

# Engaging People

## And speaking personally about climate change...

*Penny Walker* hears about some current approaches to building our collective capacity to talk to people about climate change.

Over the last few months, I have been sent a lot of information about training courses which aim to help anyone and everyone to be able to 'speak' about climate change. The common aim seems to be to empower anyone who is motivated to do so, to be able to talk confidently and persuasively to their peers, colleagues, communities, friends and relations. This may be in formal groups or – as one course promises – to be able to win an argument about climate change in your tea break.

Organisations like the Climate Outreach Information Network and Talk Action are working to create a bottom-up, grass-roots groundswell of people who can counter negativity, complacency and denial though putting the word out through their own formal and informal networks.

Talk Action's ([www.talkaction.org](http://www.talkaction.org)) one-day training in January was run by independent trainer and consultant Chris Church.

Talk Action says that this course is for anyone who is keen to get people active on climate change, whether they work for a local council, a business or a charity, or are involved in a local organisation. The core communication skills are relevant to different situations from political lobbying to talking in the street or answering awkward questions – even talking with your friends.

### Passion killers

"The biggest mistake people make is being really earnest and serious, and feeling that they have to give people lots of information," says Church. "The worst kind of person is the one who says 'I've got a whole filing cabinet of information at home on climate change, and I just need a bit more and then I can go and



talk to people'. That's not the way to be a good speaker."

So what does his training try to get across? "The best speakers combine passion about climate change with empathy for the audience – they understand where other people are coming from. They also share their personal experience of taking action, and they cover both individual action and the policy agenda. This is full of opportunity at the moment, particularly at a local authority level, so helping people to see how they can get their council to do more is key."

This focus on passion and empathy rather than facts and science is echoed by George Marshall, of the Climate Outreach Information Network (COIN).

"A lot of communication about climate change is done in a technical and dispassionate, scientific way. The lack of emotion and urgency shown by speakers does nothing to shake the feeling that climate change is not serious."

### Crisis? What crisis?

Psychotherapist Mary-Jane Rust supports this view. In a keynote speech to a recent meeting of the Guild of Psychotherapists, she explores our collective response

to climate change from a therapist's perspective. "Even though we are waking up in a big way to the crisis, there is still a great deal of numbing, apathy and denial. The scale of our crisis is *very overwhelming*. It's very hard to digest what comes up – anxiety, fear, despair, grief, guilt, rage... the list goes on; as a culture 'we don't do feelings'. Blocking the feelings means we don't feel the urgency of the situation."

Rust says that "many people who have immersed themselves in the facts about what is happening in the world, admit to me in private that they see little chance of us getting through this, yet most of them are fearful of discussing this in public for fear of sounding too depressing or nihilistic".

This separation from our feelings is understandable, yet the absence of an emotional response in the face of the stark facts is incongruous – the unspoken argument goes like this:

- if the claims about climate change are true, then surely this person would be emotional;
- there is no emotional reaction...
- ...therefore climate change is not as serious as this person is claiming.

## Environmental ghetto

The passionless delivery is accompanied by turgid jargon and an off-putting environmentalist slant.

“The technical language and terminology is a barrier, and scientists and environmentalists end up communicating only with other people who are already scientists and environmentalists – they don’t reach people from other sub-cultures.”

Marshall argues that for most people, the environment is something ‘out there’ from which they are essentially separate. Climate change is seen as an environmental issue and so these people, who do not identify themselves as environmentalists, continue to feel that it is nothing to do with them.

People who talk about ‘increased rainfall’ or ‘sea level rise’, or who say that ‘we’ need to take action or that ‘they’ will be affected by the changed climate are reinforcing this impression of disconnection and detachment. Marshall continues, “Professionals hiding behind their PowerPoint are seeking to separate themselves from the personal and ethical issues. They believe that to be taken seriously they must be dispassionate. Their language is disconnected and they tend not to talk about their own direct issues and concerns, the practical human impacts. Even these climate change professionals are in a state of denial, using euphemisms to separate their personal selves from the reality of climate change. This is a manifestation of our collective social denial.”

## Speaking personally

Marshall’s plan is to help climate change break out of the environmentalist sub-

culture by encouraging people to include their own feelings in their presentations, and to work alongside people who are already in other sub-cultures, communities and networks. “Awareness of the causes and impacts of climate change has clearly increased in the past few years. But this isn’t the same as empowerment. We want people to feel ‘people like me do this’ and ‘people like me feel this’.

**“Even these climate change professionals are in a state of denial, using euphemisms to separate their personal selves from the reality of climate change.”**

“It’s not necessarily about changing the messages, so much as about changing the process of communicating, making it peer-to-peer.” COIN has been working in partnership with trade unions, faith groups, employee networks and clubs like Rotary International and the Scouts. Marshall is keen to extend these partnerships and establish new ones.

The training is aimed at getting people to speak from the heart, to people like themselves. Trainees aren’t drilled to present to a fixed format, but instead time is spent focusing on their integrity and credibility as a person. “What makes people believe something is that people around them whom they like and trust believe it.”

‘Speaking personally’ is key for Marshall, and this includes being open about who you are (*I am*), your direct experience (*I have*) and your emotions (*I feel*).

## Stepping out

Is there an appetite for taking this next step?

“There is an astonishing desire in people to build up their skills in this area, and to be trained,” says Church. “How far they are putting it to work and actually giving talks, I’m not sure.”

If you’d like to rise to that challenge and book a speaker, there are listings on Talk Action’s website and on [www.climate-speakers.org.uk](http://www.climate-speakers.org.uk)

To hone your skills and get in touch with your personal response to climate change, or if you know of a ready-made network or community which would benefit from training, get in touch with COIN, <http://Coinet.org.uk> or Talk Action [www.talk-action.org](http://www.talk-action.org)

The Environment Council is hosting a season of COIN events, [www.the-environment-council.org.uk/winter-season-communicating-climate-change.html](http://www.the-environment-council.org.uk/winter-season-communicating-climate-change.html)

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*Mary-Jayne Rust, 2007 ‘Climate on the Couch – unconscious processes in relation to our environmental crisis’,*  
[www.mjrust.net/index.htm](http://www.mjrust.net/index.htm)



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