

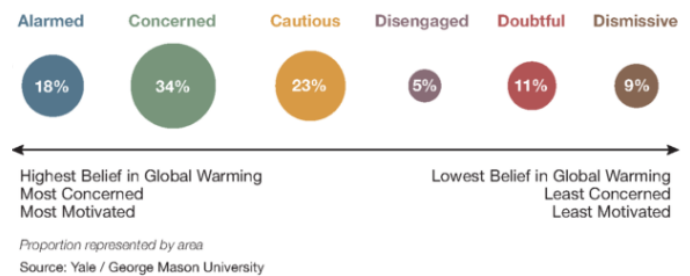
## The Time is Now – Doubling Down on Climate Leadership

A multi-part series authored by Daniel Kreeger (Executive Director, Association of Climate Change Officers)

### Part 5a: Understanding and Engaging People on Climate Change

If the recent elections here in the United States and Brexit have taught you anything, I hope that you've taken away a keen understanding that there are numerous and sometimes polarized perspectives on any issue. In an ideal world, the science of climate change would not be seen as a political consideration – rather, the policy solutions and public response(s) would be the subject of political debate. Unfortunately, that is not the world in which we live today.

The *Six Americas* study spearheaded by Yale and George Mason University have identified the categories of alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful and dismissive as reflected by the adjacent diagram.



As a practitioner working on the impacts of climate change upon your organization, you are going to encounter professionals on a frequent or regular basis whose understanding, beliefs or related motivations will your ability to drive initiatives forward. We all need to get better at moving the needle as we need to dramatically scale up our progress on climate action – it's easy to gravitate toward those who might fall under the alarmed or concerned category, but we need to make substantial progress in engaging the cautious, disengaged, doubtful and dismissive.

One of the first lessons I learned as a young public relations professional was that perception is reality. Simply put, the laws of physics are on your side, but if you can't shift their perception in some way, shape or form, you won't move the needle. So, in order to inform how you engage with these individuals, here are a few thoughts toward helping you understand their motivations and understandings, and how to engage with them accordingly.

If you're interacting with someone who you don't already know to be what I'd describe as a combination of understanding and activated, then you need to figure out how to relate with them. This can be accomplished with the following steps:

#### **Fact Finding: Where Does He/She Stand on Climate Change?**

A mistake we often make when engaging with people is to turn our sensors off and project our own thoughts on to others. But if you don't understand who the person is and where they're coming from, how can you determine the best engagement strategy? Ask clear questions that are conversational in nature and stop to listen the answer. Understanding the foundation of the person's perceptions and beliefs is critical.

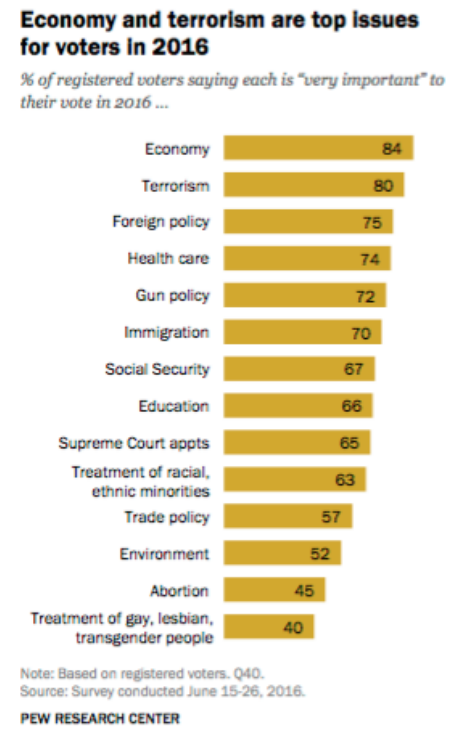
- **Don't rush or jump to conclusions.** Ask well thought ought questions to determine the person's perception on climate change. For example, there are substantial differences I'll get into shortly between someone who thinks climate science isn't definitive versus a person who simply doesn't relate to the implications of climate change and thus is unmoved.
- **Ascertain what sources of information have led to the person's perception on climate change.** You're putting a puzzle together in whatever time you have to engage this person. It doesn't take long to get a handle on the person with whom you are interacting. Some areas to inquire about might include:
  - What media does this person rely upon for information?
  - If you don't already know this, what is his/her academic, professional background and current occupation?

- Where did he/she grow up or has he/she lived for an extended period of time?
  - Is the person generally skeptical about science (e.g. consider other similar issues such as nutrition, space, vaccinations)?
  - Does he/she have any specific conclusions or strong convictions?
  - Are they overwhelmed or defeatist?
- **Look or listen for clues.** Climate change has become a polarizing issue, and to be frank, it should be as the future of our civilization is on the line. But that polarization is not always your ally in relating to people. Watch body language and listen to tone of voice. See if you can sense anger, frustration, hesitation, uncertainty or a general lack of interest. This sign will be a crucial key in informing your approach.

