn't fit the model, [our mind] relies on defence mechanisms to deny, repress or confabulate – anything to preserve the status quo."

Although he wasn't talking about climate change, he very well could have been. The question is how we can navigate these defence mechanisms that seem to work against our best efforts. Do we focus on more positive stories and solutions, making engagement local and doable?

The answer is yes – and more. People need to know what they can do to make a meaningful difference, otherwise they will tune out and avoid engaging, out of self-protection. Powerlessness and helplessness are difficult things for people to experience.

That said, the most effective way to help motivate people is to acknowledge the extent to which something may seem overwhelming, insurmountable or hard to imagine. Our ability to empathise and connect with people is of utmost importance. All of the champions, ambassadors, social pledges and social media campaigns will never be sufficient unless we allow people to respond and react to the basic recognition of the current situation facing everyone on the planet. Paradoxically, the most effective way for doing so is by having conversations. The ability to reflect, think aloud and share stories is how we as humans are wired to learn, change and grow – not as individuals, but as communities.

The importance of empathy

As our work addressing climate change evolves to meet the pressing need for large-scale engagement, we would all be well served by tapping into the research and insights into how our minds work. This means going beyond a focus solely on behaviour, values, messaging and framing, solutions and storytelling. It requires building capacities for engagement that take into account the central role of 'affect' – how these issues make us feel, and how overwhelming they can be for many people.

Pushing solutions is itself not the only solution. Helping people see themselves as empowered actors in changing our world, framing the issue as an opportunity not a burden, is where we can find our greatest headwind. Empathy is a critical ingredient in this mix, if we are to be effective. ●