

Communicating for change

Kris De Meyer - PowerUp Academy - 25 October 2023



Content

Part 1: The neuroscience basis of good communications

Part 2: How issues become contentious and polarised

Break

Part 3: How change happens - and doesn't

Part 4: The AURA of good climate comms

Format

- interactive, lean forward - can you keep video on?
- two breakout room activities
- Q&A at the end

Part 1

The neuroscience basis of good communications

Activity

If climate change was a...

Activity - If climate change was...

On a piece of paper, write down your answer to the following questions:

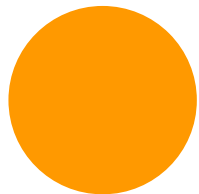
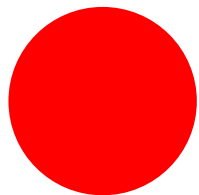
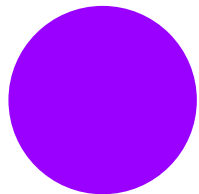
1. If climate change was a colour, what colour would it be?
2. If climate change was an animal, what animal would it be?

No need to overthink, write down the first answers that come to mind

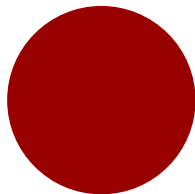
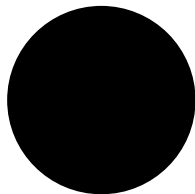
Now please type your answer in the chat

Common answers

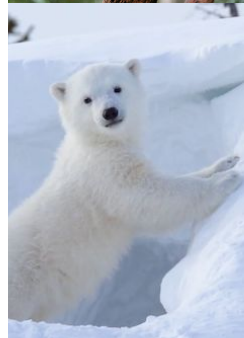
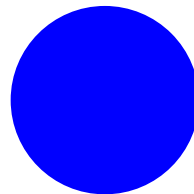
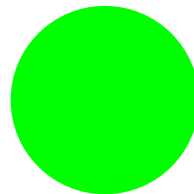
danger



death and decay



protecting nature



What did we just do?

Poke the Elephant



Insight 1

Not 1 type of thinking, but 2

Not one type of thinking, but two

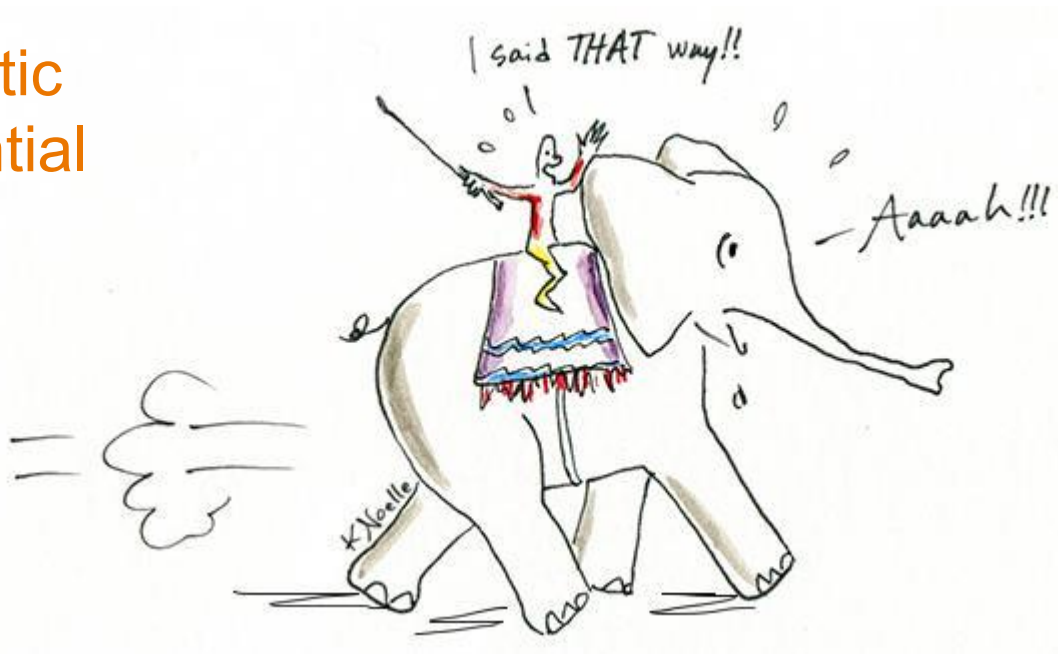
Intuitions

interact

Reasoning

Automatic
Experiential

Controlled
Analytical



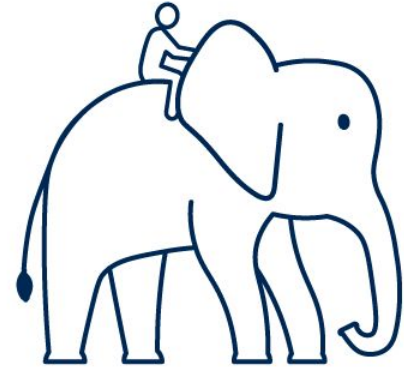
...LET'S BE HONEST AND ACKNOWLEDGE THERE'S AN
ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM...



