

Climate Action in Cities

Applied Ethics Strategies

To see how these ethics strategies could be applied to accelerate climate action implementation in cities, [visit the Carnegie Ethics Accelerator tool.](#)

●●● Building Trust

Public acceptance of actions proposed to address climate change can be hindered if there is a loss of trust in the institutions, systems, or actors involved in initiating or managing their implementation. Perceptions of hypocrisy or lack of belief that costs and benefits will be fairly distributed can substantially affect support for, or participation in, action. This is true even when the proposed change is supported in principle. Building trust in the competency and intentions of implementing actors, systems, and institutions is essential in overcoming this source of inertia.

●●● Facilitating a Just and Orderly Transition

Change is disruptive, and systemic change even more so. Therefore, ensuring transitions are orderly and fair in their distribution of burdens and benefits—and the process through which distribution is decided—can help ensure acceptability and more comprehensive support for, and participation in, the transition.

●●● Finding Common Language

Language is a powerful indicator of cultural, societal, and group values and principles. Certain words or phrases can be interpreted as indicating a wider set of values and principles that may be considered incompatible with one's own—and consequently the underlying message (and any associated messages) risks being ignored or rejected. For example, use of the phrase “climate change” may be interpreted by some as representing a worldview grounded in socially liberal, progressive, left-wing, or “woke” values which fail to resonate with those not sharing such values. This may consequently put them off before considering the core message about the need for action on climate change. Sensitivity to the semiotics of language used in advocating for climate action and finding common language that connects with—rather than conflicts with—the diverse range of values and principles represented in the target audience can ensure more effective and widespread engagement with the message being communicated.

●●● Grafting onto Existing Rootstock

Top-down implementation of climate action can fail to find full support or uptake at individual or local levels due to issues such as lack of trust, perceptions of fairness, or perceived conflicts in underlying values and principles. Scaling the adoption of any action requires sensitivity to and connection with the established cultures, practices, values, principles, needs, and interests of the individuals or communities involved. Climate action is no different. Designing implementation attuned to these things can ensure more effective and widespread engagement and uptake.



Prioritizing Middle-Ground Solutions

There's a tendency for actors involved in the design and implementation of climate action to either strive for perfection or think they must choose between polar opposites while overlooking creative, middle-ground solutions. Prioritizing such 'inflection points' rather than pursuing absolutes can help avoid delays resulting from perfectionism or polarization.



Putting Yourself in Others' Shoes

Lack of understanding and consideration of the values, principles, needs, or interests of those involved in climate action can result in pushback, criticism, polarization, or stalemates. Consequently, parties involved may either disengage altogether or focus on defending their position rather than being open to more productive engagement. Taking critics seriously and honing active listening skills to "sit on the same side of the table" and see matters from different perspectives can help ensure more productive engagement. These skills can be effectively driven by empathy and concern for others, the principle of charity, or simply a desire to find convergence based on common interests or towards common outcomes.



Speaking to an Existing Truth

Many advocates of climate action unwittingly fall into the trap of trying to "inject" their message into the minds of their audience. Driven by their sense of urgency (or passion), each failed attempt prompts an even more forceful intervention. Finding the means by which to speak to an existing truth already held in minds (or hearts) of the target audience can be an effective means to connect.



Strengthening Ethical Literacy

When deciding on whether and how to engage in action on climate change—or promoting activities to encourage others to do so—understanding the underlying ethical frameworks guiding such decisions can hugely help or hinder implementation. These frameworks are often assumed, implicit, or unexamined. There are many ways to answer the question, "What should I do?" It can be analyzed by the consequences of an action, or the obligations or duties you believe an actor has, or what the action implies about a person's character or values. The strongest arguments are those that can be expressed in multiple ethical "languages." In turn, this requires advocates to be ethically "literate" across the spectrum of these "languages." Such literacy can help advocates of climate action better frame their arguments using the multiple "languages of ethics" that are being accorded validity within their ethically diverse target audiences.



Valuing Small Decisions

Given the global scale of climate change, there is a tendency to discount or overlook the potential of small changes and instead focus on large actions and actors to deliver the scale of impact required. But small decisions matter. Emphasize that a small change—when made by a large number of people—can have an outsized impact. The biggest challenge is not that we are powerless, but the belief that we are powerless.