### Exacerbating Factors: What Issues Motivate the Person?

When you get the sense that you have a solid understanding of what leads to the person's perceptions, it is time to learn about what things motivate them. You may not find the person has strong motivations about climate change, so regardless, you need to learn about the person's other motivations. Try to honestly see things from the person's perspective. There's nothing wrong with asking a person what motivates them, but make sure to ask your questions in a way that will get you real insight into their motives.

- **Identify the person's personal motivations and/or values:** What are the drivers and guiding principles that move this person throughout life? Recognizing this may not seem like the easiest issue to address, you can usually figure out pretty quickly if a person's convictions are driven by factors such as faith, political ideology, family values, economic security or wealth.
- **Determining priority political issues:** Knowing the issues that this person prioritizes is worth its weight in gold. There are very few issues that do not directly intersect with or are not significantly exacerbated by climate change. If you determine the person's top 3 or 4 issues, you'll likely have at least one or two that can be leveraged.



### Moving the Needle: It's Time to Engage

You now have enough information to begin to formulate a strategy for engaging with the person toward your objective. It's easy to think that one elevator pitch is all you need, but in reality, you need an arsenal of approaches and knowledge, and you'll need to know what to summon and when.

- **(Re)Consider your objective:** You may have had a particular objective in mind when you first began communicating with the person, but you should revisit that objective. What you learned from the person? Does your original objective still make sense or should you amend it? For example, motivating a skeptic to consult more accurate sources of information can be a win, as can be 'disarming' someone who has in outright denial or an obstructionist.
- **Tailoring your approach:** Align your objective with what you've learned about the person with whom you are speaking. Be flexible, build a rapport and find common ground. While your intent may be climate action, your content may be economic development, mission assurance, risk management or opportunity.
- **Summon relevant examples:** You need to make this real. One of the greatest challenges with relating climate change to people is that it's incredibly hard to see it or touch it. Think about the implications of climate change, not just the hazards – but make sure to include account for opportunities and hope. We won't stop climate change, but we can slow it down and we can prepare for and adapt to it. Here are some practical examples:

- National security: An overwhelming number of active duty and retired multi-star generals and admirals have cited climate change as a threat multiplier and de-stabilizing force. Knowing where flare-ups are likely to occur can inform a long-term regional strategy, for example.
- Agriculture production: Crops that are sensitive to microclimates or are water intensive (e.g. avocados, wine) are important to identify. Solutions might include investing in alternative farming solutions or changing recipes.
- Real estate value and insurance coverage: Sea level rise and related flood risk will impact coastal real estate as it becomes more difficult to insure or finance. Some lenders and insurance providers are already restricting activity in vulnerable areas. Infrastructure projects such as raising roads, improving drainage and other civil engineering solutions can mitigate these risks while creating jobs.
- **Mind your demeanor**: Your tone and approach is critical to your success in moving the needle. Make sure you mind the following basic principles in engaging with others, regardless of their beliefs and perceptions:
  - **Never get into an argument** with the person and never let the emotions of the conversation escalate. This is of course a challenge given your likely passion for the subject, so try to put your energy into being genuinely inquisitive and understanding.
  - **Show respect for the other person's opinions** and never say they are wrong or come across as judgmental. As Galileo said, "You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself."
  - **Nobody's perfect**, so when you've made an error, admit it – and don't expect that this person is any different.
  - **Be friendly and engaging** so that your conversation is genuine and to ensure that the person wants to hear you out, consider your words and establish a rapport with you.
  - **Appeal to their more noble motives** based upon the motivations and drivers you learned earlier.
  - **Relish the opportunity to engage** this person and show appreciation for their willingness to keep an open mind.

So you have a simple process for engaging with other individuals who may not see climate change the same way you do. This approach should help you across most categories, though inevitably, you will run across someone who's denial of climate change is so strong that these approaches may not be enough. Here are a few relevant categories of those exceptions I've encountered:

- Religious deniers
- Corrupted influence
- Political ideologists

Each of these categories of individuals requires a very different approach. In the next chapter of this article series, I'll cover strategies and perspectives on engaging with these individuals.

## About ACCO

The Association of Climate Change Officers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization for executives and officials worldwide in industry, government, academia and the non-profit community. ACCO's mission is to define, develop and support the functions, resources and communities necessary for effective organizational leadership in addressing climate-related risks and opportunities. For more information about ACCO, please visit [www.ACCOonline.org](http://www.ACCOonline.org).

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