Framing COVID-19

Topic #10: Talking about climate action in the era of COVID-19

We can’t afford to not to have a conversation that connects climate action to the pandemic response. The measures we put in place to recover from the crisis will shape climate policy and environmental outcomes for decades.

But to motivate public action—and broaden our coalition—we need to pay careful attention to the ways we talk about these connections.

If we stop at drawing parallels between the coronavirus crisis and the climate crisis, we risk appearing that we’re vying for attention. This weakens our credibility. Messengers who appear to be self-interested or "grinding the same old axe" are unpersuasive, easily dismissed, and often vilified.

And in a moment with so much pain, stress and uncertainty, some seemingly compelling communications strategies risk falling flat, or even causing harm.

Here are three ways we can connect climate change to the current moment—without falling into the trap of pitting one crisis against another.

1. Take care in framing the "choice" we are making.

As we advocate for policies that don’t lock us into further climate disruption, we can inadvertently activate beliefs that undermine support.

We shouldn’t play into the harmful myth that economic security and environmental harmony are fundamentally at odds—even if the intention is to refute it. We must also avoid implying a choice between indulgence and sacrifice, or between right and wrong.

These contrasts invite people to choose a side. Given that we’re hard-wired to put immediate concerns over longer-term ones, the environment won’t win.

Make the story about choosing the kind of energy that will fuel our future.
Instead of "we can have our cake and eat it too"

"We don't have to choose between the economy and the environment: we can have both. Those that would suggest we have to choose one or the other offer a false choice—and likely know exactly what they are doing. But we can pull off a win-win here. Green proposals are the kind of government stimulus that could help pull our economies out of the current slump and build a more resilient future. And by attaching green conditions to bail outs, and requiring companies to report on carbon emissions, we can get our economy going and get it on the path to sustainability."

Try "out with the old, in with the new"

"As we recover and redesign our economies, we should carefully consider what we bring forward. Now is the moment to rethink our use of fossil fuels, the energy of the past. Rampant carbon dioxide has been trapping heat in our atmosphere for more than a century. It's disrupted our climate system, putting us all at risk. Every subsidy we offer—every stimulus we adopt—should move us toward clean energy. Recovery packages should invigorate the industries that will move us into the future, not try to resuscitate ones that are already being phased out."

2. Offer solutions, not just critiques.

There are lessons from the pandemic that are important for climate action, and we can and should highlight them. The tone and the stance we take in doing so matters.

Blame—a backwards look to find fault—is never as powerful as looking forward. This is not the time to play "gotcha." Don't try to spark a sense of guilt. Don't risk seeming resentful.

Invite reflection, offer wisdom, and call people to action. Paint a picture of the future, not the past.

Instead of "we could have done it, we just didn't want to"

"Our leaders say shutting down extractive fossil fuel industries would be too disruptive. But the coronavirus has exposed how government leaders, and the public, actually can make immediate, dramatic changes—even when those changes have serious consequences for the economy and our quality of life. Provided there is strong enough political will, that is. Ignore the foot-draggers who say we can’t do it. Our current situation shows that humanity can cope with dramatic changes. We just don't want to."

Try "now we see how powerful we can be together"

"Effective government action has made the difference between places that are managing the outbreak and those that are overwhelmed by it. This shows us how to handle other major threats—like climate change. To get back to a stable climate, we have to stop using fossil fuels. They put human health, and our future, at risk. The responsible thing to do is to switch to other types of energy. This shift requires bold, coordinated action, led by government. The pandemic has proved that this isn’t easy—but that it can be done."
3. Connect with our need to be prepared and protect our world.

We need sound climate policy to be a pillar of the recovery effort. To get it, we need be in sync with the current public mood, which is focused on protection, preparedness, safety, and health. Connect any "ask" to current challenges and insights.

Unless you're certain you're only talking to other experts, be sure you're using language that speaks to the public. Invite people into the conversation with concrete, accessible examples.

Offer solutions—and even ask for bold changes—but avoid sounding idealistic. An overly optimistic tone always risks sounding utopian, but in this moment, it can seem particularly out of touch.

**Instead of "the sky is the limit"**

"Bold climate solutions can drive recovery. The climate change movement has long been calling for a massive transformation of our energy infrastructure, housing and transportation systems through public investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency and low-carbon transportation. We've been asking for vital innovation, like green finance. Now is the time to push forward on these priorities—and into a more resilient, more sustainable, and more socially connected future."

**Try "let's prepare for the big stuff"**

"The COVID-19 crisis has shown how vital it is that our governments are prepared to protect us from harm—and to take action even when the threat feels distant. As part of our recovery measures, we must step up our ability to handle problems stemming from climate disruption. As just one example: we know extreme weather events are ahead, because a warmer ocean fuels stronger storms. We can see this threat to health, safety, and economic prosperity. Now is the time to get ready for what lies ahead."

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**About this series**

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We're pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every week, we'll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter. You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.