APPLYING CLIMATE PSYCHOLOGY PRINCIPLES AND METHODS TO THE WORK OF LEADING ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

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She has published *Environmental Melancholia* (Routledge 2015), and is currently working on a trade publication about applying the psychology of climate and ecological threats to our business and personal practices.

To shift today's economies and societies from ecological *transition* to ecological *transformation*, i.e at speed and scale, we need to apply psychology principles and methods. This article outlines a framework for how those leading ecological transformation efforts in an organization or community can apply psychology principles to guide and accelerate innovation for transformation. Guiding principles include attuning, revealing, convening, equipping and sustaining.

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, the conversation around climate psychology focused on one field: behavioral psychology, popularized by Nobel economics laureates Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler, who pioneered the integration of psychology into how people make economic decisions. The study of climate decision-making often centered on encouraging people to change their consumption behavior or other actions through 'nudges' such as charging for supermarket plastic bags or comparing one's energy usage to that of neighbours. A behavioral-psychology approach also involved studying public perceptions and beliefs on climate so the right levers could be selected to change behavior.

But nudges work only at the individual level. While individuals acting in concert can have significant power to drive change, ecological transformation requires systems-level change. It requires change not only in the ways we consume, but in the ways we act as citizens, as employees, and across our other identities and roles throughout communities, economies and societies.

To accelerate and scale change in our current systems to better address climate change and its impacts, we need to expand the conversation beyond the nudge.

Applying psychology principles to climate change engagement and other ecological transformation is about much more than just behavioral nudges. Many practitioners have strongly entrenched 'theories of change' and approaches on how best to engage people on climate and sustainability.
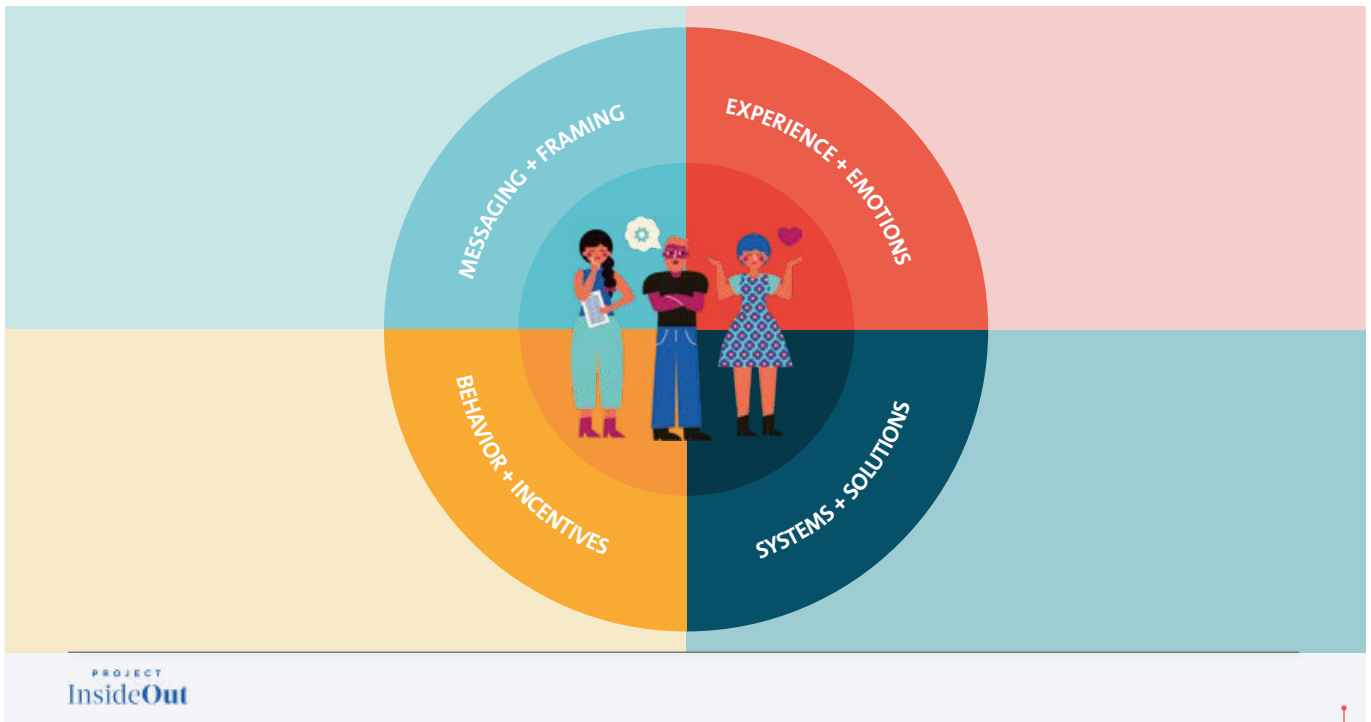
The Quadrants of Engagement - the four main orientations towards theories of change.
Source: Renée Lertzman via Project InsideOut.

