A palette of possibilities

for environmental action projects

aaee
Australian Association for Environmental Education
NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER

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The goal: well designed action projects

An 'action project' is one that aims to influence the choices and actions of human beings.

The starting point for an action project is PRELIMINARY RESEARCH with the people we hope will act.

That research then helps us select a mix of SYSTEMIC and BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES (our 'theory of change').

Once we have the theory of change, we'll creatively design face-to-face activities and communications. Ideally, these will include TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS.

When communicating, it's important to think about using VALUES, not just facts.

Lastly, before rolling out our project, we'll FIELD TEST our critical engagement tactics and tools, to test whether they work in the real world and discover ways to improve them. And then we'd REFLECT on the lessons learned.

This guide covers each of these elements.

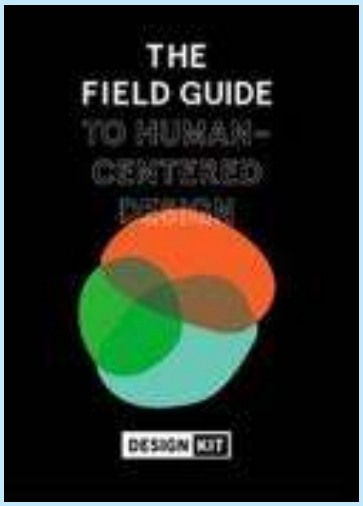
Although the examples are from the sustainability field, the processes and strategies are relevant to many fields including health promotion, road safety, and community development.

A plug for Design Thinking

This guide is influenced by Design Thinking - a powerful system of practice that involves:

- immersion in the realities of people's lives (by observing, talking to people)
- rethinking the problem
- imaginative brainstorming
- fast prototyping in the field

An excellent resource is: *The Field Guide to Human-Centred Design* by IDEO http://www.designkit.org/resources/1



The starting point: preliminary research



The starting point in designing a change project is to admit how much we don't know, and fill that gap by preliminary research. This is essential.

You'll seek out:

☐ **Baseline data** on the current state of the environmental problem you're tackling (e.g. litter counts, Koala counts, weed counts, number of landholders doing a particular practice).

☐ **What is known to work.** What approaches or tactics are known to work in this or analogous situations?

☐ **Published social research:** Is there published social research that informs you about the target groups, their readiness to change, and their needs?

☐ **Inspirations:** What projects have dealt with similar situations in Australia and around the world, focusing on innovative approaches, creative ideas, and lessons learnt. This will excite your imaginations with new possibilities!

And, vitally, you'll talk directly to your target audience(s) by doing:

☐ **Human-centred research** to understand the lived experiences, wants and needs of the people you'll need to engage.

See the next page...

Doing human-centred research

Direct contact with human beings is a vital step in good project design. It tests assumptions, avoids misconceptions, and creates valuable clues to engaging target group(s) in change.

Note that the purpose of this research is to generate insights for your project team. It is not necessary to apply academic research standards.

A good guide to social research methods is The Design Kit by IDEO. http://www.designkit.org/methods

Note that surveys alone rarely generate sufficient insights for good project design. Face-to-face interaction is vital.

For more information on doing social research see the Guide to using research in sustainability programs.

Methods of social research

Social research methods include:

Interviews: One-on-one conversations with individuals. These could be formal interviews (e.g. sitting down in a coffee shop) or informal discussions in the field (e.g. talking to dog walkers on a beach).

Focus groups: Facilitated conversations, each with 5-7 people.

Field observation: Watch them doing it. For example, staff could observe littering behaviours at a festival, or cameras could observe dogs being exercised in a 'no dog' zone.

Do it yourself: Walk in their shoes or alongside them. If you can experience the situation for yourself, do so - you'll learn a lot.

Codesign: Invite some of your audience to help design the project with your team. Typically this means holding a workshop that includes an inspiring briefing followed by a brainstorm.

Questionnaire: A list of questions to be answered by individuals.*

* **A note about questionnaires** Questionnaires are good at measuring the distribution of beliefs, attitudes, practices and social norms in a population. However they are a weak tool for obtaining insight into how to move people into a desired future.

Social research should always begin with interviews to ensure open-ended listening with the aim of having our assumptions challenged, and obtaining surprising insights. Once this qualitative research is complete, a questionnaire can determine the proportion of your population that may be open to various strategies.



Methods of social research

Individual interviews

Create an interview form with questions and spaces for you to take notes. Then sit down with individuals and have a discussion. It can be good to use an informal environment, like a café. You should give people a consent form. With permission, you might record the discussion on your phone.

It can be good to capture people's experiences as a story. For example, ask them to describe every step in their experience of managing food waste. You'll need to ask "And then what happened?" a lot.

Ask open questions and start with "What, where, who, when, why". Avoid questions with "yes" or "no" answers.

Make sure you have a good spread of age, gender, ethnicity, education and other factors that may be important.

It's good to offer food, and also a small reward such as a movie tickets or food voucher.

Your approach:

Be curious. Stay neutral: don't try to 'sell' ideas. Avoid judgemental facial expressions or body language.

Look for surprises that challenge your assumptions. Be alert to the systems, rules, technologies, expectations and day-to-day constraints that influence people's behaviours. Look for ways a small change (for example, an additional skill, new technology, different data, a simplified process, or a new social opportunity) might make a difference to people's choices.

Examples:

The City of Canada Bay interviewed 80 dog walkers in public parks to develop their "Bag it, Bin it" dog poo reduction campaign.

Waverly Council interviewed 42 household recyclers, by knocking on doors in apartment blocks, to develop a project to reduce recycling contamination.

Project Cane Changer completed questionnaires with 48 sugar cane farmers to ensure their project aligned with growers' values. Read more on the project website.



To improve recycling in apartments in Bondi, Waverley Council's waste staff interviewed 42 householders, gathering narratives of their experiences. The insights changed the way staff understood the problem.



Project Cane Changer surveyed 48 cane growers to understand their values before devising the strategy.

How many people in your sample?

There is no universal rule as it depends on your budget, but as a guide you want enough people so that insights can be corroborated by several individuals. It's not essential to meet academic standards: the aim is for just your team's assumptions to be challenged and tested, and to obtain insights.

For a small project you might consider:

3-4 focus groups with 7 people each ***and/or***

30-60 face-to-face interviews ***and/or***

30-60 field observations.

Questions to ask

Here are some suggested questions to use as a starting point.

• What is your personal experience of the situation?

For example: "Tell me how you currently recycle / deal with your picnic litter / maintain your garden / manage weeds on your property / use the river?"