© OVI CONTRAS 2014

1. Intuitions come first, reasoning second
2. Intuitive thinking and associations are rooted in lived experiences

Elephant and Rider



Take Home Messages



Insight 2

Ginger the Dog

What we say to dogs

Okay, Ginger! I've had it!
You stay out of the garbage!
Understand, Ginger? Stay out
of the garbage, or else!



What they hear

blah blah GINGER blah
blah blah blah blah
blah blah GINGER blah
blah blah blah blah...



**What we *think* we say
is often not what other people *hear***

Ginger explained

Words and phrases develop different 'felt meanings' and associations - based on our lived experiences and expertise

Reasons

- jargon
- 'doing' differences
- value differences

The science behind Ginger

“Our results show that at least 10 to 30 variants of word meanings exist for even common nouns. Further, people are unaware of this variation, and exhibit a strong bias to erroneously believe that other people share their semantics.”

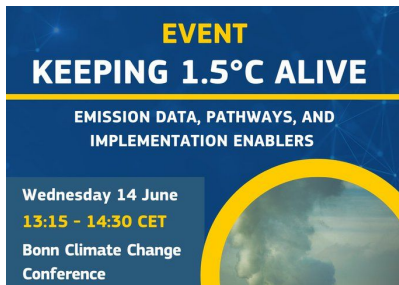
Marti et al. 2023 Open Mind https://doi.org/10.1162/opmi_a_00072

Ginger the dog - example

‘boundary
of doom’

‘unachievable
target’

‘1.5C’



Leaders | Goodbye 1.5°C

The world is missing its lofty climate targets. Time for some realism

Activity - your 'Ginger' moment

Think of an example of when you have experienced a 'Ginger the dog' moment - either as listener, speaker or observer - from your professional or personal life

Make a few notes about your example. In particular:

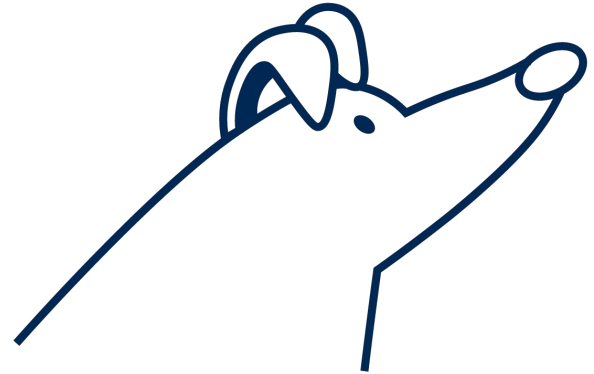
- What happened in that moment
- What the effect was (if any) on the conversation
- How you dealt with the situation

We will break into groups of 4 to share your examples (6 minutes)

Breakout rooms

1. What we *think* we say is often not what other people *hear*
2. You can't define away Ginger, but surface the problem early on
3. Work your way around it by avoiding the term - instead using examples and evocative language

Ginger the dog



Take home message

Part 1 - Summary

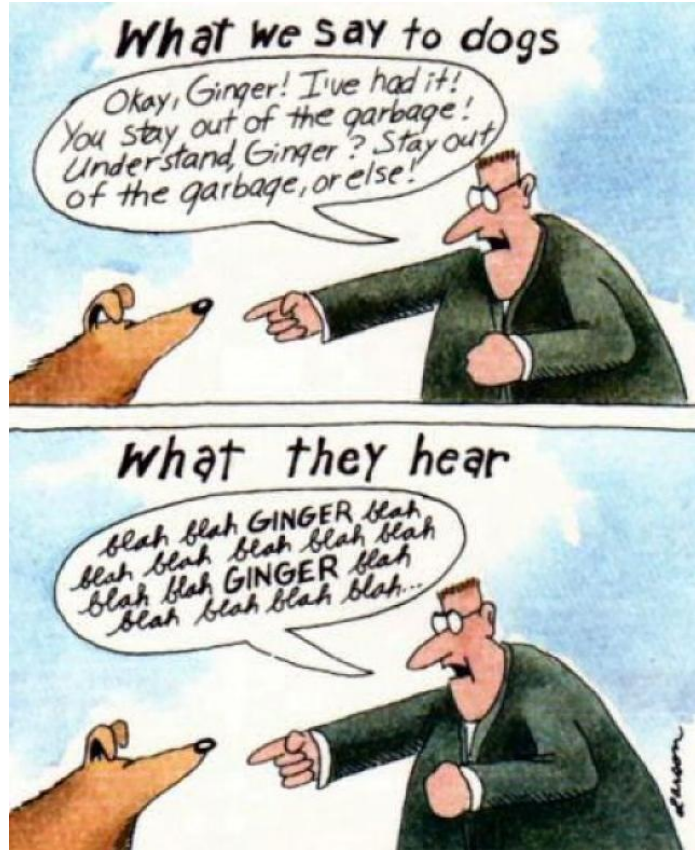
Welcome to the Zoo:
of Dogs and Elephants

The secret of good communication...



