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How to communicate a climate emergency

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Steps for communicating climate emergency mobilisation

01

Urgency & courage

The Earth is already too hot: we are in danger now, not just in the future. The Great Barrier Reef and other coral systems are dying. We are greatly exceeding Earth's limits, and food and water shortages are contributing to conflicts and forced migration.

On current trends, following the *Paris Agreement*, we may face catastrophic warming within our children's lifetimes, with large parts of the world uninhabitable and major food growing regions ruined by drought (such as Australia's Murray-Darling Basin, south-western USA) or rising seas (such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, Egypt). Climate warming is an existential risk to human civilisation, and on the current warming path we are heading towards outright chaos.

The failure of community and political leaders to talk about such concerns leaves unspoken fears lurking just below the surface of public life, sapping our strength. Fear and alarm should be welcomed as healthy reactions that show we've noticed something dangerous is going on.

Our response to the climate crisis is the courage to match actions to the size of the problem.

02

Emergency response

Many people realise we are heading for a social and planetary crisis. Three-quarters of Australians consider climate change a "global catastrophic risk".

Many people have experienced emergencies such as fires, floods or cyclones. In these times, we move into emergency mode. In emergency mode we stop "business-as-usual" because nothing else matters as much as the crisis. We don't rush thoughtlessly in, but focus on a plan of action, which we implement with thought, and all possible care and speed, to protect others and get to safety. Everyone chips in, with all hands on deck. Climate warming is now a planetary crisis or emergency, requiring courageous leadership and a coordinated society-wide response of a scale and speed never before seen in peacetime.

It is now too late for gradual, incremental steps to protect what we care about.

The Titanic didn't just need to slow its pace, but needed to turn at emergency speed. It's the same for climate warming. When you are about to go off a cliff, you need to reverse out of the danger zone fast, not just slow your speed.

03

People's mobilisation

A failure to properly recognise and communicate the full extent of the climate crisis has produced a dangerous complacency.

The danger we face didn't just happen. It's the result of decisions taken by people with vested interests who run the world's biggest corporations and too much of the media, and their political colleagues.

People made this problem, and people can fix it. We have the capacity to solve this problem, and live in a safe climate.

Successful social movements are energised by the strength of purpose that comes with working together for a just cause.

Popular movements have stopped tyrannical governments, won civil rights and better working conditions and better health services. They have closed down dirty coal and gas mining.

Change is already happening: new wind and solar are cheaper than new coal power. A transition disrupting the old energy industries is well under way.

We have the economic and technological capacity to succeed, but a failed politics is preventing the fast change that is now essential.

04

Fast solutions

The planet is already too hot, so we must stop emitting climate-warming gases such as carbon dioxide and methane, as fast as humanly possible. At emergency speed.

We are already in the climate danger zone, so we need to reduce or “draw down” some of the climate-warming gases in the air. Restoring degraded forests is a great starting point.

Achieving these goals fast is essential if we are to stop further “tipping points” in the climate system that would lead to many metres of sea-level rise, drowning cities and rich coastal lands.

We have the knowhow to make change fast, and plans to support communities most directly affected by change.

And change can happen fast when we really apply our effort: from fighting natural emergencies and rebuilding cities, to going to the moon or building a digital economy.

The steps to a safe climate will also build a better and more livable world: clean energy, better-designed cities, comfortable homes, healthier food, less waste, regenerative farming and the recovery of the natural world.

What’s the framing?

Counterposing “fear” and “hope” narratives is a false dichotomy, because both are needed. Just reading a climate message that forthrightly describes the seriousness of our situation can increase commitment to taking action. Strong fear messages have been found to be more effective than weak fear messages. When fear is combined with hope this can create an emotional drive that motivates a change of habit.

Health, well-being, livelihood

In their hearts, most people value the same things: good relationships with friends and family, providing for and supporting their families, and making a positive social contribution. The health, wellbeing and livelihood frame presents climate change in ways that connect to core values and issues familiar to people and decision makers.

It can activate and reinforce values of empathy, responsibility, protection, community, fairness and opportunity. These world views are commonly held by both conservative and progressives.

The health, wellbeing and livelihood frame is an opportunity to spell out not just the centrality of the climate change threat, but how it impacts and threatens each and every part of our lives, including where we live, jobs, transport, energy infrastructure, the economy and even where we holiday.

Telling the story

Our climate is already too hot, with more dangerous heatwaves and bushfires, droughts and crop failures, and coastal flooding.

Accelerating climate warming could bring on social breakdown and global economic crisis.

But Australia’s government, held back by vested interests, is failing to protect us and the things we care about.

Like other emergencies, we need to throw everything we’ve got at this to restore a safe, healthy climate.

We have the resources and knowledge to succeed.

We need a whole-of-community* effort to make big changes within a decade.

