



Expanding Our Repertoire:

Why and How to Get Collective Climate Solutions in the Frame

In FrameWorks' approach to communications on social problems, Strategic Frame Analysis®, social scientists identify several different frame elements, which are aspects of communications where seemingly small differences in emphasis can lead to large differences in how the communication is understood, interpreted, and acted upon. *Solutions* is the frame element that discusses possible actions to take to address a social problem. Solutions might be promising initiatives, effective programs, or recommended decisions. Effective framing of solutions supports public engagement in the issue by establishing that problems have solutions, and it directs the public to consider collective, public responses to social problems.

Because the strategic framing approach is designed to engage the public in a more informed civic discussion, FrameWorks' strong recommendation is to focus communications on collective solutions, not individual behaviors. This isn't to suggest that individual behaviors aren't ultimately part of how to effectively address the issues facing our environment—they are, of course. But they are not the only piece of the puzzle. Individual behaviors are always shaped by context, and experts agree that policy-level changes are needed to address this issue. Given that the problem requires a both/and approach to individual/collective actions, this is where careful consideration of the communications strategy comes in. A social or scientific analysis of a problem isn't the same as a communications analysis!

In arriving at a communications analysis, careful consideration of existing patterns of public thinking is an important early step. Across social issues, FrameWorks researchers have found that systemic and structural changes are difficult for the American public to grasp. In contrast, the same studies have shown time and time again that individual-level explanations of causes and solutions are the “default setting” for Americans. We explain education outcomes in terms of the actions of students, teachers, and parents—and find it difficult to imagine what constitutes

“the system” beyond this. We explain health outcomes in terms of the diet and exercise choices of individuals—and are unlikely to spontaneously think of the social and economic factors that shape health. Individual explanations are also top of mind for the public when they think and talk about the environment.

If this is the default setting, it has implications for how to talk about solutions. FrameWorks' recommendation is that science educators focus communications on examples of collective and civic solutions and spend as little time as possible talking about personal consumption choices. Here's why. Americans already get a fairly steady diet of news-you-can-use messages about how to personally pursue a more climate-friendly lifestyle, and they have plenty of practice in thinking about solving problems at the individual level. Notably missing from the public discourse are examples of what can be done collectively, systemically, at a scale large enough to meet the challenge before us. As a result, people get little practice in thinking about these types of solutions. It's important to fill in this “cognitive hole.” With a purposeful, disciplined approach to diffusing more and better examples of lesser-known policy options at the community, regional, and national level, science educators can play an important role in expanding Americans' repertoire of solutions that they have heard of and can consider productively.

So: FrameWorks recommends that climate communicators carefully steward their precious few opportunities to engage the public and use this limited resource to spread the word about collective solutions.

From here, the next question is whether there are more and less effective ways to talk about collective solutions. And the answer is yes—framing matters! Read on to learn about four considerations for talking about solutions in the most powerful way.

What to do when they ask, “What can I do?”

It’s important to proactively include solutions frames in communications, as opposed to only talking about potential changes when asked directly. But, when people do ask, how can climate communicators take advantage of the opportunity to help diffuse a new, more expansive understanding of what needs to be done to address climate and ocean change? When a curious person asks, “What can I do?” how might you answer in such a way that appeals to the person as a citizen, not merely a private individual?

Here’s one simple possibility. You might begin, “I think it’s important for all of us to look for ways we can make a difference beyond your own households.” Then, if the situation allows, continue with concrete suggestions that involve actions the person can take to influence decisions within or through institutions. Here are examples you could provide:

- “...Learn more about the proposals in your community that are working toward sustainability. And as those possibilities get discussed or debated, get involved and speak up about how important this is.”
- “...Keep an eye out for opportunities to make connections to the issue of energy use, so that the kind of productive conversation we’re having here starts to happen more often and more publicly. It might be connecting a parent-list-serve conversation about carpooling to the broader implications for us all. Or it might mean bringing up energy efficiency as an important concern when your office is figuring out its new office supply procurement policy.”
- “...Think about the organizations you’re in—your place of work or worship. How can those groups take action toward reducing the waste of/use of fossil fuels?”

The connecting thread here is the recommendations all involve individual actions that take place in some sort of sociopolitical context beyond the household—institutional, local, or otherwise. They illustrate the kinds of things that ordinary people can imagine themselves doing, but they are always and only actions that leverage their power as civic actors and as members of groups and organizations, acting in community.

When talking about spheres of human activity, be concrete but also collective

To help the public grasp how and where we use energy, it can be helpful to provide concrete examples from different spheres of human activity (transportation, manufacturing, food, and building). When doing so, it’s important to continue to talk about

potential solutions at a big-picture level. Below are some ways to describe each of these sectors in ways that point attention to the broader, beyond-the-household view, yet are still accessible and clear to nonexperts. As you read them, consider the habits of communication these “solution starter sentences” might replace. For example, talking about food systems as recommended below is an alternative to advice about what choices to make at the grocery store.

“One sector of our society that uses a lot of energy is transportation—moving goods around the world and across the country, and getting people to and from the places they need to go.”

“One sector of our society that uses a lot of energy is manufacturing—turning raw materials into finished products, such as transforming iron ore into the steel we use for construction and machinery.”

“One part of our society that uses a lot of energy is our food system—growing, shipping, packaging, preserving, and refrigerating the foods we serve in private and public places.”

“One sector/part of our society that uses a lot of energy is buildings—constructing, heating, cooling, and lighting the places where we all work and live.”

Watch out: Some ways of framing solutions can cause problems

A final framing recommendation is to take extra care to avoid partisan cues when talking about promising approaches or upcoming proposals. Perhaps more so than other frame elements, solutions are the most likely to be interpreted as partisan, or at least political, in nature. Partisan cues easily activate *myside bias*. This cognitive shortcut, also known as confirmation bias, leads humans to readily incorporate information that confirms beliefs held by their social group and reject ideas that they interpret as coming from another “tribe.” Put another way: once people interpret a communication as part of politics as usual, they tend to switch out of learning mode and into debate, defend, double-down mode. To keep dialogue and learning open, it is therefore important to take extra care to avoid word choices, themes, and examples that might be understood as coming from a particular political vantage point.

While this recommendation might be easy to grasp conceptually, it can be tricky to implement—and even trickier in the current political moment. On issues that have been the subject of partisan divides, and in moments of increased political polarization, sensitivity to partisan cues can be heightened. To help framers

attend more closely to word choices that could evoke myside bias, here's a short list of alternate terms to use.

Instead of this:	Consider this:
politician, policymaker	elected official, community leader
policies, legislation	directions, ideas, proposals, commitments
California adopted standards requiring...	Californians agreed to/ committed to...
Government	Our state, our community, the city/ county of...
Speak up, let leaders know your opinion	Get involved, keep learning, join a group

This isn't a comprehensive list—and even the longest list of wording alternatives wouldn't capture all partisan cues, as the idea of politics as usual can be communicated in different ways. A story about how a specific zoo or aquarium is playing its part in a local effort to reduce heat-trapping emissions will almost certainly contain fewer partisan cues than a story about what the Paris accords will mean for the nation. The idea is to maintain an explanatory stance, as opposed to a persuasive one, when talking about solutions.

Conclusion

Getting out of behavior-change framing involves some behavior change! Changing communications habits takes practice—but that's as it should be, as the stories we tell are dress rehearsals for the policies our society will endorse. By developing the discipline to include collective solutions in your climate communications and to avoid words and choices that could polarize or alienate potential allies, talking solutions can be part of the solution to the threats facing our ecosystems.

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