These include:

- **Behavioral change and behavioral sciences:** Behavioral science approaches today often center on encouraging individuals to change their behavior through 'nudges', as well as identifying the right levers for behavior change.
- **Messaging and framing:** The linguist George Lakoff, for example, highlights the importance of framing – not just as a means of persuading people to act, but the conceptual structures by which people understand climate change and other environmental issues.[1] At the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, program director Anthony Leiserowitz studies public beliefs, attitudes and behaviors about climate change and sustainable development; Leiserowitz and his colleagues have identified six segments of people by the way they view climate change, ranging from 'Dismissive' to 'Alarmed'.[2]
- **Designing better systems and solutions:** Design thinking is the iterative process of ideating, prototyping and testing solutions, founded on an understanding of user experience. Its application to social impact was first popularized by organizations like IDEO and Ashoka.

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- **Emphasizing experience and emotions:** Practices and initiatives that build community, belonging and connection; foster emotional intelligence at all levels; address climate anxiety and emotions; and encourage leaders to be vulnerable and human, are also effective ways of engaging people on climate.

Examples include the Extinction Rebellion activist community and its 'fire circles', the Climate Coaching Alliance, and the Climate Psychology Alliance.

In fact, we need all of these approaches, and we need to combine and integrate them in creative ways, for effective climate change engagement.

FOSTERING INNOVATION FOR ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

We know these approaches are important – but the art lies in using them. How should we guide change to foster innovation for ecological transformation?

A NOTE ON THE THREE AS: ANXIETY, AMBIVALENCE, AND ASPIRATIONS

In nearly every encounter with climate change, we experience the 'three As'.

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1 George Lakoff (2010) *Why it Matters How We Frame the Environment*, Environmental Communication, 4:1, 70-81, DOI: 10.1080/17524030903529749

2 Verner, M., Marlon, J., Carman, J., Rosenthal, S., Ballew, M., Leiserowitz, A., Buttermore, N., & Mulcahy, K. (2023). *Global Warming's Six Audiences: A cross-national comparison in nearly 200 countries and territories worldwide.* Yale University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Cheerleader	Righter	Educator	Guide
A focus on solutions and keeping things positive, hopeful, inspiring and uplifting. However, it has blind spots or can be ineffective when it does not acknowledge people's anxieties and ambivalence	Includes advocacy; making the moral and ethical case for the right thing to do; and highlighting the urgent need for ecological transformation. Sometimes focusses only on what has gone wrong and demands change without a clear pathway or motivation for how to get there	Focuses on raising awareness and providing people with the right information, on the basis that having this information will spur people to act differently. Like cheerleading, educating can often fail to acknowledge anxiety or ambivalence and focus only on aspiration	Emphasizes listening, questions, conversations, and relationship-building as a means of building capacity to learn, grow, evolve and transform.

PROJECT
InsideOut

The different types of changemakers and their key characteristics.
Source: Renée Lertzman via Project InsideOut.

One is **anxiety**. Grappling with a massive, complex problem like climate change can be anxiety-inducing. We may feel guilty or ashamed that we aren't doing more about it, or paralyzed when we don't know what to do or how to do it. In climate engagement, we need to acknowledge and confront anxiety, as it has a direct impact on how we think, feel, process information and relate to one another.

Another is **ambivalence**. Ambivalence refers to feeling pulled in multiple directions by simultaneous, conflicting desires, motivations, attachments and values. For instance, perhaps someone fears for the last biodiverse spaces on the planet, yet wants to visit them all – a trip that would hasten their demise – before they disappear. We may feel tugged in different directions as citizens, caregivers, consumers or employees. In climate engagement, ambivalence is a key ingredient in how we wrestle with new solutions, behavioral changes, and collective actions. The more we recognize and acknowledge it, the more readily we can work out new ways of engaging effectively.

The third 'A' is **aspiration**. As humans, we have some fairly universal aspirations, such as autonomy, agency, and purpose. When it comes to climate change, we want to

be part of the solution, to make a difference, and to have a positive impact.

To help organizations or communities achieve ecological transformation that addresses climate change, it's essential to acknowledge and address all three 'A's – not just speak to people's aspirations or try to frighten people into action.