...is talking to the Elephant

...while being aware of how it can go wrong



Part 2

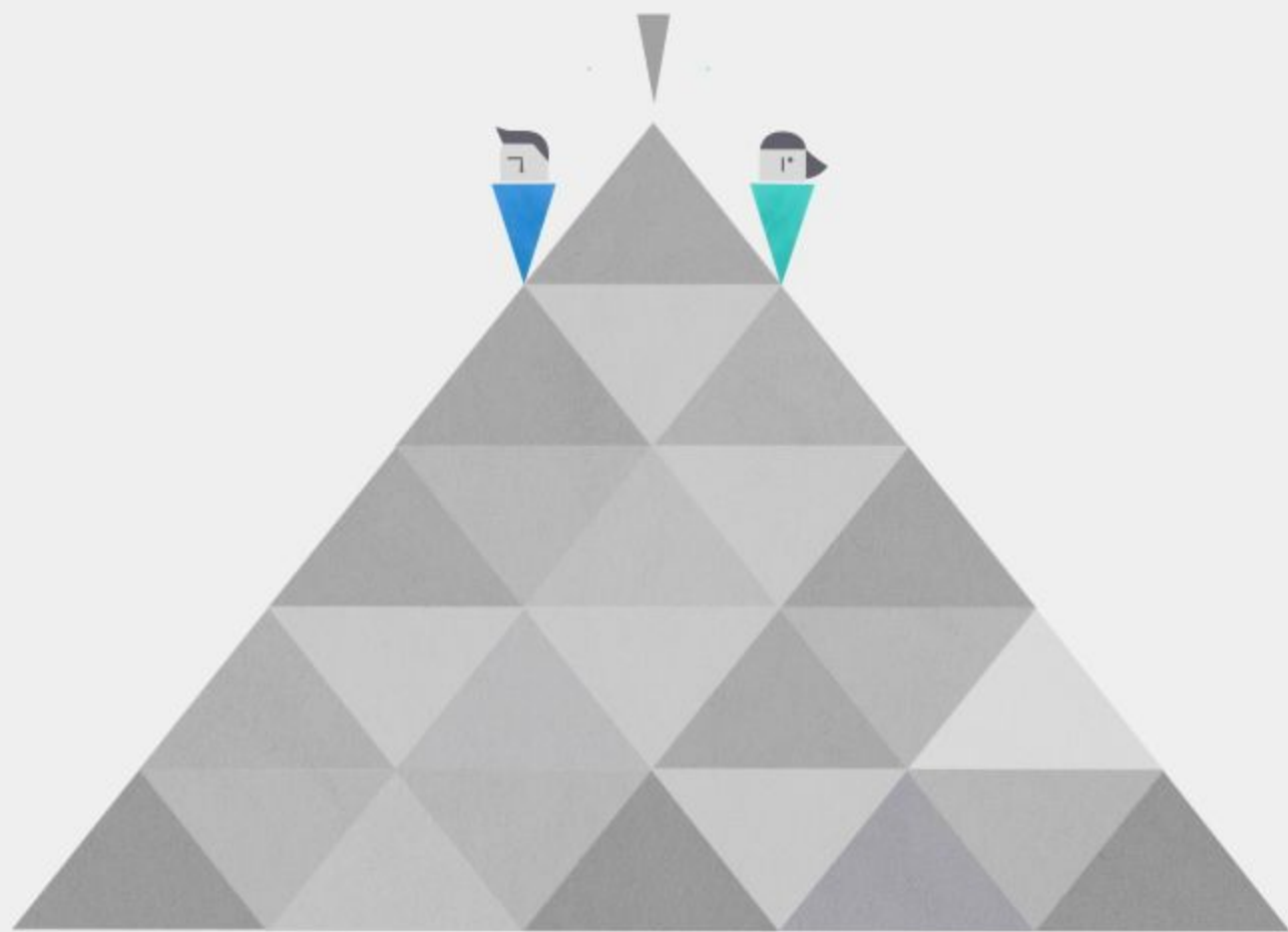
How issues become
contentious and polarised