Ideally, collect this information as a flowing narrative ("What do you do first? What do you do next?" etc..). Listen carefully for 'pain points' where people experience frustrations, negative feelings or obstacles. Ask people to interpret their observations as you go. For example, a littered park might be interpreted as 'council doesn't care'.

• What might enable personal change?

- What ideas do you have for tackling this environmental problem?

- What do you understand about the causes of the problem?

- What do you think about the proposed solution?

- What would have to change for you to adopt a specific action or practice?

- Why aren't you acting now?

- How could a practice/tool/system be made easier?

- What do you think is the 'normal' practice amongst their peers?

- What do you peers say about the problem? About the solution?

• What might engage them?

- What kinds of community activities most attract/excite you?

- Who do you trust as credible sources and leaders?

- How would you like to be communicated with?

• Demographics: Ask for data such as the respondents' age (in ranges), gender, languages spoken at home, whether owner/tenant, and time in the area/industry.

Who to interview?

When deciding who to interview, consider starting with pre-qualifying questions that exclude people at the extremes of the bell curve ('the converted' or 'the opponents').

It's often best to look for people who are open to the idea but not yet doing it. That way you can hone in on practical barriers that might make a difference.

Focus group discussions



Source: Les Robinson.

All the above comments apply, except you're facilitating a group discussion, typically with 5-7 people, just as if you were hosting a dinner party. You'll ask questions to spark discussion, give each person a chance to answer, and then ask more questions to explore the issues.

To allow you to concentrate on facilitation, you should have an observer to take notes. Make sure you invite quieter participants into the discussion. It's good to create a silent time for people to jot down their answers before the open discussion begins - this minimises dominant people influencing others.

Usually you'd have aim for two focus groups with each similar demographic, so their views can be corroborated.

The Community Tool Box has quite good guidance on running focus groups.

Field observation

Can you observe people doing undesired behaviours in the field, such as littering? Can you observe people struggling to apply existing solutions and technologies in their lives or businesses?

If so, consider an observational study, where you observe human behaviours in the real world, taking careful notes as you do so.

This video explains the value of field observation.

This 1998 study into littering behaviour in Australian cities is a classic of observational research.

As an example, **Rockdale Council**'s waste management team wanted to create a special public bin for hot BBQ coals. They found out that one was already in use in a different council area. To find out whether it worked and how it could be improved they spent a Sunday watching picnicers use it. This provided insights to produce a better bin.

CoDesign or participatory design

A key tenet of co-design is that users, as 'experts' of their own experience, become central to the design process.

- John Chisholm, What is CoDesign?

Codesign is an approach that brings the target audience directly into project planning to help you design the details of your strategy, tactics and messages.

Holding a codesign workshop with some supportive members of your target audience allows you to tap into their perspectives and imaginations. See The Design Kit website for instructions on how to run a codesign workshop.

The simplest CoDesign methodology is to invite users into a workshop together with experts and project staff, provide them with a slide show of inspirations, then use facilitated processes to develop solutions. facilitated processes can range from a simple brainstorm asking "What would make a difference?" to more sophisticated tools, such as these in The Design Kit.

Examples:

The Leave it! project to reduce domestic dog attacks on koalas in south-east Queensland, started with six codesign workshops with dog owners and experts.
They were shown examples of projects from other places, then brainstormed solutions together. The result was a positive, dog-focused program that delivered obedience training, giving dog owners the skills needed to avoid wildlife, launched by a popular Dogfest festival that had 1500 attendees.
Read more in this ResearchGate website article from Social Marketing in Action.

Waverley Council recycling contamination project: To design a strategy to tackle recycling contamination in multi-unit dwellings, council held a 2 hour workshop with five internal staff, three managing agents, and three keen recyclers from blocks of flats. They were briefed with local data and possible solutions from around the world. They then brainstormed and prioritised their ideas to generate a strategy to be piloted in Waverley.



City of Canada Bay used codesign with school children to develop public art targeting mangrove vandalism.
Source: Whale Design



Young farmers using craft materials to design a biosecurity project to target the transfer of pathogens between properties. Source: Young Farming Leaders.

Key points: Human-centred research

• Collect information systematically e.g. have a written format that you complete for each person you interview.

• Be completely neutral and avoid advocating a solution or trying to convince people of any proposition.

• Make sure you meet people face-to-face and ask open-ended questions that let you explore possibilities.

• Don't just rely on written surveys. Be open minded and willing to be surprised and discomforted.

A palette of strategies

Your research informs your choice of strategies.

Ideally you'll settle on a mix of 2 to 5 systemic and behavioural strategies.

SYSTEMIC STRATEGIES alter the environment in which people make their choices. They can have long term effects.*

BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES aim to directly influence people's choices. They often have shorter term effects and so are best combined with systemic strategies.

Together they'll form your 'theory of change' - the underlying framework or logic that explains how your project contributes to the long term environmental outcome.

* For a quick overview of systemic strategies, see: http://www.enablingchange.com.au/systems.php

What mix of strategies will you select?

Typically you'll think about employing a mix of 2-5 systemic and behavioural strategies.

Think about choosing a mix of strategies that:

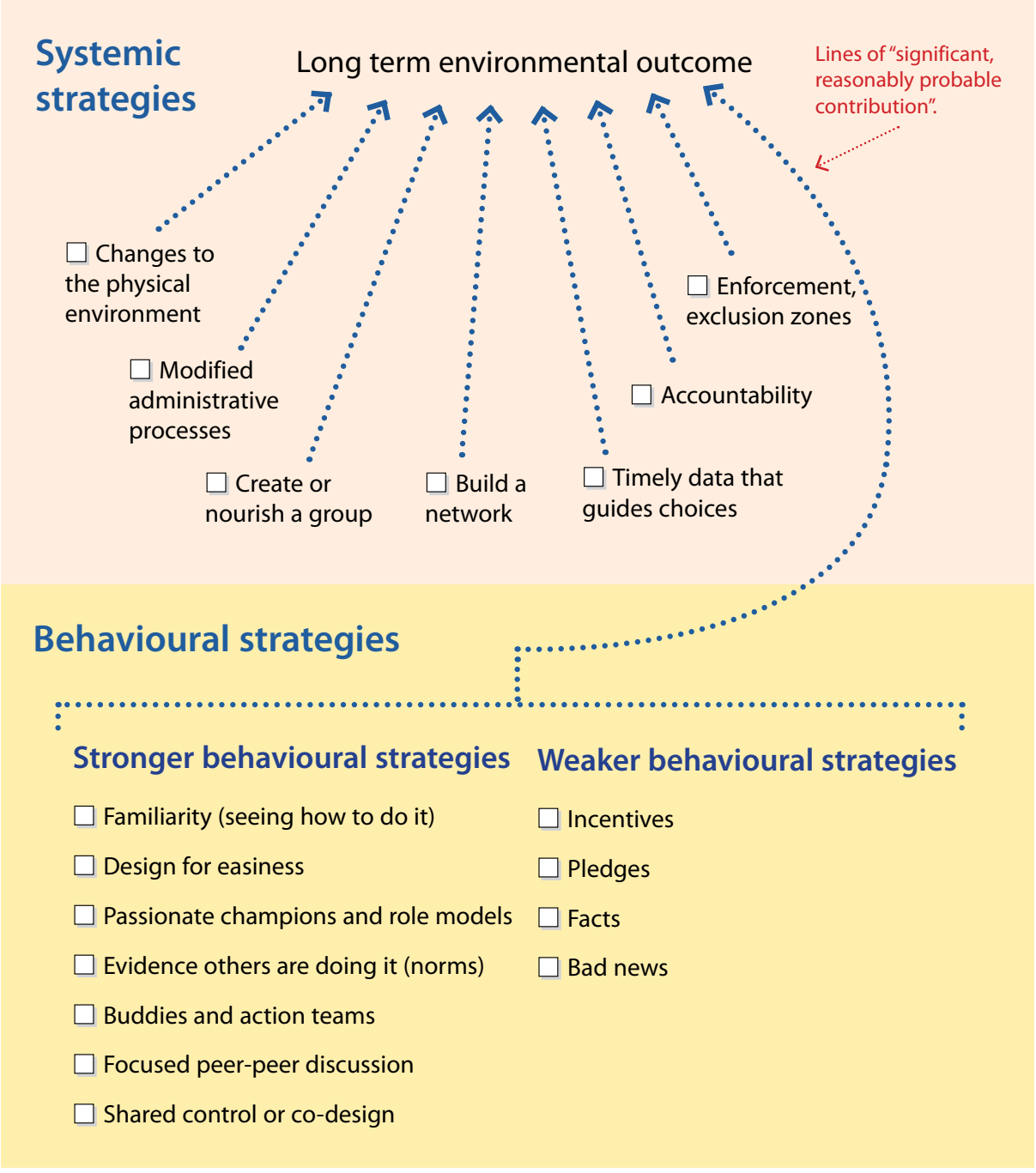
- are available and affordable;
- have a reasonable chance of making a difference, based on local social research, expert advice, and good practice from elsewhere.

Remember that every situation is different and there is no perfect model.

It's important to start with a best hunch and then pivot your project based on what you learn from field testing.

The following pages show examples of systemic and behavioural strategies.

It's good to consider a wide palette of strategies.



Thinking like scientists with 'theories of change'

A theory of change is a crisp statement of the 'change logic' of your project.

It specifies the conditions you'll bring into existence to drive progress towards the desired future. The examples below explain this idea.

Your theory of change is a 'best hunch' that arises from your social and desk research.

It's a chance to practice the Scientific Method: your theory is the hypothesis and your project is an experiment that tests it!

Typically a practical theory of change will have a mix of 2-5 systemic and/or behavioural strategies.

Always start with a measurable problem in a real geographic place.

Note that it's important to create your theory of change BEFORE you start designing engagement activities, messages or tools.

Your theory is the set of rules that provides discipline for your project, ensuring you only implement activities and communications that are consistent with it.

A 'theory of change' format:

Problem: ..... [measurable] **Location:** ..... [specific]

Strategy 1 + Strategy 2 + Strategy 3 + Strategy 4 → Long term environmental outcome

Examples:

Problem: dog attacks on Little Tern breeding sites. **Location:** Bongil Beach, Sawtell.

Citizen surveillance during breeding season. + Signage that is prominent and engaging, with a local feel. + Dog proof fencing in place. + Dog owners aware of alternative walking sites. → A successful Little Tern breeding season.

Problem: lack of active travel to school. **Location:** Melton West Primary School.

Parents aware of safe routes to school. + Walk-ride-scoot Friday, with rewards and "Spotto" comp. + Breakfast Club for early walkers. + Students travel with buddies. → Increased active travel to school.

Problem: high use of single-use coffee cups. **Location:** Manly central business district.

Cafes adopt reward card system. + Reminder signs in local businesses + "Coffee cup heroes" to normalise behaviour. + Awards to "coffee cup heroes" create buzz. → Decreased use of single-use cups.

Examples of systemic strategies

Change the physical environment

What changes to the physical environment could contribute to the environmental outcome?

For more bike trips, build a bike way. For more koalas, plant the right trees. For less waste, put the right bins in the right places. Want people to spend time in nature, install beautiful seating.

Physically engineering the environment can be a strong intervention because it targets practical barriers and can last well beyond the project's horizon.

If the changes are prominent, visible, and attractive, they can have a sustained influence on local norms and culture.

Ease-making infrastructure

Making the right action easier, quicker and safer is a strong intervention.



A vital ingredient in tackling litter is well-placed 'binfrastructure'. Source: Seal the Loop program, Zoos Victoria.

"Our studies of cigarette littering behaviour show that where special attention has been paid to providing well-located butt disposal options in clean, well maintained areas, butt littering rates can be halved."

- Curnow, R. and Spehr, K. *Litterology, Understanding Littering and the Secrets to Clean Public Places*



Secure bike parking is an important enabler of commuter cycling.



A special bin for hot BBQ coals reduces coal dumping on Botany Bay foreshores. Source: Rockdale Council.

Natural infrastructure

Can we add directly to wildlife habitat?



Bee hotels and pollinator gardens were the centre pieces of the University of Western Sydney's 'Bee Aware of Your Native Bees' project.



Arncliffe Men's Shed constructed bird houses for Rockdale Council's Wild Things project. Source: John Veage.

Social interaction infrastructure

To appreciate nature and to have conversations, people need places to come together. So 'nature place-making' including just putting seats in a bush park, can be a positive strategy.



This eco-themed seat graces Henry Lawson Park, Abbotsford.



The seating in Kendrick Park, Cooks River, Sydney, draws visitors' attention to the indigenous story of the area. Source: Save Our Trees.

Using hard infrastructure to communicate ('marking the place')

Can you use hard surfaces to prompt the right behaviour and start conversations?



Drain stencils are a sustained communication,at minimal cost.



