
Shifting the narrative – four effective strategies for talking about transport systems designed for people and planet

Adapting to, and mitigating, further climate disruption is an opportunity for people in government and business to create better transport systems. Transport systems that enable many of us in towns and cities across New Zealand to live the better, more connected life we want.

Current narratives block the creation of these transport systems — because they activate short term reactivity, hopelessness and fatalism about transport shifts. The current narratives also limit people to think in terms of individual choice, rather than the power of collective actions and benefits.

A more helpful set of narratives is needed that draws on what is already present across our communities — people’s desire to live in ways that work with our natural environment, that are more connected to the places we learn, work, play and to each other.

Three unhelpful mindsets that block the shift to climate and people positive transport systems

There is a core group of mindsets that influence thinking and limit effective action for a climate and people positive transport system. There are variations of these three also.

1. Fatalism

In general this is the belief that the transport and climate problems are too big and complex to solve. The problems or systems are too embedded, and the people responsible (usually government) are not up to the job. It obscures the way in which many of our systems have been designed and implemented by people and can be redesigned. It saps people's sense of hope, agency and optimism, leading to disengagement.

Transport fatalism — is the belief that the car centric system is inevitable, and would create too many negative impacts to shift. It obscures the harms from the current transport system, harms like injuries to children, that conflict with our shared goals and values. It also obscures the many effective alternatives that meet our shared goals. As advocates, we inadvertently cue this thinking

when we frame vehicle centred planning and cities, and use words like “car centric”, “getting rid of cars”, “removing car parks”, or “politicians won’t act”.

Climate fatalism — the belief that it’s too late, too hard to act on climate disruption, and no one in governments and business will act. It dampens people’s sense that they can act and make a difference, and knowledge about effective action. We engage this thinking when we use “crisis and fear” frames about climate change, focus on the risks without making concrete the solutions and better lives we can build. It sounds like “act now before it’s too late” “it will cost a lot more later if we don’t”. These frames and words can raise awareness but do so at expense of agency, efficacy and ability to act effectively.

2. Individualism

The belief that the problems we have are best solved through individual’s choosing to shift their behaviours, often consumer behaviours. It distracts people from seeing how structures and systems are key to shaping and reshaping people’s behaviours. It limits people’s understanding of what collective action is, and its impact on shifting systems to make certain behaviours easier. We reinforce this mindset when we frame individual behaviour change, tell stories of individuals doing the hard or right thing, and when we use words like “choose”, “buy”, “make the hard choice” and talk about people as “consumers”.

Freedomism – the belief that current carbon based car-centric systems give us independence, freedom and fun. Any changes are impediments to free will, individual choice and preferences. Freedomism prevents people from seeing the greater freedoms that the system inhibits; good health, clean air, the fun and ease of alternative modes of travel. It also obscures the industries who benefit at people’s expense. We cue this thinking when we frame loss people need to expect from transport and climate disruption solutions, and use words like “making the hard decisions” “we have to change our way of life”.

Shared mindsets

Shared mindsets are shared ways of reasoning about and understanding how and why issues come about and what should be done about them. They shape people’s responses to information, and the policies and practices they are willing to support.



Narratives

Narratives are a pattern of meaning present in our communications - like a golden thread we weave through them. The pattern of meaning often reflects shared mindsets. Narratives often have values — our core human motivations — nested within them. What narratives dominate influences the mindsets that dominate and power plays a significant role in both.



3. Them versus us (otherism)

The belief that there are people who are fundamentally different and “other” from “us”. In transport and climate these “others” are seen as a threat to our way of life, and to benefit from particular transport changes (eg bike lanes), at the expense of “our” needs (being able to drive). It obscures the experiences of excluded groups such as children, disabled people, while dampening down shared desires and benefits of a climate and people friendly transport system. We cue this thinking when we differentiate people particularly by their mode of transport “car drivers”, “cyclists”, or we address the concerns of businesses, but not communities currently harmed.

Four effective strategies for communicating about climate and people positive transport systems

1. Remind people of the type of communities (and transport) they have a shared desire for and can have

Counter othersism and fatalism by framing the collective “we” and the better life that a redesigned transport system offers us all, whether that be in terms of health, wellbeing, freedom, mitigating climate disruption, or creating a connection with others.

✓ Amplify

Talking about **people’s shared desires** for communities that are easier for everyone. Name our need for connection and care for the environment and natural world. **Show people** in clear every day ways the communities people want to live in. **Offer clear concrete actions** (with an emphasis on collective ones) that we can speed up to get us there. Use these terms: people who want to ride, people who want to walk, people who want to take a bus.

