

BUILDING A RELATIONAL CLIMATE CONVERSATION PROGRAM

There is a perception that the US public is disengaged and apathetic about climate action, but the numbers don't bear that out. Instead, we have a problem of **pluralistic ignorance**: people tend to underestimate the concern felt by their peers and community about climate change and take the apparent silence as further evidence that they're alone in caring about the issue.

So why would people act on climate change if they feel alone in doing so? When an issue is complicated, confusing, and even controversial, it helps to have encouragement from someone they trust.

This tipsheet lays out how advocates can build a relational climate conversations program to inspire supporters to take this most basic and neglected action: letting family members, friends, and neighbors know that they are not alone in caring about climate change, and that there are ways to face this crisis if they act together.



GO WITH WHO YOU KNOW

The **gap** between peoples' perception of the level of climate concern in the US and the actual level indicates that we are stuck in a spiral of silence around climate change where a lack of public dialogue has made the issue seem taboo. One way to fight against this trend is to normalize conversations about climate change among family, friends, and community members as not only acceptable but appreciated.

Relational climate conversations build on the foundation of **relational organizing**, which recognize the inherent source credibility, trustworthiness, and persuasiveness that climate supporters hold among their peers and loved ones. Put simply, they are **relatable messengers** who are well-positioned to cut through hesitancy and build efficacy through the depth of their relationships. This is part of the reason why youth climate advocates, speaking about the risks and uncertainty facing their generation, have become some of the leading and **most persuasive** voices in this arena.

While simple in concept, relational climate conversations require organizational buy-in and support

to succeed. Asking our supporters to talk about a polarized political topic – even with people they're close to and trust – can be a difficult, risky, and anxiety-inducing ask. Organizations can aid their supporters not only through trainings, but also emotional support programs such as “buddying up” with other volunteers or other ways to **legitimize** and help folks overcome their apprehension.

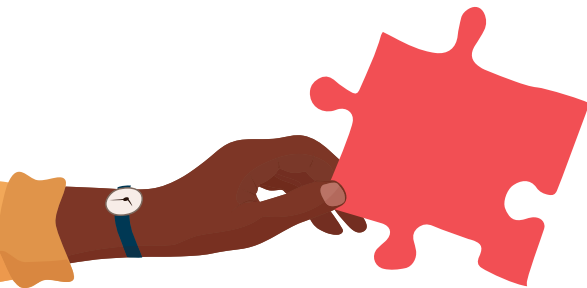
LISTEN, CONNECT, AND GET PERSONAL

Invite your supporters to think carefully about who they want to speak with and what they hope to get out of the conversation. What do they know about their audience in terms of who they are, how they identify, and what interests and/or concerns them about climate change? The ideal conversation partner probably isn't their cranky uncle at Thanksgiving dinner, but someone who they know (or suspects) cares about climate change but doesn't talk about it. The goal doesn't need to be signing them up for an action – just opening up the conversation to nurture future discussion is a laudable achievement.

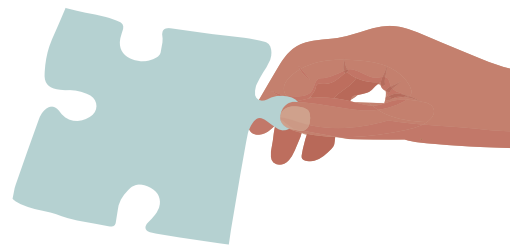
Only **18%** of Americans say they regularly discuss climate change in their everyday lives, and only **26%** say they have been personally encouraged to take climate action by a friend or family member? All this while **60%** of Americans **report** that they are concerned about climate change personally harming them during their lifetimes and **74%** say that they are willing to change their lifestyles to reduce the worst effects of warming. Informing people that *they are not alone* in their climate concerns and that *the time is right* to talk about it leads to greater openness and less anxiety.