This signage clearly depicts a desirable behaviour. Source: Les Robinson.





A road surface can start conversations. This energy conservation project in Brighton, UK, reported on the energy performance of individual streets by stencilling their results onto the road. Source: Collabcubed.

Inspirational infrastructure

Public art that focuses attention on the natural environment can educate without lecturing or threatening. It can be a strong intervention because it changes the lived experience of places, sparking new conversations and influencing social norms and local identity.

If the art is permanent, it can be a valuable legacy of a project.



The Hello Koalas Sculpture trail raised awareness of Port Macquarie's threatened Koala population. Source: Bago Studios.



This sculpture celebrates the Little Tern as part of the identity of a district. Source: Durham Heritage.





The City of Canada Bay installed attractive glass sculptures (codesigned with school children) to help reduce vandalism on mangrove walkways. Source: Whale Design.

Create or nourish a group

Collective effort really does change the world in dramatic ways by concentrating human energy and creativity.

When people work for a common purpose their fears of change greatly reduce. They are able to take on onerous and challenging activities, set high expectation and support each other.

When established as incorporated associations, informal volunteer groups take on an independent life, making sustained contributions to their communities and industries, and strongly influencing local culture and norms.

Examples include:

- 'friends of' groups
- cooperative purchasing groups
- local trading exchanges
- industry associations
- innovation hubs
- community gardens
- environmental care groups
- shared venues and play spaces
- resource and equipment pools
- repair centres



'Friends of' groups give sustained, passionate support to local issues.



Sustainable Salons, a group of passionate hairdressers aiming to transform the industry. Source: Sustainable Salons.



Totally Renewable Yackandandah: a volunteer community group, formed in 2014, with the aim of powering a small Victorian town with 100% renewable energy.

Build a network or alliance

Bringing people together to share challenges, celebrate progress, learn from each other, and work on common efforts is a strong intervention. Think about monthly network meetings, communities of practice, blitz groups.

It might be a regular meeting of groups (for example, all the players in conservation in a district), or it might be a network of individuals (for example professional sustainability educators).

It can be formal, with regular meetings. Or it could be loose, held together by just an annual camp fire and a Facebook page.

An excellent guide to facilitating a network is Collaborating for Sustainability, which includes case studies.



The University of Western Sydney set up a thriving network of bee-friendly gardeners: The Bee Aware of Your Native Bees project.



The Australian Association of Environmental Education established Make the Change networks for environmental educators in each region of NSW. Each one has a facilitator and meets regularly to learn, share and inspire.

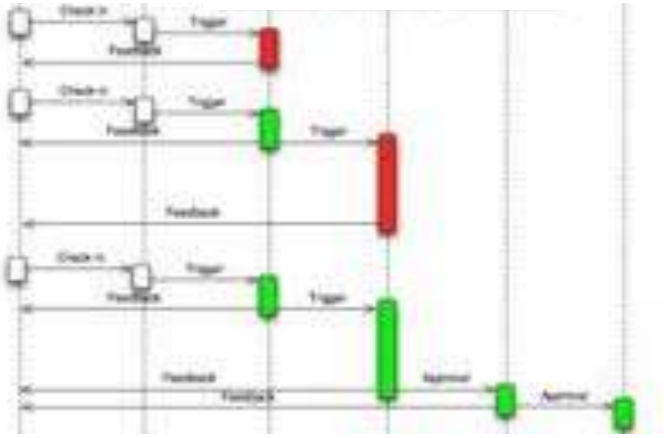
Modify administrative processes or planning policies

Especially for government: Is the problem partly caused by unhelpful administrative processes, poorly enforced regulations, or poor planning policies?

Check whether administrative processes are hindering good practices or rewarding poor practices.

Your research should consider this and investigate possible solutions.

A good resource to explore this issue is the Australian Government Guide to Regulation.



Provide timely data to guide decisions

How many Koalas are on my property? How dry are my soils? How much energy am I using? How much litter is in the river?

Carrying out site assessments, regular environmental audits, or installing technical systems that deliver the right data, can be vital for individuals, councils and government agencies to make good day-to-day decisions.

Having feedback, at the right time, on the negative consequences of actions means corrective action can be taken before damage mounts.

Providing a service: Keep in mind that many individuals simply lack the time or skills to create this data. If so, you should provide a service that does it for them.

Examples:

The **Sustainable Grazing in the Tweed** project provides free soil testing for graziers (which would normally be costly).

Waverley Council's Living Connections project provides garden plans to residents, with information tailored to their own situations.



Townsville high school students working with James Cook University researchers to test a biometric sensor for water quality. This communicates via the G4 network.

Collect and share performance data

Performance data helps people understand and control their impacts. It provides a vital feedback loop that allows players to take action before damage mounts.

Making that data public can be a strong intervention because it allows the public to hold organisations to account, motivating them to follow through on commitments.

Examples include performance measures, independent monitoring, accreditation systems, rating systems and rules about transparency.





Measuring and sharing performance data is vital for accountability.



The Australian Hairdressing Council established an accreditation system for Sustainable Salons.

Visible enforcement

The threat of legal sanction is a strong influencer of human choices. Enforcement is therefore a vital tool in the arsenal, especially where small numbers of people are responsible for significant damage.

Rangers can't be everywhere, therefore enforcement activities should be visible and well publicised so that word of mouth spreads the message.

Keep in mind that resistance is always an issue - where people find ways to continue their damaging behaviour, often going to great lengths to conceal it. Solutions to this are community monitoring, social pressure and shaming. Also, note that enforcement works best when it represents local community values.





Seasoned advice for good enforcement

"I issue a verbal caution for a leashed dog in a carpark, a written caution for a dog off leash, a fine for a repeat offender or a dog owned by a local chasing wildlife in a national park, a person that does and should know better, and fine anyone who badly fails the attitude test or is impermeable to re-education. And take the pig hunter with a ute of dogs in the sensitive nature reserve straight before the local magistrate.

"Nothing works better than the fear of apprehension. Fly the flag regularly, at random times. Do a park patrol just after dawn in known dog hotspots and go for a compliance check at 7pm on a summer night. That's when you'll catch the smarties.

"Keep a good database. Don't caution people twice or they'll treat you as a pillow."

- Martin Smith, Ranger, NSW NPWS

Exclusion zones

Sometimes an effective intervention is to physically separate activities, whether by fencing or by regulation. Exclusion zones can help normalise good behaviour and have an educative function, informing the community about local issues.

To minimise non-compliance, exclusion zones need to be established sensitively in partnership with the local community.