We'll explore this more deeply in 'How to be a guide' below.

> *To help organizations or communities achieve ecological transformation that addresses climate change, it's essential to acknowledge and address all three 'A's (Anxiety, Ambivalence, Aspiration) – not just speak to people's aspirations or try to frighten people into action*

HOW TO BE A GUIDE FOR CHANGE: THE FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

There are many different ways that advocates and changemakers have sought to drive ecological transformation, but the only one that is truly effective is Guiding.

Because it operates in the context of relationships with people and acknowledges and addresses all three 'A's, Guiding it is the most effective method for driving transformation in a community or organization. It can encompass and integrate elements of Righting, Educating and Cheerleading where they are relevant. Other practices

do not fully acknowledge how people view ecological transformation: Cheerleading and Educating can often fail to acknowledge anxiety or ambivalence and focus only on aspiration, while Righting can sometimes focus only on what has gone wrong and demand change without a clear pathway or motivation for how to get there.

So how might Guiding be applied to climate transformation? In 2019, I convened a group of experienced clinical psychologists, sustainability professionals, researchers, and design thinkers in San Francisco to think through what practices can best guide people to shift deeply entrenched behaviors and promote sustained long-term transformation over short-term change.

The output became the five Guiding Principles of Project InsideOut that are grounded in evidence-based research, best practices, and years of clinical experience. They are:

- **Attune: Understand your people.**
  - When trying to create change in any group – in a business unit or department, for instance – you must first understand *yourself* and have compassion for the range of your experience and emotions.
  - Then, understand and address the three 'A's that may arise in the group, and seek to experience your campaign from their point of view – not just the call to action. Understand the dynamics in your organization that may stem from the three 'A's of your people, and correct course in real-time if needed.

- **Reveal: Go deeper.**
  - Revealing means providing opportunities for vulnerable, personal sharing – from leaders driving transformation, and from your people. The typical 'heroine' narrative involves overcoming a tough challenge to emerge triumphant. Don't forget to leave room to talk about the struggles along the way, such as doubting oneself or facing skepticism from others.
  - Can you create a culture in your organization or community where people feel safe to reveal the extent of their struggle without being shot down?

- **Convene: Less talking *at*, more talking *with*.**
  - When we focus on the urgency of ecological transformation, it can be tempting to promote, tell, lecture or pitch – to get people to care, donate, or change their behavior. But transformation depends on relationships, which over time are the most effective drivers of change.
  - This means viewing organizations as conveners rather than messengers. Can you enable people to work in small groups or pairs to build relationships with each other? Can people get to know each other socially while engaging with ecological transformation?

- **Equip: Be a gardener, grow your people.**
  - The more that changemakers can build the skills and capacities of others, the lighter our individual burdens

get and the stronger our organizations become. But it's not just about uni-directional upskilling or lecturing. As leaders, we need to confer on people a sense of autonomy, control and purpose around ecological transformation. We can draw on methods like peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, and train-the-trainer models to accelerate people's growth.

- **Sustain: Go beyond the pledge.**
  - While eliciting a commitment or getting signatures on a pledge is exciting, ecological transformation demands sustained change. How do we make actions stick in the long term?
  - Again, changemakers can plan for this. We can make sure there are resources and infrastructure available after the pledge or commitment is reached. Being attuned to your people can also shed light on where they're at, what they are struggling with, and what they need to support and sustain transformation. And the most powerful way to sustain engagement is, of course, involving people in co-design, co-creation and co-ownership of the change they'd like to see.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: AN EXAMPLE

How might the five Guiding Principles play out to accelerate and scale companies' and organizations' contributions to ecological transformation?

Recently, I worked with the technology company VMWare to support its ESG engagement strategy – first outlining the company's ESG agenda and goals for its next several years, then engaging in listening across the organization and hearing where people were in relation to these ESG goals.

> *Transformation depends on relationships, which over time are the most effective drivers of change*

Next, we held a series of dialogues with a variety of stakeholders within the organization. Over time, they were able to articulate their principles.

Most importantly they developed the skills and tools to guide internal stakeholders, teams and business units to establish a deeper connection and understanding of the company ESG agenda and goals. They did this by going through a process of learning how to implement the Guiding Principles, gain awareness of their theory of change, and translate this into their own unique culture.

Now, the organization is in an early stage of rolling these principles out organization-wide, in a way that is a true collaboration across different business units and teams. The Guiding Principles are not applied in a one-off manner. Rather, we enable people within an organization to develop skills, evolve their mindsets, and work in ways that enable them to continually experiment and practice.