Besides letting people know that they are not isolated in their climate hopes and worries, here are some other messaging directions for you to give your supporters to build trust, understanding,

- **Supporters should be prepared to meet their friend or family member where they are by **listening** to how they understand, recognize, and grapple with climate change in their own experiences.** This means providing them with a safe opportunity to disagree, ask questions, and have their concerns heard and addressed.
- **Work with supporters to identify short- and medium-term solutions that are currently feasible and have **positive local impacts** on issues their audience cares about.** For example, they could mention the improvements to local air quality from shutting down a local coal plant, or how improved net metering policies could reduce utility bills for home solar systems.
- **It's hard to talk about climate change without getting emotional to some extent, but you should caution supporters to consider the emotions they want to elicit from a conversation.** While anger and fear can be motivators in some contexts, they can also lead people to withdraw and shut down; we recommend **focusing on hope and optimism** to spur engagement whenever possible. No matter the emotion evoked in their conversation, supporters should help their friend or family member channel those emotions into actions, whether that's signing onto an action or just setting up their next chat.



- **Supporters don't need to memorize a whole spiel or script to have their conversations but they should be experts at **telling their personal stories** about engaging with climate change.** That way, they can model their own personal journeys from concern to intent to action-taking for their friend or family member. Encourage supporters to also be vulnerable in sharing where they may be falling short of their climate commitments – perhaps these could be areas supporters and their friend or family member tackle together.
- **To go along with the above, supporters should acknowledge and respect that climate change can be a hard topic to talk about for their conversation friend or family member, whether that's because of the larger politics of the issue or just a sense of feeling lost.** Rather than minimizing peoples' anxiety, they can **legitimize those feelings** but then reinforce why climate action is still worth talking about and fighting for.



A ROADMAP TO CLIMATE CONVERSATIONS

Advocates can use the following points as a roadmap to train their supporters to carry out relational climate conversations with their friends, family, and neighbors:

START



CLARIFY YOUR INTENTIONS

Have supporters plan out who they want to talk with, what they know about their friend or family member, how they'd like to direct the conversation, and what outcomes they hope to achieve.



PICK YOUR SPOT

Supporters should pick out a comfortable setting for their conversation that invites emotional intimacy. There's a reason kitchen tables are iconic.



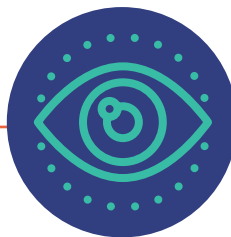
FIND COMMON GROUND

Supporters should consider whether it makes sense to introduce the issue directly or if it would make their friend or family member more at ease to enter through a side door, such as a local extreme weather event or another topic of mutual interest, as a way to explore climate change together.



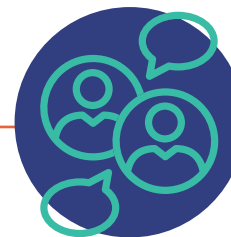
LISTEN

While supporters should go in with a plan, conversations shouldn't be preachy. Instead, they should really listen to what their conversation friend or family member is saying, clue into how they're thinking, and adapt their plans accordingly.



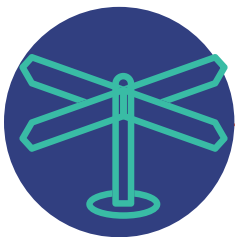
ATTEND TO YOUR OWN SENSATIONS

Relational climate conversations can stir up all sorts of emotions for both parties. Remind supporters to step back if they are facing conflict and think about how they can respond conscientiously rather than by habit.



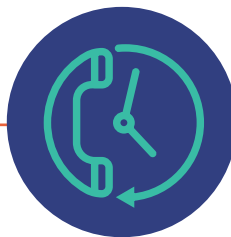
CULTIVATE SAMENESS

One way to promote intimacy and vulnerability is to listen carefully and reflect back what they understand their friend or family member to be saying to make sure they are understanding them correctly. This practice helps guard against miscommunications and can build a sense of acceptance.



GENERATE PRODUCTIVE DIFFERENCES

If conflict or disagreement arises, supporters should find ways to navigate away from the "danger zone" where conversations deteriorate into argument. This can be accomplished by either steering the conversation towards firmer ground or naming the conflict in a conscious attempt to move around it.



FOLLOW UP

If the conversation went well, supporters should thank their friend or family member for hearing them out, express what they learned from the conversation, and make it clear that they would like to return to the topic in the future. One way to set that up is to close with a callback to some hanging thread from the conversation that could be picked up next time.



REFLECT AND RECORD

After the conversation, supporters should take some time to reflect on the experience and compare it to their original plan. How did it go? What went well and what might have gone better had they made different choices? Ask your supporters to share these reflections back with you so that everyone can learn from the process together. We at the Lab would love to hear how things went too!

COMPLETE



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