✗ Avoid

Leading with fear, risk and loss. Including talking first and foremost about the climate and other risks we face and what inaction will do, unless we act with urgency. Avoid these terms: cyclists, car drivers.

2. Make the transport system, and how it shapes our lives, the centre of your communication

Counter individualism and concerns about limiting choice, by providing people with the context for how our transport (and other) systems constrain many of us. Explain what happens when we shift the context by redesigning to create a people and climate positive transport system.

✓ Amplify

Talking about how our transport environment **creates the context** for people's behaviour, how it limits people's options, inconveniences, and harms us. Provide concrete examples of where rebuilding has made people's lives easier and met public good goals. Highlight how **visible community support** has made this happen. Embrace terms like people, citizens, communities.

✗ Avoid

Talking about individuals needing to change their behaviour, make better transport choices or decisions, or why more people need to care. Avoid these terms: ratepayers, consumers, customers and property owners.

3. Put the responsible actions of people in government and business in the frame

Build a sense of efficacy and hope, as well as an understanding of who can act to do what, by talking about the role of people in government to take action for the long term good of all people.

✓ Amplify

Talking about **planning for the big stuff**. Name people in government as the **agents** who need to **act pragmatically** and respond well now to prevent things getting worse. Give specific examples of people in government, business, iwi, hapū and communities working together on effective solutions.

✗ Avoid

Talking about communities needing to fend/prepare for themselves, or not to expect people in government to help.

4. Making stories easy to hear and share: Use a vision and values led story structure

Build a compelling story that is easy for people open to understanding to hear and share, by using a vision and values led structure as scaffolding. Follow up your vision and values with a clear explanation — one that names barriers, agents of action and solutions.

Stories

Stories are different tales about particular events and people that appear in different forms across our information environment. At the heart of many stories are shared narratives. Many stories together contribute to building and amplifying specific narratives.

A story about the responsible actions of people government



Opens with the shared values of responsibility and pragmatism.

A concrete vision for the better life.

Short explanation about what the barrier is to this vision, and what the impact on all of us is.

Uses an explanatory metaphor "gears" to help explain how a car-centric transport system limits many people's options and more options can be provided.

It makes practical sense for people in government to ensure our cities work well for all of us over the long-term. Across our communities most of us want it to be easier for everyone to walk, ride a bike or take a bus or train.

However, our cities have been geared to one form of transport — cars, meaning now our streets don't work well for anyone — including people who need to drive.

Just like we need different gears for cycling up and down hills, our cities need people in government and business to provide different transport solutions for our different challenges. They can take practical steps to solve our transport problems by making it easier for people to walk, ride a bike or get a bus or train. It is the responsible thing for people in government to do to make sure our cities work well for all of us over the long term.

Names the agent with power to make change.

Moves to a solution that works, reminding people of the values.

Closes with a reminder of our shared values.

A story about the communities we want and can have



Opens opens with shared values of interconnection.

A concrete vision of what many people want: the opportunity.

Short explanatory chain: what the initial factor is, what the impacts are and what needs to be done.

Our cities can work to help many of us live the lives we would like: more connected to each other and our environment. Good homes closer to the places we work, learn, and play, more green space that make room for more water, and streets open to people and children walking and riding bikes. Such cities work to protect people and places we love from harm.

People in government, council and business have not used the right tools to create the cities and towns we want to live in. Current transport systems encourage the release of carbon and other pollutants, while planning rules have allowed for unhealthy homes in places that are hard to get to or are in risky places. These approaches to transport and building harm our health and the planet.

We need these people to use the right tools for the job at hand-making our cities good places to live now and into the future: transport systems and structures that open our streets to walking, riding bikes and much more public transport; urban planning that ensures we have warm, stable homes, in the right places.

When people in government use the right tools to build the cities we want to live in, we can protect people and places from harm today, and ensure we do the best for those who come after.

Uses explanatory metaphor "tools" to do the heavy lifting of the explanation.

Names the solutions that work, using accessible language

Names the agent and what they need to do.

This memo is informed by the following reports and guides by [The Workshop](#)

[How to talk about transport and climate action](#)

[How to talk about opening our streets for people who walk, ride bikes and take public transport](#)

[Framing mode shift: research report](#)

[How to talk about climate change: A toolkit for encouraging collective action, 2019](#)

[Short guide: How to talk about air quality and environmental health, 2022](#)



August 2023 www.theworkshop.org.nz

This memo was produced by The Workshop with support from Auckland Council

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