**How we move from
weak to *strong* opinions**



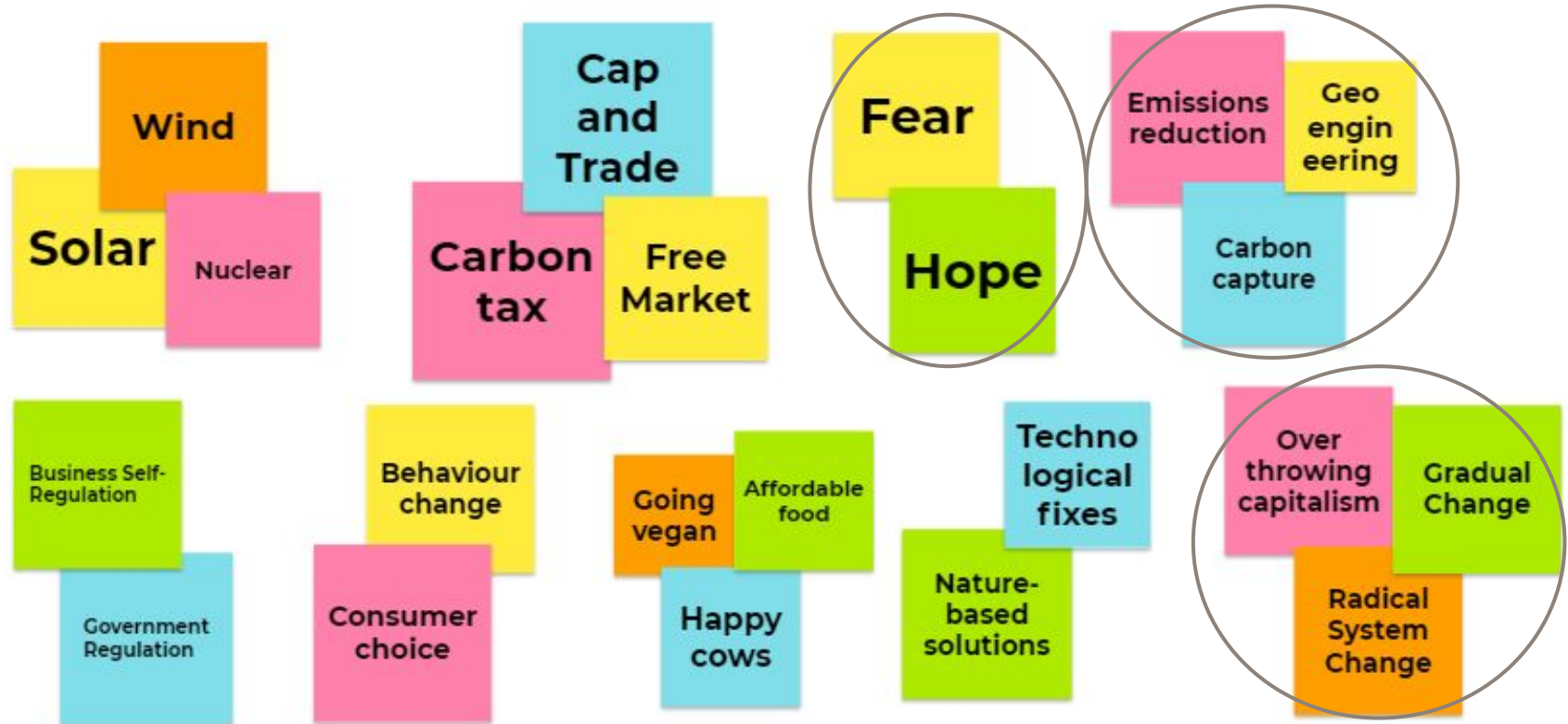
Insight 3

The pyramid of polarisation



**The more serious the issue,
the more pyramid moments it creates**

Consequence: fragmentation of 'meaningful' climate action



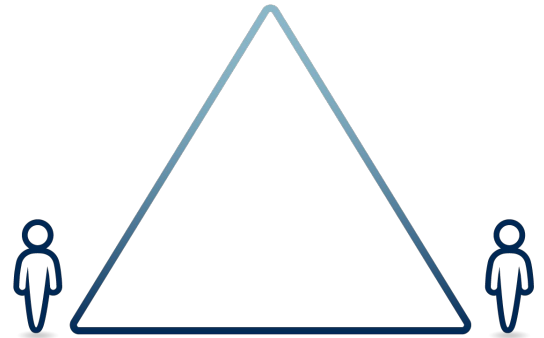
Another natural consequence of pyramids

IGNORANT
STUPID
CRAZY
EVIL



1. The pyramid = moving from weak to strong opinions about an issue
2. As an issue becomes more serious, opinions on what to do about it will become more fragmented
3. Deep disagreements lead to stupid-crazy-evil reasoning

The Pyramid of Polarisation



Take Home Message

Break (5 minutes)

Part 3

How change happens - and doesn't

Activity

Action attempted

Action attempted

- Think of one time you wanted to take an action because of climate or the environment but were unable to carry it out
- Think about (1 min):
 - What your action was
 - The reason you couldn't do it
 - How it made you feel

Now type in the chat how this episode made you feel

FRUSTRATING

THE SYSTEM

OTHER PEOPLE

Conventional wisdom about behaviour change

information
awareness
understanding
care
concern

???