Source: Midcoast Concil

"No dog areas are most effective at protecting shorebirds. Overall, there was higher compliance in 'no dog' areas compared to on-leash access."

- Review of Dog Impacts to Beach-nesting Birds and Management Solutions, Dr Grainne Maguire 2018



Source: Eurobodalla Shire Concil

Examples of behavioural strategies

The solutions to environmental problems almost always depend on people adopting specific practices or behaviours, for example obtaining firewood from difference sources, driving slower in Koala habitat, installing bee hotels, recycling business waste, correctly disposing of litter, or reducing fertiliser use.

The next pages show strategies that can enable behaviour change. How many can you build into your project?

Familiarity (SEEING HOW to do it)

'Fear of the unknown' is one of the biggest obstacles to change. People can be frozen into inaction by the fear of failure and embarrassment.

Creating familiarity is therefore vital for every change project. It means demonstrating the steps in doing the action so clearly that the individual is able to mentally rehearse doing the action.

Use visual instructions, how-to prompts, modelling (seeing a similar person do the actions) and hands-on, experiential learning.



Source: Jessamy Gee.





Clear, simple instructions make a big difference. Source: Les Robinson.

Immersive learning creates familiarity and reduces fears. The National Parks and Wildlife Service used a Trust grant to create Bush Trackers, a program that tackles 'nature deficit disorder' by familiarising kids and families with bushland, with cultural stories and bush safety. Source: Bush Trackers.



Design for easiness

Is the right action as easy as possible to do? Easiness means reducing the mental and physical effort as close to zero as possible.

This means reducing the number of decisions and making each decision as simple and rapid as possible.

Often change requires complex, difficult, time consulting actions to be REDESIGNED so they are simpler, less mentally demanding, and speedier.



This specialised litter bin makes it easy for truck drivers to do the right thing. Source: Highways Today.



Source: NSW Environment Protection Authority.



Simplified booking systems increase the participation rate in kerbside pick-up programs. Source: City of Sydney.

Find passionate champions and role models

Every successful change project has a passionate leader or role model. Passion and optimism are contagious. Your project can bring people into contact with passionate, optimistic people who are 'living the dream' and can teach by example. It's best if they are *similar people* or part of the local social network rather than celebrities.



Jo Taranto and Corina Seeto are a charismatic duo who began reducing disposable coffee cups in Ryde and went to create a fantastic action guide for community campaigners as part of the War on Waste.



Waverley Council's Bondi Unwrapped project used the Bondi Beach lifeguards as role models for not littering. Source: Waverley Council.

Show similar people acting ('norms' or 'social proof')*

Humans have "a sort of instinctual response to overvalue something" when we see that others want it.

- Read Montague, neuroscientist, New Scientist, 31 July 2004

Share stories and images showing similar people doing the action, passionately supporting it, and living the dream.

Remember, the more *similar* to your audience they are, the better.

This is an effective method because it simultaneously inspires, depicts the desired action, and suggests ways to do it.

It avoids resistance because, instead of trying to convince people to adopt beliefs, we're inspiring them with positive stories of real people who are similar to themselves.

Note that it's good to use images that depict people's enthusiasm and positive body language.

* This is especially effective for climate projects.



Images like this show that picking up litter is normal and popular. Source: Responsible Runners.



Plastic Free Manly distributed these bags to emphasise a positive social norm for Manly residents. Source: Plastic Free Manly.



Bankstown City Council widely promoted this statement of social norms: "85.7% of Households in Bankstown Recycle Right".

Buddies and action teams

Buddies create courage, tremendously reducing peoples' fears of change: "knowing you are not alone." For example: an action team, a landholder cluster, a green team, a buddy system, mentoring, ride to school groups.



Barragal Landcare established 'cluster groups' of landholders who work with neighbours to control foxes. Source: Camden Narellan Observer.

Peer-peer conversations

Focused peer-peer discussion is a strong enabler of change.

Human beings literally 'talk themselves into change'. This is enabled by informal events where participants express personal views, share challenges, celebrate progress, and learn from each other. These get-togethers lower the fears of change and strengthen social norms.

Examples include field days, tours, walks, camp fires, picnics, coffee table talks, BBQs, community clean-ups and forums on hot issues.

A carp muster, for example, is both a social event and an opportunity for personal behaviour change as people informally share experiences, knowledge and skills with each other.

Keep in mind that to maximise attendance beyond the 'usual suspects' these events should be designed to have broad popular appeal: they should have fun and food, and provide child-friendly activities (i.e. not 'workshops' or meetings).



Informal social events like camp fires can be excellent opportunities for peer-peer conversations.

Examples:

The Coonamble Neighbourhood Centre ran a Coonamble Energy Futures Forum with over 65 attendees.

Orange City Council took state government weed officers on a high risk weeds study tour.



Conservation Volunteers Australia supported local fishing clubs to run carp muster and Tilapia capture events in northern NSW coastal rivers.



MidCoast Council's 'Weed, Wine and Dine' night focused on sustainable gardens and harmful weeds. Source: MidCoast Council.

'Popular opinion leaders' method

An effective approach is to recruit members of the target audience to have conversations with their peers. This method has been proven effective in many contexts.

A project based on 'Popular opinion leaders' method might involve recruiting dog walkers to have conversations with other dog walkers.



Weaker behavioural strategies

Incentives

Sometimes a well-timed incentive payment can help people over a 'behavioural road bump', for example a farmer covering the costs of installing an off-creek watering system. However incentives are always short term and there's strong evidence that they *reduce* people's intrinsic motivation in the long run. Use selectively.

Pledges

Pledges tend to work only in very specific settings where the pledges are publicly visible to the pledger's own acquaintances, friends and neighbours. The most psychologically effective pledges are not formal 'pledges' but rather publicly visible statements of commitment, like front yard signs, bumper stickers, newspaper ads, or names engraved on bricks in a wall or footpath.

Facts

If you have important facts that need to be communicated, do so clearly in plain English. However don't assume that facts or messages alone can cause to people to change their behaviour. If you're fortunate enough to have a surprising fact that you know will seriously affect people's choices (like "there are 10 teaspoons of sugar in a cola") communicate it graphically and strongly. However keep in mind that such persuasive facts are rare, and always have to be linked to easily do-able behaviours.

