FrameWorks Training:

How to talk about Climate Change

El Dorado County Public
Health
April 14, 2023

Colleen Bridger, MPH, PhD

FrameWorks 101—Review

Three questions:

#1 How do we get people to think about our issues?

#2. How do we get them to think about our issues in such a way that they will want to solve them through public policies?

#3 How do we get them to think about issues in such a way that they want to solve them through Public Health public policies?

FrameWorks 101—Review

FrameWorks Research shows us:

- People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.
- Incoming information provides cues about where to "file" it mentally.
- People get most information about public affairs from the news media which, over time, creates a framework of expectation, or a dominant frame.
- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation and configure incoming information to conform to this frame.

Frameworks 101—Review

Strategic Frame Analysis teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must be thematic and contain:

1. Values, that orient the audience to the big idea or to "what's at stake" and "what this is about";
2. Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work;
3. Reasonable tone;
4. Reinforcing visuals and
5. Effective Messengers; who weave together thematic stories that explain the link between cause and effect.

In Summary - to frame an issue:

- **Know** the opposition – and the opportunities – by understanding how people think and feel about this issue

- **Make** deliberate choices when presenting information: what to emphasize, what to explain and what to leave unsaid

- **Trigger** certain ways of thinking and bypass others – it's very hard to argue against a feeling or belief once it's activated

- **Show** why it matters by aligning solutions with people's ideals of what's desirable and good

- **Show** that change is possible, not that problems are insurmountable

- **Give** your audience ways to think differently instead of meeting them where they are

Climate Change

What do people think – Experts

- The climate is composed of interdependent systems, oceans, land, atmosphere

- There are both natural and human causes of climate change

- Human activity causes changes to the climate system through carbon dioxide, which traps heat in the earth's atmosphere and results in increasing temperatures, sea level rise, extreme weather events and increased ocean temperatures

- Carbon dioxide is also changing the earth's oceans and marine systems through ocean acidification, where carbon dioxide dissolves in sea water to form carbonic acid

- Policies to reduce global carbon dioxide emissions are critical to mitigating the effects of climate change
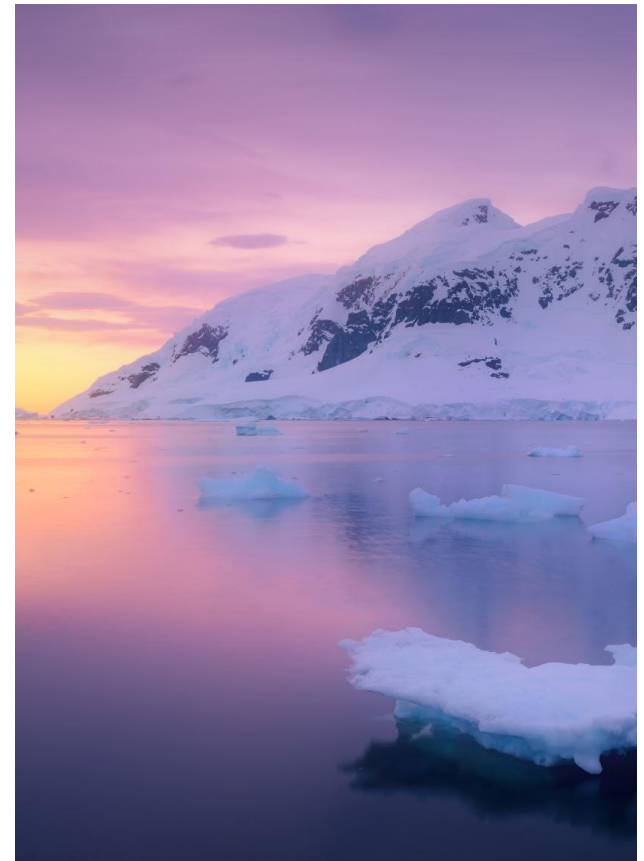
What do people think – Public

- The "climate system" is a missing concept; rather conceptualized oceans, atmosphere, climate and weather as discrete concepts rather than as an integrated system

- Pollution is how oceans change. People affect oceans by dumping waste into them

- Not familiar with term "ocean acidification," but drew on assumptions about pollution and acid rain when asked to think about the term

- Earth is warming because of gaseous pollution destroying the Ozone layer and letting in more radiation