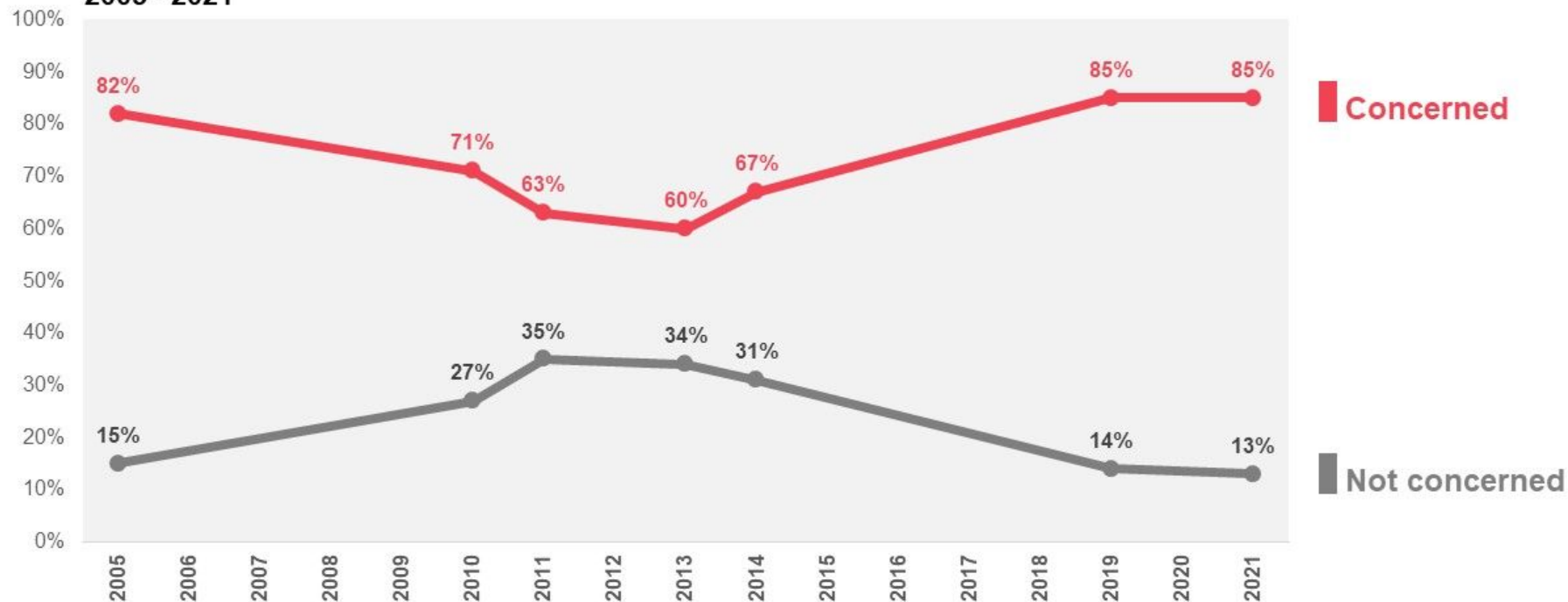
action
behaviour change

What is happening with public
opinion about climate change?

Public concern about climate change

How concerned, if at all, are you about climate change, sometimes referred to as 'global warming'?