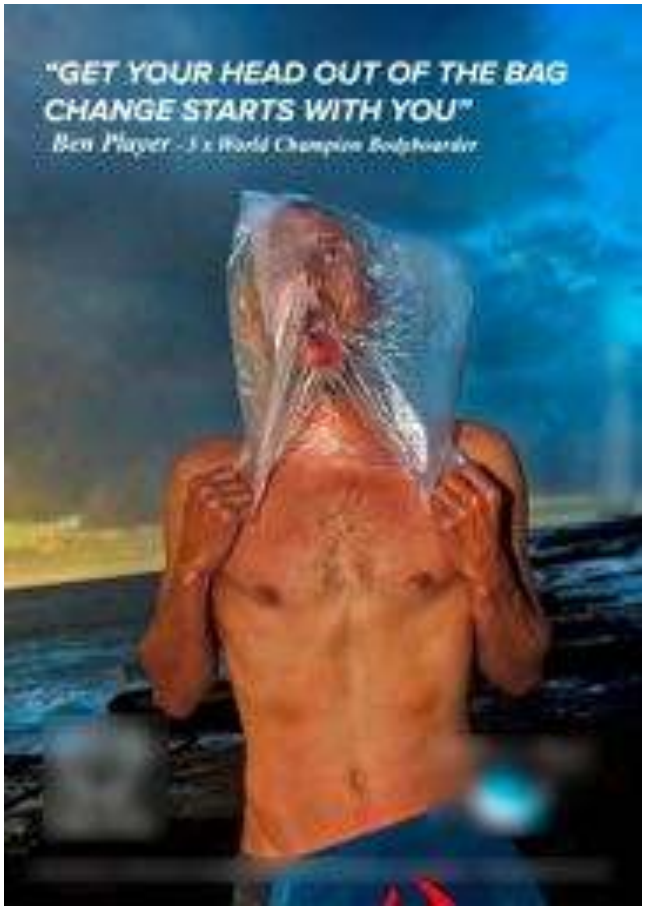


A poor example: Beware of arguing with people. It causes resistance.

Bad news*

Attempts to make people feel bad about their current behaviours tend to cause denial and resistance. It's better to recognise, thank and celebrate them for the good things they are doing.

* Technically known as 'cognitive dissonance' or 'threat appeals'.



Another poor example: Beware of messages that lecture, criticise or belittle the audience.

Field testing

Field testing involves planning a cheap and quick 'no frills' version of at least one 'make-or-break' engagement activity that's at the centre of your project.

You then test this with a small number of your target group to find out how they respond to the activities e.g. which elements had impact and which didn't work?

This will give you new ideas on how you can refine or redesign the activity. Keep in mind that the purpose of field testing is not simply to confirm your initial assumptions but instead to learn how to change your project for the better. You should be ready to abandon some aspects, build on others, and generate valuable new ideas as you go.

Field testing aims to ensure your project works as effectively as possible in real life conditions. It's excellent risk management.

For example, if your key engagement activity is to offer site visits to landholders to reduce weed infestation, you might begin by offering site visits to 10 landholders in one part of the catchment.

You'd subsequently interview the participants to find out whether they applied new weed management techniques on their land. You might run two or three such field trials, improving your ideas each time, before feeling confident to roll out your program on a large scale.

Questions to test

Your field testing should include data collection. At a minimum, collect data on the following questions:

- Did the tactics engage the target group(s)? For example, did the pop-up stall attract residents to have a conversation and take a native plant home?
- Was the engagement experience satisfying? Did it answer their questions? Did they feel more likely to act?
- Did the engagement lead to the desired action? For example, how many people planted the native plant in their garden, and watered it?

Hint: If you work for local government, you may be able to test your idea on a sample of council staff who aren't directly involved in your project. Council staff are a broad cross-section of adults, so they can be a good test bed.

Key points: Field testing

☐ Select at least one 'make-or-break' engagement activity that's at the centre of your project.

☐ Create a quick and dirty version of this key engagement activity to test on a limited sample of your target group.

☐ Be clear about the questions you're testing and be sure to collect data on how people responded to the activity.

☐ It can be a good idea to create a number of different versions of your activity and test each one on a separate sample, comparing the results.

☐ The idea is not to confirm your initial assumptions, but to learn how to change your project for the better. You should expect to abandon some aspects, build on others, and generate new ideas as you go.

Examples

Port Phillip City Council carried out a simple field test of a possible strategy to increase the use of bicycle bells by cyclists. They sprayed temporary stencils on a number of shared paths and counted the before and after rates of belling by cyclists.



Temporary stencils tested by Port Phillip Council.



Field testing allowed Canterbury-Bankstown Council to test six alternative strategies to reduce recycling contamination. Each strategy combined feedback cards (above) with a different tactic.

Canterbury-Bankstown Council made good use of field testing to reduce contamination in recycling bins.

The project team selected 1400 households and divided them into six similar groups. They devised six different prototypes, one for each group, and trialled them over a 14 week period, measuring the results with bin audits.

The results show the power of this approach:

Feedback cards alone = 0–6% reduction in contamination

Feedback cards + plastic tubs to transport recyclables from kitchen to bin = 16% reduction in contamination

Feedback cards + a hole in the bin lid to make to inconvenient to stuff whole plastic bags into the recycling bin = 25% reduction in contamination

Feedback cards + face-to-face pledges with council staff = 25% reduction in contamination

Feedback cards + door knocking by council staff beforehand = 30% reduction in contamination

Feedback cards + bulk recycling bin = 37% increase in contamination

Reflecting on lessons

It's valuable to have a structured process for reflecting as a team on the lessons you're learning as you devise the project.

This is a basic action research format you can use a number of times during your project, for example:

• to identify lessons from the research stage; and

• to identify changes you want to make following the testing stage.

A reflection process

Bring together your team and some additional minds for a short discussion e.g. two hours. It's good to choose an out-of-office location e.g. a garden café.

Review the results of the research/testing activities.

Facilitate a discussion in three phases:

1) What results were surprising? List them.

2) What could those results mean? List possible lessons.

3) What changes should we make to our project based on those results? List the recommended changes.

Note to facilitators

Ask people to avoid advocating solutions and instead get into a curiosity mindset where all ideas are respected. To maximise the range of ideas, begin by silent brainstorming with Post-it notes before commencing a free discussion. If difficult choices need to be made, consider prioritising with dots rather than letting strong opinions dominate.

Along the way, the facilitator might ask more questions to focus people's minds, for example:

"What happened?"

"What was dispensable?"

"What did you see/hear?"

"If that was impossible, what could we do instead?

"What makes you say that?"

"What would a comedian/celebrity gardener/celebrity cook do?

"What else could explain that?"

"Whose point of view is missing?"

"What was great?"