- Scientists often exaggerate and overstate what they know

- Climate Change is seen as "natural" and nature as "self-correcting"--no human action is necessary and could do more harm than good
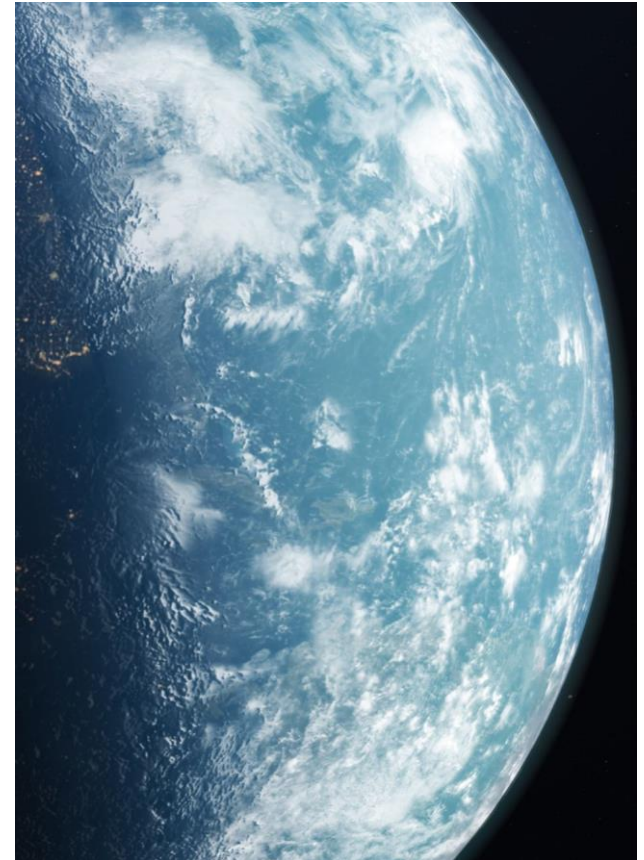
Cognitive Holes

- **The climate system:** The public treats oceans, atmosphere, climate and weather as discrete topics or entities and consistently fails to see these concepts as part of a larger system

- **Trouble with trends:** The public shares with experts the understanding that weather is short term and climate is long term, but has difficulty reconciling short-term variability in the weather from season to season with the knowledge that the climate is getting hotter over time

- **Ocean acidification:** The public is entirely unaware of this concept and its effects, underscoring problems in connecting land and water effects.

Explanatory Chain on Ocean Acidification:

"When we burn fossil fuels like coal and gas, we release carbon dioxide (CO2) into the air. The oceans absorb a lot of this carbon dioxide, which changes the ocean's chemistry. This is called ocean acidification. One result of this change in chemistry is that it makes the ocean a less hospitable environment for many types of marine life. This more challenging environment means that these types of marine life often have to work harder to do basic tasks, like reproducing and building their skeletons and shells, and, as a result, they are less successful in achieving these tasks. By making it harder for some types of marine life to grow and survive, ocean acidification disrupts the food chain, which undermines the stability of the whole ecosystem."

Values

1. Protection — This value emphasizes the need to shield people from harm, "stepping in to ensure people's safety." It also underlines the importance of risk reduction, concern for the welfare of others, and preserving habitats

- Most effective and most flexible

2. Responsible Management/Pragmatism/Stewardship - Forefronts the importance of using common sense and step-by-step approaches to produce responsible long-term plans that act in the interest of future generations

- Effective in communicating about climate change and oceans

Protection

"It's important that we protect people and places from being harmed by solving the issues facing our environment. This means stepping in to ensure people's safety and well-being to the best of our ability and safeguarding the places we depend on. We also need to take measures to eliminate or reduce risks, making sure that people are able to go about their lives freely. Simply put, we have a duty to protect our surroundings. Protection is the right thing for us to do."

Protection w/Climate Change and Health

"It's important that we protect people and places from being harmed by solving the issues that climate change poses for our health. We know that climate change creates severe health threats, generating extreme heat, violent storms and wildfires that kill people, as well as spreading infectious diseases and causing respiratory, heart and other health problems.

To respond to these threats, we must step in to ensure people's safety and wellbeing to the best of our ability and safeguard the places we depend on from the health threats that come with climate change.

We also need to take measures to eliminate or reduce risks, making sure that people can go about their lives freely. Concern for the welfare of others and vigilance in preserving our habitats are the hallmarks of our approach. Simply put, we have a duty to protect ourselves and our health from the effects of climate change. Protection is the right thing for us to do."