2005 - 2021

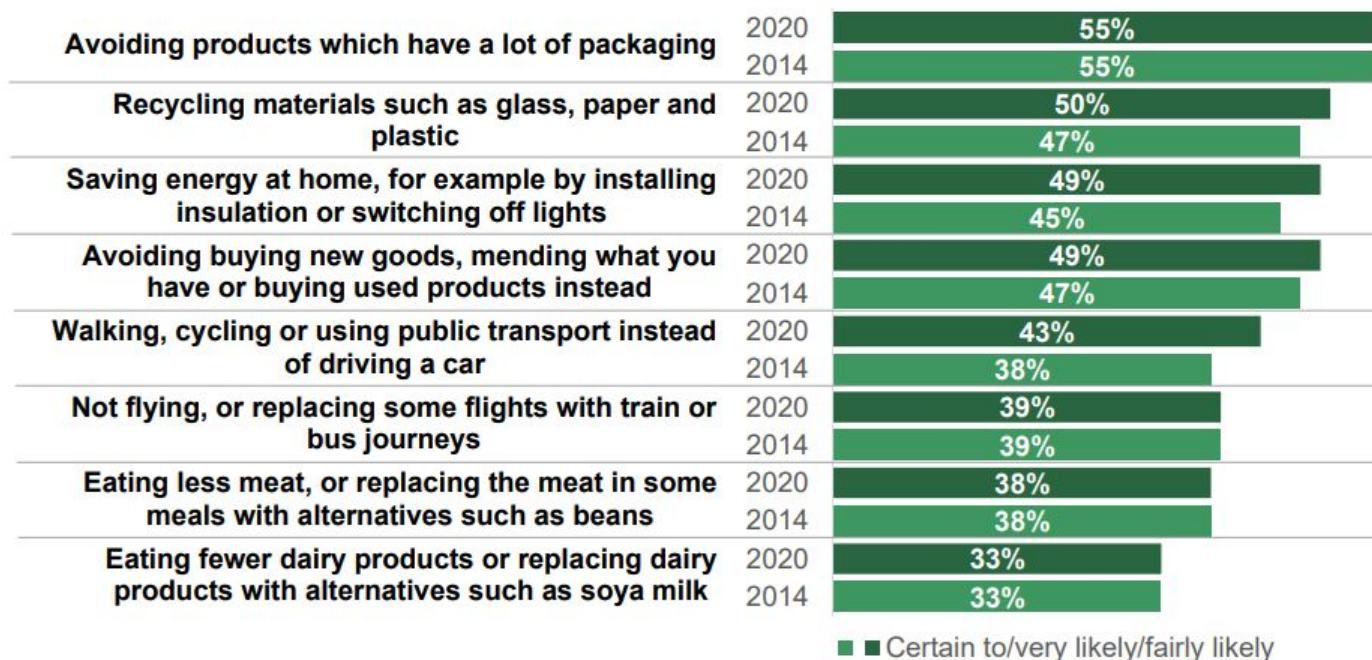


Base: c.1,000 British adults 18+ each month

Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor

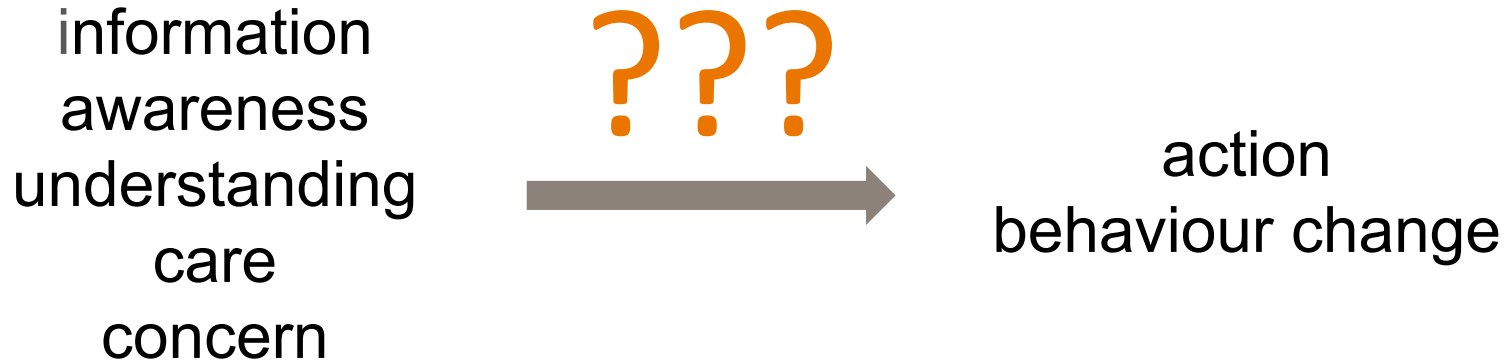
Willingness to take action on climate change – 2020 vs. 2014

Q. Thinking about things you might do in order to limit your own contribution to climate change, how likely or unlikely would you be to make the following changes within the next year?



Base: 10,504 online adults aged 16-74 across 12 countries: Fieldwork dates: Feb 21 to Mar 6, 2020, Sep 26 to Oct 10 2014

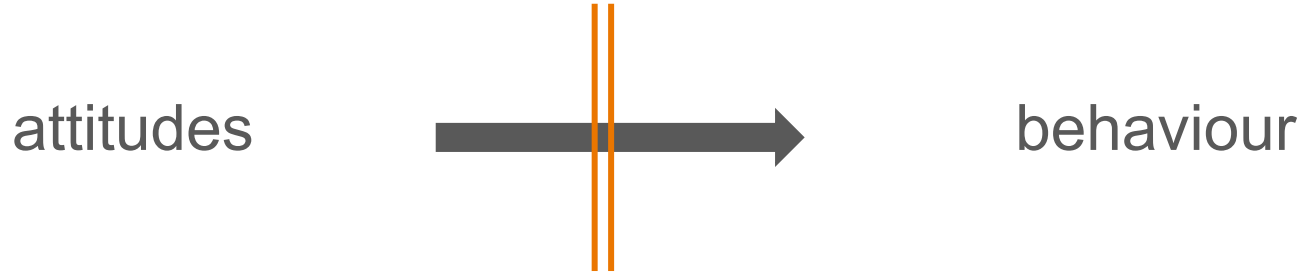
Conventional wisdom about behaviour change



Known as:

- 'attitude-behaviour' gap
- 'value-action' gap

What's the problem with the conventional view?



Reason: not knowing *how*
to overcome barriers

agency

noun

UK  /'eɪ.dʒənsi/ US  /'eɪ.dʒənsi/

Lack of Agency

‘Not knowing *how* to act’

It plays out differently for
citizens, politicians, people in
business, finance, media etc

How do we overcome
lack of agency?

Activity

Action realised

Action realised

Think of an action you took – at first – for any reason but later thought of as having a pro-environmental or climate-positive angle

Note down:

