

# Engaging People

## Nasty or nice – how to create change?

“The North Wind and the Sun argued about which of them was the most powerful. They agreed to settle the matter with a contest. The winner would be the one who could first strip a wayfaring man of his clothes. The North Wind tried his power first and blew with all his might, but the stronger his blasts, the closer the Traveller wrapped his cloak around him. At last, giving up all hope of victory, the Wind called upon the Sun to see what he could do. The Sun shone out with all his warmth. The Traveller no sooner felt his genial rays than he took off one garment after another, and at last, fairly overcome with heat, undressed and bathed in a stream that lay in his path.”

*One of Aesop's many fables is that of the North Wind and the Sun. The moral is given as 'persuasion is better than force'. In the context of engaging people to change their behaviour to make it 'greener', people are interpreting the dichotomy somewhat differently. Is it more effective to appeal to negative emotions like fear and guilt, or to positive ones like curiosity and inspiration? Do you create more change by being nasty to people, or by being nice? Penny Walker draws on the experience of some recent thinking on the psychology of change to express her view.*

### Pioneers, prospectors and settlers

One powerful analysis which has been gaining ground lately, is that put forward by Steve Hounsham in his report for green NGOs. 'Painting the Town Green' argues that, when it comes to behaviour change, environmental groups have been putting

across their messages in ways which are almost guaranteed to fail for the vast majority of people. (Political change and campaigns aimed at organisations are a different matter.) “There’s been a gradual realisation that we haven’t been effective enough when we try to get people to change their behaviour. Even when I talk to my own family and friends, I can see that our messages just aren’t resonating. Greens communicate well with people who are already like them, but that group of people is too small to make the difference that’s needed.”

So who are the ‘people like us’ and who are the ‘others’? According to Hounsham, the population at large is divided into pioneers, prospectors and settlers. “Different people have different values, motivations and triggers for action. People in green groups are, on the whole, pioneers. We have been talking to ‘the public’ as if they are all like us – motivated

by an altruistic and heroic idea of saving the planet. Pioneers may even enjoy the element of self-sacrifice. For prospectors, what matters is being smart, ahead of the pack and being seen to be successful. For settlers, it’s family, home, security and protecting what you already have. If we want prospectors and settlers to change their behaviour – and I’d argue that we do, to give us the scale of change needed – then we have to find ways of reaching them in a way that appeals to them and their values.”

So pioneers can be scared and guilt-tripped into action, but they shouldn’t expect others to react the same way.

“Challenging ingrained habits and things that people choose to do generates huge resentment. When the central message is one about saving the planet or facing Armageddon, people are far more likely to resent it, dismiss the message and the evidence that backs it

up, or respond with denial. If they do believe the message, and respond only with fear, then that doesn't tend to lead to behaviour change either." Hounsham argues that environmental campaigners and communicators need to work harder – developing alternative campaigns for different audiences.

## Three varieties of dolphin

"Let's say you were running a campaign to save some dolphins. For the pioneers, it's straightforward. You tell them that if they don't do X or Y, the dolphins will die – in some horrible way. For the prospectors, you can remind them that your town is booming on the back of tourism and the visits of fashionable people, and that the dolphins are one of the reasons why. For the settlers, you might paint a picture of the town as unchanging and traditional, with the dolphins as part of that history. A return to a clean sea is good for the dolphins and good for settlers' children, so the change is also a direct benefit to them.

"We also make the mistake that giving people information will encourage action. In fact, it's emotional attractiveness and desire that do the trick. Look at advertising – you'll see much more emotional content than factual content."

Convincing people that a change is needed – and that change is positive and aspirational – is a first step. The other crucial part of it is to give people something to do which will be easy and

effective, and also appeal to their values.

"Too often, people are given whole lists of things to do which are overwhelming, or baffling, and where it's very unclear what the purpose or benefit is. People need to hear that everything that they do – however small – counts, even if they don't do everything. They need to be congratulated for their small steps, not reprimanded for not going further. Once you've opened the door, people are more receptive to change and the dominoes start falling."

## A little less conversation, a little more action

The Sustainable Consumption Round Table's (SCRT) report, 'I will if you will' (see News page 4), draws attention to the fact that intellectual appreciation and emotional commitment don't have to come first – they can follow behaviour change. There are people who have found themselves in homes with small-scale energy technologies like solar water heating, not out of active choice, but as tenants of pioneering social landlords. If the technology and its positive benefits are explained to people, it changes their views and attitudes, and makes them receptive to more change. For example, a teenage couple whose home had solar water now actively choose to buy energy efficient A-rated appliances. The SCRT's report says, "Micro-renewable technologies can provide a tangible hook to engage us emotionally with the issue of energy use. People also report a sense of satisfaction and pride that they are helping to tackle climate change in their everyday lives."

Hounsham sees a role for action at a political level too. "With a lot of environmental actions, the payback is distant, long-term and societal. But people need a payback now. So there's a huge role for government in creating paybacks like financial incentives. The paybacks have to be genuinely motivating."

Micro-renewables certainly appeal to those prospectors who like gadgets and boys' toys. If they also help to protect families against fuel price rises, I can see them appealing to settlers as well.

So if it's appealing, chimes with your values, you can see how to do it and that it works – maybe you don't need to get

scared or feel guilty at all before you change your ways.

## Renew US

And from the land of big oil comes something to inspire confidence. Take a look at the short film on the website of an organisation called Renew US. This is a communication tool which is steeped in the confidence that a small group of committed people can change the world. It is set in a future where climate change has been successfully tamed, and the people who did it tell us how. It's short enough to play at your next team meeting, workshop or even to the settlers next door.

## Fun in the sun

What can we learn from these different sources?

- make it easy and obvious (including starting with what people already do and know);
- make it aspirational (in a targeted way);
- give people confidence that they are making a difference; and
- give some payback (again, targeted to what people value).

And speaking of payback, taking your cloak off is the last thing you want to do if you're cold. But if everything else around is warm and genial, your cloak becomes a burden, you crave the feel of the air on your skin – the path to the stream will be littered with the things.

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'Painting the Town Green' is available from Transport 2000, [www.transport2000.org.uk](http://www.transport2000.org.uk)

'I will if you will' can be downloaded from the Sustainable Development Commission's website, [www.sd-commission.org.uk](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk)

Renew US, [www.renewus.org](http://www.renewus.org)

Many of the ideas in this article were debated at a meeting of AMED's Sustainable Development Network, [www.amed.org.uk/networks/sustainable\\_development.shtml](http://www.amed.org.uk/networks/sustainable_development.shtml)