"What caused laugher?"

"What assumptions are we making?"

"What assumptions are stopping us?"

"What didn't work?"

"If you had a magic wand, what would you do?"

Appendix 1

Transformative experiences

Transformational learning is about shifting people's perceptions, meanings and worldviews: their 'frames of reference'. This can include, for example, shifting from short-term thinking to long-term thinking, from a pessimistic view of human nature to a hopeful view, from competition to collaboration, from being separate from nature to being located in nature.

Such transformative shifts often require exposure to strong and confronting experiences, however it is possible to incorporate simple elements into any project that will increase the potential for transformative moments.

1) Strong, immersive, first hand, sensory experiences

Can you bring people face-to-face with environmental problems and/or inspiring solutions? For example a visit to a landfill or recycling facility, or an immersive bushwalk, or a day picking up litter on a beach, or a day working on a permaculture farm.

Keep in mind that there should be a close attention to hopeful solutions to prevent people despairing.

When thinking about the design of transformative experiences, an excellent resource is Tim and Dan Heath's The Power of Moments. They propose that transformational experiences have four features in common:

Elevation: they are emotional moments that rise above the routine.

Insight: they contain crisp, surprising insights that the audience discover for themselves.

Pride: they celebrate people's achievements.

Connection: they involve a strong experience of connection to others.

Example:

Coffs Harbour City Council's Coffs Ambassadors Tours program trained volunteers with a passion and knowledge for their local natural 'place' to take residents on guided immersive bushwalks.

These 'Coffs Ambassadors' shared their love of these places and encouraged participants to adopt simple practices in their daily lives to protect these environments, e.g. removing noxious weeds, keeping their dogs on leads and picking up litter.



Coffs Ambassadors take residents on bushwalks to places they love like rainforests and estuaries. Source: Rob Cleary / Seen Australia

2) Conversations between people of diverse values and worldviews

Conversations between people from diverse backgrounds and worldviews can create sudden shifts in perspective. It can be an effective way to break down prejudices and open minds to alternatives.

Ideally these events should be social, enjoyable, safe, comfortable and non-confronting. Food is an excellent way to bring people together.

The facilitator should take care to ensure that people don't feel judged, and there should be a clear purpose and structure.



"It's a Dogs Breakfast"
Coffs Harbour Council staff, national parks rangers, and volunteers socialise with beach dog walkers, focusing on Little Tern conservation.



Bunny Boiler challenge, an annual Landcare event that brings together the whole Phillip Island community with the aim of engaging landholders in rabbit control.

3) Bottom-up decision making

Participants feel empowered when they are able to make important decisions about what problems to target and how to target them. Landcare is a good example of this approach. It involves self-determination plus the resources to act.

4) Big picture thinking

Also known as 'systems thinking', this is where participants are familiarised with, and have a chance to discuss, the systemic causes of problems.

Big picture thinking helps people understand connections between environmental, economic, social and political systems so that they can create solutions that go beyond just addressing the isolated symptoms of a larger problem. Exploring these connections can empower them to critically think about environmental issues outside of the project and how they might be solved.

For example, a project engaging café owners to stop using plastic straws could include information about the bigger problem of single-use plastics, its impacts on our oceans and waste management systems, and the political movement to ban single-use plastics etc.

Sometimes excellent resources are available to assist, like these infographics from GRID Arandal.

5) "How it could be" discussions that envisage a better future

Imagining a future where an environmental problem is tackled can reduce pessimism and help people understand the pathways to improvement. Also known as 'envisioning' or 'futures thinking', this creates links between where we are now and where we want to be in the future, so participants can imagine the steps to get there.

You might simply ask each participant to answer the question: "What would it be like if this problem was no longer with us?" Being exposed to inspiring, innovative examples can help people think imaginatively about possible futures.

6) Time with passionate role models

Meeting passionate, stereotype-busting leaders and innovators can spark enthusiasm and defeat pessimism. Their authentic stories make it possible to believe that out-of-the-ordinary results are possible.

Here is a passionate role model: Molly Steer, the 11 year old whose Straw No More campaign inspired adults and children across Australia. Source: One Million Women.



7) Use creativity to break stereotypes

Use your creativity to design a project that breaks expectations about how environmental education projects are supposed to look and feel.

When you take risks and break the rules it makes it easier for your audience to believe they can take risks and break the rules too.

For inspiring stereotype-breaking community tactics see the Enabling Change website resource "If Not,Then What?"



The Sugar vs the Reef? project in Mackay held a Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers to showcase how sunflowers could be grown as a sustainable soil recovery crop on cane farms. Read more at the project website. Watch this video of the event and this documentary about how art and agriculture came together for the project.

Checklist of transformative experiences

How many can you build into your project?

- ☐ Strong, immersive, first hand experiences
- ☐ Conversations between people of diverse values and worldviews
- ☐ Bottom-up decision making
- ☐ Big picture thinking
- ☐ "How it could be" discussions that envisage a better future
- ☐ Time with passionate role models
- ☐ Use creativity to break stereotypes

Appendix 2

Communication for action

Communication for action has different rules to "inform" or "educate" communications. We're asking people to invest effort and negotiate risk. And we have to contend with people's natural fears and tendency to resist and deny any form of pressure.

Here are 8 rules and some tips.

1) Spotlight a hero

Everyone wants to be a hero. Hero stories create optimism and prove that change is possible. They have how-to lessons that people readily learn from.

☐ **Check:** Are you telling a human story that causes curiosity, amazement or admiration? Is there a role model people can learn from? Can they dream
"I wish I was that person?"

2) Choose an authentic voice

Communicate using voices who are real and trusted by the audience. No one trusts the disembodied voice of reason or authority anymore. Instead people want to hear the unfiltered, passionate voices of real people.

☐ **Check:** Have you allied yourself with leaders who are similar, passionate, respected, known, connected and powerless?

3) Shake people up (gently)

Unpredictability grabs people's attention and shakes up their worlds, opening minds to new possibilities. Tell stories that surprise, break stereotypes and expectations. Use styles or media that are unexpected. But don't shock - that does the opposite!

☐ **Check:** What is surprising about your story and the way you're delivering it?

Beware of arguing!



Beware of reasons, lists of costs and benefits, and logical arguments! When intended to persuade, reasons and arguments tend to cause denial and resistance. They make the speaker feel good but imply that our listeners are living wrongly. No one likes being made wrong and so people push back to protect their dignity. The people who are likely to act on your message already know plenty of "whys". Adding more "whys" won't help. If you notice you're arguing with people, seriously think about stopping - do the things on this page instead.