Responsible Management

"It's important that we take responsible steps to manage the issues facing our environment. This means thinking carefully about problems and focusing on the best ways to deal with the problems we face. We also need to keep future generations in mind while we look for the best solutions.

Simply put, we should take a practical, step-by-step approach that relies on common sense and uses all the evidence we have to take care of our surroundings. Managing challenges responsibly is the right thing for us to do"

Responsible Management and Health

"It's important that we take responsible steps to manage the issues that climate change poses for our health. We know that climate change creates severe health threats, generating extreme heat, violent storms and wildfires that kill people, as well as spreading infectious diseases and causing respiratory, heart and other health problems.

To respond to these threats, we must think carefully about these problems and focus on the best ways to deal with the health threats that come with climate change. We also need to keep future generations in mind while we look for the best solutions.

Simply put, we should take a practical, step-by-step approach that relies on common sense and uses all the evidence we have to deal with climate change and with its effects on human health. Managing challenges responsibly is the right thing for us to do."

Both Values Are Most Effective When Combined With Health

Simplifying Models

Why?

- Help people overcome assumption that carbon dioxide is natural and harmless and recognize that excess CO2 harms climate system

- Provide a basis for understanding the importance of oceans within the climate system

- Increase understanding of the process of ocean acidification

- Generate an understanding of how oceans regulate the climate system by controlling the flow of moisture and heat throughout the system

- Promote recognition that oceans' ability to perform their role in the climate system is being negatively affected by burning fossil fuels

- Illuminate the problems that ocean acidification causes for marine life

- Help people in reasoning and discussing how climate and ocean change can be addressed

Explanatory Metaphors

Climate's Heart

Regular vs. Rampant Carbon Dioxide

Osteoporosis of the Sea

Climate's Heart - Concepts

- Conveys the centrality of oceans within the climate system. The metaphor is highly successful in communicating the importance of oceans for the proper functioning of the climate system

- Facilitates thinking about how oceans can be harmed

- Promotes thinking about the importance of preventive care

- Concept of circulation generates understanding of how oceans regulate climate

Climate's Heart

The oceans regulate the climate system the way your heart regulates the flow of blood throughout your body. The heart sustains the body by controlling the circulation of blood, making sure the right amount gets to all parts of the body — not too much and not too little.

Climate's Heart

The oceans act as the climate's heart, sustaining the climate by controlling the circulation of things like heat and humidity. The oceans are the heart of a circulatory system that moves heat and moisture through all parts of the climate system, including oceans, land and atmosphere. As the heart of this circulatory system, the oceans regulate the climate by helping to control the earth's temperature. By absorbing heat from the sun and emitting it back into the atmosphere, the oceans maintain a regular flow of heat and stabilize the earth's temperature.

Climate's Heart

Ocean currents and winds move heat and moisture to different parts of the world, which keeps the climate stable. Burning fossil fuels damages the oceans' ability to maintain good circulation of heat and moisture. When we burn fossil fuels, we put a lot of stress on the oceans, which damages their ability to keep the climate stable — so sometimes the oceans pump too much heat and moisture through the system, sometimes too little. Burning fossil fuels weakens the oceans' ability to regulate the climate system.

Regular vs. Rampant CO2 – Concepts

- Identifies carbon dioxide as the problem and helps people understand that excess carbon dioxide is the main cause of climate and ocean change

- Links carbon dioxide and fossil fuels in people's thinking and, in turn, generates the understanding that we need to reduce fossil fuel usage to address the problems caused by high levels of carbon dioxide

Regular vs. Rampant CO2

Some carbon dioxide, or CO2, is needed for life processes. We can call this Regular CO2.

But CO2 is not just something that plants breathe in or that we breathe out. It's also something that gets put into the air when we drive cars or burn any kind of fossil fuel. And these things are putting a lot of CO2 into the atmosphere and oceans. We can call this Rampant CO2 because there's too much of it and it's getting out of control.

Rampant CO2 accumulates in the wrong places, like the oceans, and causes a number of problems in the climate and ecosystems. We'll always need Regular Carbon Dioxide, but we need to start reducing Rampant Carbon Dioxide.

Osteoporosis of the Sea – Concepts

- Generates understanding of the effects of acidification. By giving people a concrete, relatable way to understand a complex and unfamiliar phenomenon — acidification — Osteoporosis gives people a strong grasp of the effects of acidification on certain types of shellfish, and the ocean system more generally.