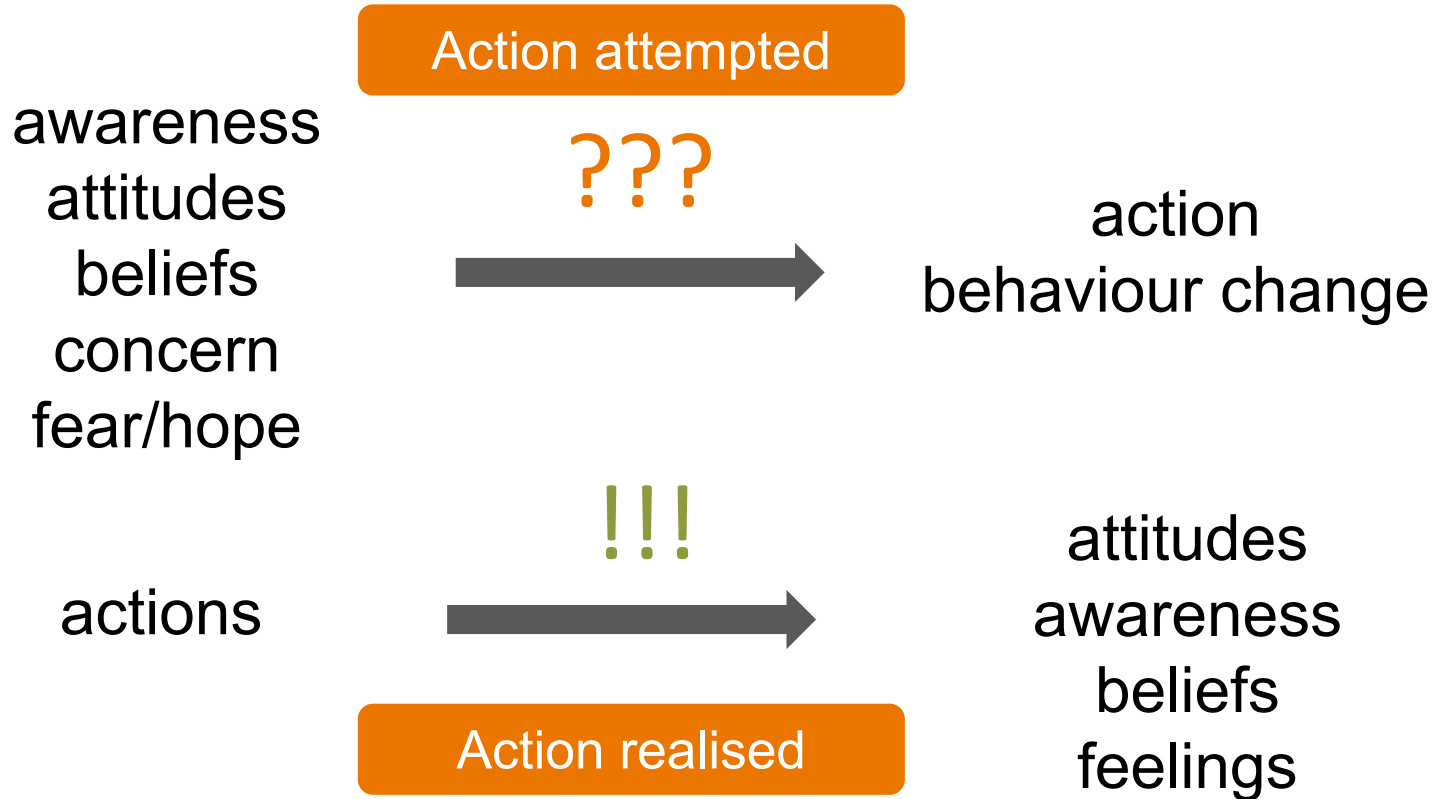
- Your action
- The original reason
- The environmental explanation
- How it made you feel
- Any follow-on actions this led to

Action can be:

- personal
- community
- professional
- civic/political

THE DIFFERENCE?

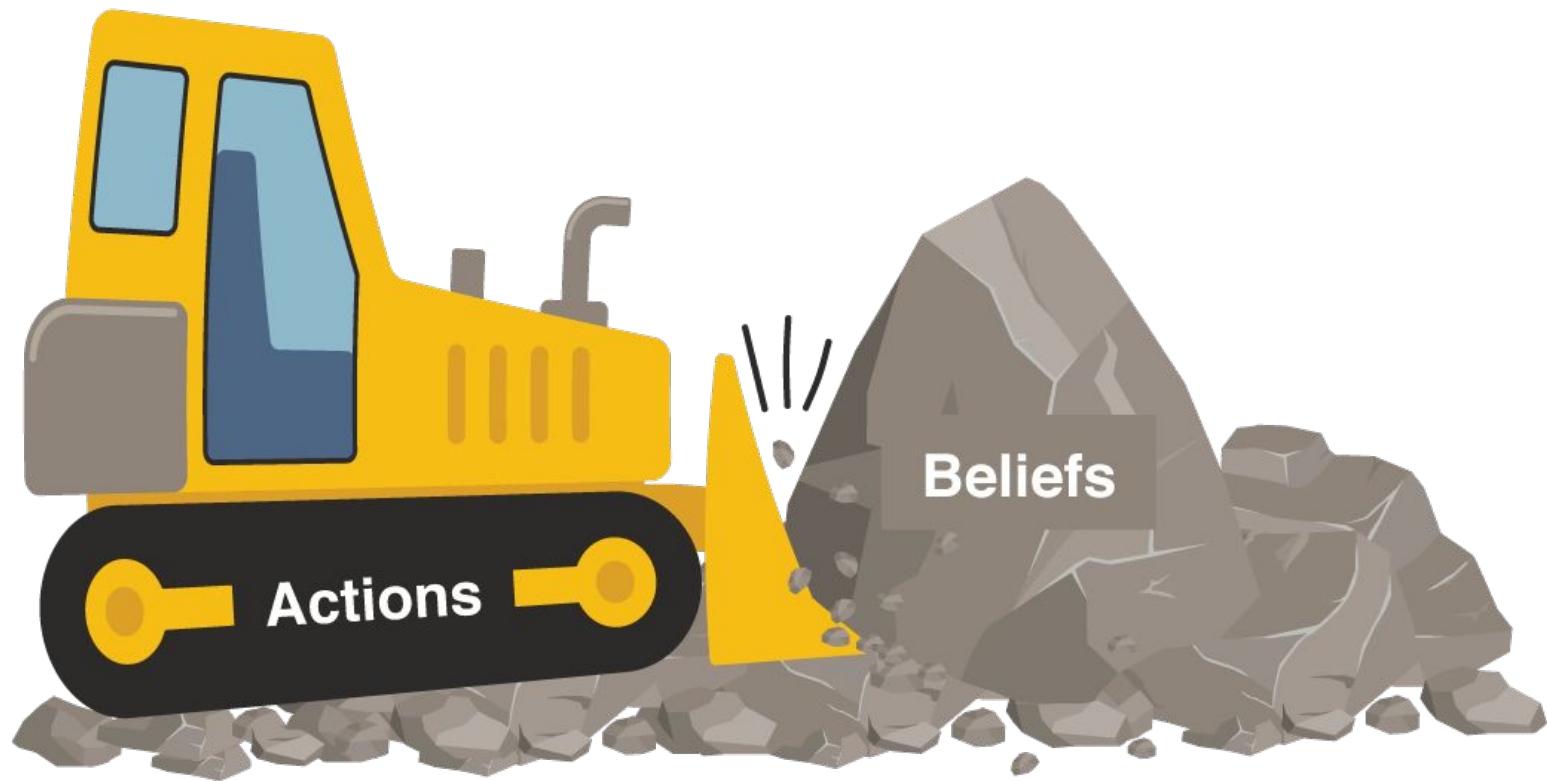
The alternative to the conventional wisdom





