



Don't Do One Thing:

Why and How to Get Collective Climate Solutions in the Frame

In FrameWorks' approach to communications on social problems, Strategic Frame Analysis™, we 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. These 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 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, wide-scale 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!

Considering patterns of public thinking is the first step in strategic frame analysis. Across social issues, systemic and structural changes are more difficult for the public to grasp. In contrast, FrameWorks research has shown time and time again that individual-level explanations of causes and solutions are the "default setting" for the American public. 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, little-picture explanations are also top-of-mind for the public when they think and talk about the environment.

This leads us to the recommendation to focus communications on examples of collective/civic solutions, and avoid talking about individual-level Solutions. Here's why. Because Americans' Individualism model is so incredibly strong, once this model is cued, it crowds out other available, but less-used, ways of modeling problems and solutions in more collective, systemic terms. If the goal is to get a "hard to think" idea into public discourse, so that the public can more effectively consider a range of proposals for wide-scale change, then it's counterproductive to remind them of the "easy to think" story they already have in mind. Humans are "fast and frugal" thinkers; when presented with one familiar idea and one unfamiliar idea, they will latch on to the story they already know and believe and are unlikely to absorb the information that isn't readily incorporated into their existing understanding.

Starting a new conversation on climate and ocean change involves a conscientious reframing of the issue – which includes a purposeful, disciplined approach to diffusing more and better examples of lesser-known policy options at the community, regional, and national level.

Getting out of behavior-change framing involves some behavior change! Below, we provide some models of how to frame Solutions more effectively, yet still maintain an accessible, inclusive, fairly casual style of interaction with the public.

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

What ways of framing Solutions can 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 them 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 they can take to influence decisions within or through institutions. Here are examples of 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 their 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 reliance on/use of fossil fuels?”

The connecting thread here is the recommendations all involve individual actions that take place in some sort of policy context – 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 citizens and as members of groups and organizations, acting in community.

Additional ways of framing Solutions at the systems level

Another important approach for framing Solutions is to proactively include this frame element in communications, as opposed to only talking about potential changes when asked directly. When doing so, it’s important to continue to talk about potential solutions at a big-picture level. Below are

some examples of how you might introduce different sectors of human activity in such a way that encourages systems-level thinking and invites the public to consider a broader range of ways of addressing climate change. As you read them, consider the habits of communication might 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.

ENERGY PRODUCTION

Energy Shift: “The key to getting the climate system back to functioning the way it should is to get away from fossil fuels for energy. This means moving toward sources that don’t add to the heat-trapping blanket effect, such as solar energy.”

Energy Efficiency: “The key to getting the climate system back to functioning the way it should is to move away from fossil fuels for energy altogether. Lots of people are working on that. In the meantime, we can also take steps to use much, much less of the kinds of energy that add heat-trapping gases to our atmosphere.”

TRANSPORTATION

“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.”

MANUFACTURING

“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.”

FOOD SYSTEM

“One sector/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.”

BUILDING

“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.”

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.