- Can be extended to explain calcification effects for any type of marine life. Although the version of the metaphor tested talks about "shellfish," the metaphor can be used to talk about calcification effects for other types of marine life as well.

Osteoporosis of the Sea

Ocean acidification is causing "osteoporosis of the sea." Acidification is changing the chemistry of the ocean and, as a result, many types of shellfish have trouble building and maintaining their shells. This osteoporosis of the sea causes the protective shells of these animals to become thinner and more brittle, which makes it hard for them to grow and survive.

An Effective Explanatory Metaphor:

- Improves understanding of how things work
- Creates robust, detailed and coherent discussions of a complicated concept
- Can facilitate problem-solving thinking
- Inoculates against dominant but unproductive frames
- Is highly communicable and can be shared easily among individuals without major breakdowns or unproductive mutations
- Is a linguistic resource for better stories
- Is self-correcting. When a breakdown in communication does occur, people can re-deploy the metaphor in its original form to once again clarify key aspects of the issue.

Putting it Together – Change is Possible

1. **Make it do-able and show change is possible - The alarm bell has been rung. We need to land the idea that we can tackle climate change. That it's challenging but do-able.**

Before: "Climate change is the biggest challenge we face. Life on earth is in crisis. Our house is on fire and our leaders are not listening or acting. In fact, many of them are fanning the flames."

After: "We face major threats to the future of our planet and human life on it. But we have it within our power to repair and restore our world. Our leaders can and must act now."

Putting it Together – Change that makes the most difference

2. **Focus on the big things and how we can change them - Instead of getting locked in circular debates about whether people are making the right choices in their own lives, pan out and look at the big picture.**

Before: "We all need to act to tackle the climate emergency. This means us all making better choices, like flying less, eating less meat. It means demanding politicians transform our systems and economies."

After: "We need to change the things that make the most difference. For example, our leaders have the opportunity to redesign our energy system so that we're powered by clean energy."

Putting it Together – Everybody's Doing it

3. **Normalize action and change, not inaction - when we hear that no-one is doing the right thing for the planet, we assume not much can or will be done. To overcome this, show that action is underway and that we all want more.**

Before: "The truth is that we're not facing up to the climate emergency and acting like it matters. We need a radical transformation, not tinkering at the edges. But the government is not listening to the truth and not enough of us are playing our part."

After: "Most of us want to see more action to revive our planet and secure a healthy future. Our politicians work on our behalf so our appetite for change matters. They can and must take the actions that will make the most difference, like reshaping our energy and finance industries."

Putting it Together – Hand in Hand

4. **Connect the planet's health with our own health - Human health goes hand in hand with the planet's health. Reminding people of this connection boosts understanding, concern, and support for policy change.**

Before: "Climate change threatens life on earth and this is only set to get worse. We need to act now to stand a chance of keeping an inhabitable planet."

After: "Our health depends on us having a healthy planet. But right now our actions are hurting the planet. We can and must heal our world for all of us and for future generations."

Putting it Together – Fit for Future Generations

5. **Emphasize our responsibility to young people and future generations - Talk about our duty to care for and protect the planet for future generations. Bake this sentiment into messages and stories about climate change.**

Before: "The science is clear. Climate change is real and is happening now. So we need to act now to keep global temperature rises below 2 degrees."

After: "We all want to pass on a healthy planet to young people, and our children and grandchildren. We can and must act now to protect and repair our planet so it's fit for the future."

Putting it Together – Make it Real

6. **Keep it down to earth - Down to earth, straightforward messages work. Complex language and messages can undermine our cause.**

Before: "Climate change is already causing mass migration and displacement. Sadly we will see the tragic impact of more and more extreme weather events as the climate crisis worsens. The floods, droughts and fires we see raging around the world are tragic reminders of the urgent need for both mitigation and adaptation."

After: "Climate change means right now we're having to cope with more extreme weather. We're seeing more floods, droughts and fires close to home and around the world. To protect our planet's - and our own - future, we must take practical action to tackle climate change."

Framing Words

Instead of saying: Systems change

Try: Changing the things that make the most difference; for example...

Instead of saying: Choices, behaviors, lifestyles

Try: Options available to us

Instead of saying: Radically transforming our economy

Try: Re-designing our economy with concrete policy changes

Questions?

Colleen M. Bridger, MPH, PhD

Colleen@cbridgerconsulting.com