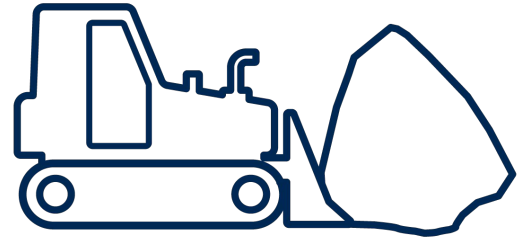
Insight 4

In real life, actions drive beliefs



1. The only reliable form of persuasion is self-persuasion
2. Action inspires action
3. 'Behaviour change' morphs into 'developing our agency'

Actions drive beliefs



Take Home Message

Part 4

The AURA of good climate comms



Golden Nugget

How to use 'actions drive beliefs' in communications?

The AURA of good climate comms:
tell stories of 'doing' - not of 'concern'

The gateway to our brains

It's the most natural, authentic type of communication.

Our brains have been shaped for stories of people *doing* - not stories of abstract issues (neither threatening nor positive)



Benefit 1: stories of action build agency

- most agency is social: seeing other people solve problems
- help people to understand *how* to change - don't just tell them *what* to change (provide the recipes, not just the menu)

“If they can do it, so can I”

Benefit 2: stories of action inspire

tell stories of people doing the doing - warts and all (think of it as a hero's journey - challenges met and overcome)

those are far more effective than simply communicating the issue-based version of what you do

you can use this for internal as well as external comms

Benefit 3: action signals the scale of a problem

Issue-based frame

Problem, problem, problem



Therefore we must take action

Action-based frame

We are doing X, Y and Z



Why? Because there is a huge problem

The AURA of good climate communications

Action inspires action: build agency through social learning (recipes, not menu items)

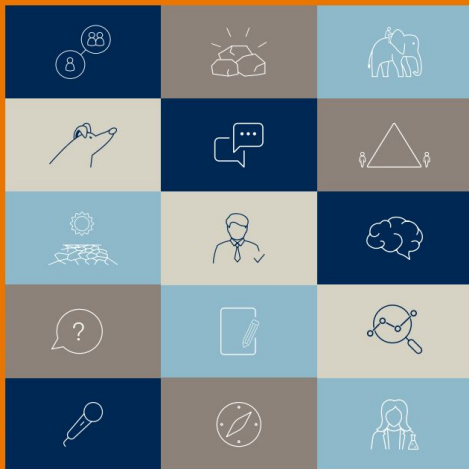
Urgency of a crisis is best communicated through the actions we undertake to tackle it

Risk: make sure it is concrete and precise (for decision-making, not for storytelling)

Action: stories of action signal action and inoculate against hopelessness

COMMUNICATING CLIMATE RISK A HANDBOOK

A publication of the COP26 Universities Network in cooperation with the UCL Climate Action Unit



COP26 UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

Climate Action Unit

ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH LETTERS

PAPER • OPEN ACCESS

Transforming the stories we tell about climate change: from 'issue' to 'action'

Kris De Meyer^{1,2} , Emily Coren³ , Mark McCaffrey⁴  and Cheryl Slean⁵

Published 23 December 2020 • © 2020 The Author(s). Published by IOP Publishing Ltd

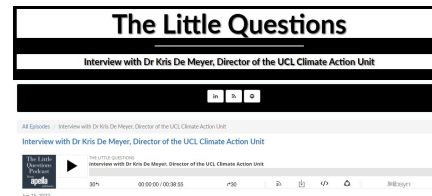
[Environmental Research Letters, Volume 16, Number 1](#)



Podcast

Climate Curious: Why there's much more to climate action than reducing your carbon footprint

Tara Cooper



Climate Action Unit

Web: www.ucl.ac.uk/climate-action-unit | **Email:** climateactionunit@ucl.ac.uk | **Twitter:** @UCL_CAU

Questions?