4) Focus on one do-able action

The starting point is knowing exactly what you want people to do. But don't ask them to do several things - they'll just be overwhelmed (and so would you). Settle on one action per campaign and throw all your resources at it.

☐ **Check:** have you chosen a single pivotal action to focus your resources on?

5) Depict exactly how it's done

Show people *how* to do it. Remember that even simple actions seem onerous and scary to those who haven't done them before. Familiarity is the key to reducing that fear.

☐ **Check:** Have you shown people exactly how to act, visually, with such clarity that a person could look at your communication and say "I could do that."

6) Make it about community

Social connection enormously reduces people's perceptions of risk. How can your effort bring people closer together?

☐ **Check:** Is it sociable? Will people meet enthusiastic companions or leaders? Will they feel part of a community?

7) Show that you care for your people

Show you care for their wellbeing, happiness and dignity. Empathy and caring is 50% of credibility*. If you care for people, they'll likely trust you.

☐ **Check:** Do your words and efforts demonstrate genuine concern for people's hopes and frustrations? Do their lives get better in multiple ways?

The Iceberg Theory of Communication

Good communication is more than a collection of words and images. It's about conversations and relationships. What's below the surface makes all the difference.



Stuff that works



Humour and quirkiness
A great way to lower resistance, even to confronting requests.

Social proof
Humans have "a sort of instinctual response to overvalue something when we see that others want it". For example:
"57% of Cardinia homes have rooftop solar".
"No one smokes here anymore."

Urgency and scarcity
"Must register by 20 April."
"Just 20 positions available."

Praise and recognition
Thank people for the good things they've done already and celebrate each step into their future.

Pleasure
People love games, puzzles, fun, and food.

Oh yes, did I mention food?

Stuff that doesn't work



Bad news
People don't need more bad news - it's depressing and disabling. It makes them turn away (i.e. denial). Offer hope instead.

Prizes and rewards
Really, if you have to bribe people then you're not expecting them to care.

Thinking your audience are stupid or bad
You're wrong and eventually they'll figure out that you don't respect them.

Forgetting to poof fred.

Appendix 3

Using values in communication

Understanding what values are important for our audience is vital for good project design.

'Values' refers to people's hopes, wants, dreams and desires. For example, for a group of farmers it might be productivity, pride in their land, self-respect as hard working producers, or just tackling a particular weed that's taking too much of their time and money.

If we are asking for people's energy and commitment, we need to show that we share their values by offering projects that improve their lives or solve their frustrations (as well as achieving the environmental outcomes).

Social research is vital. Spend time listening to your audience to get a sense of what they care strongly about. Once you figure it out, make sure you frame the purpose and language of your project around that value.

Values are communicated in the language of a project - its name, its stated purpose, and messages. Keep in mind that the substance of the project should genuinely deliver on those values if we want results to be sustained.

Values are the source of motivation in human beings. The more heart-felt the value, the more time and energy people are likely to spend acting for that value, over a longer period.

For example, for a riparian protection project, instead of "improving our rivers" a better purpose statement might be "giving farmers the edge in their business". That shows we put their values first.

If you can genuinely deliver on that purpose you're more likely to see riparian protection practices adopted and sustained.

This values love of place.



This values a youthful sense of adventure.

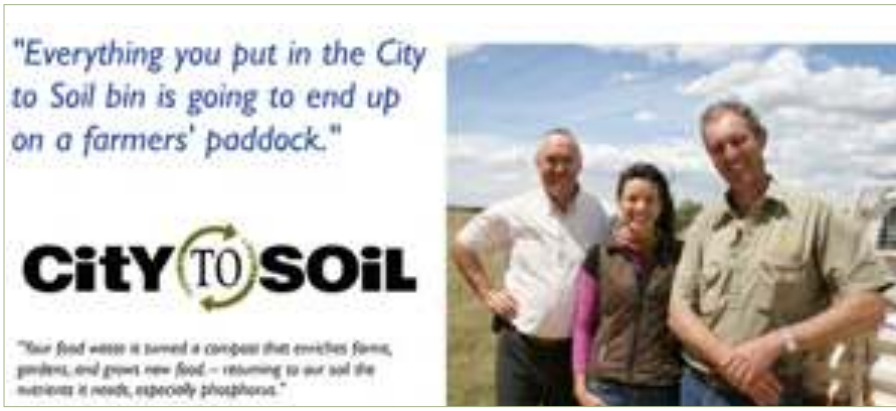


Examples:

Following the catastrophic 2019 floods, **Townsville City Council**'s flood recovery program 'flooded' the city with corflute bollards whose language strongly embodies the value that "our first priority is you".



Queanbeyan City Council's City to Soil project aimed to get householders to use a kitchen caddy to transfer food waste in their green waste bin. It was framed as a chance for householders to do good by improving the lives of farmers, and to return to 'our soil' the nutrients it needs.



Queanbeyan City Council's 'City to Soil' project was framed around making a difference to the lives of farmers and to 'our soil'.

Doing good for others

It can be tempting to frame projects around a selfish notion of 'what's in it for me' by focusing on immediate financial rewards (like prizes, giveaways, or incentives) or on avoiding threats (like fines).

Instead, it can be more effective to focus on making a positive difference for other humans.

Most people are strongly motivated to make a better world for other human beings. Provided we make it safe and simple to act, most people will readily accept a chance to leave a positive legacy. Read more in this HuffPost article.

Should we try to change people's values?

Keep in mind that it can be extraordinarily hard to change people's values. That's because values are the result of people's entire experience of life. Values can sometimes be altered by intense and confronting life experiences (see 'transformative learning' below). However it will always be easier to 'paddle with the current' by aligning with people's existing hopes and desires, rather than trying to alter them.

In fact trying to change them can be dangerous because audiences will often read this as 'you think I'm bad', leading to denial and resistance.

Therefore, instead of trying to motivate people to believe in your values, it's better to devise projects that are clearly at the service of your audience's own hopes and dreams.

Read more about values framing for the environment in this 2010 article by George Lakoff.

Key points: Values-based communications

Aligning with your target group's values will help to communicate that your project is relevant to them.

☐ Find out what your audience care strongly about and then frame the purpose and language of your project around that value.

☐ Framing your project around the positive hopes and dreams of your audience will help to harness their motivation and commitment.

☐ Always be aware of whose values you are communicating - yours or your audience's?

☐ Avoid the common mistake of trying to persuade your audience to care about the same values you care about.

Appendix 4: Using program logic*

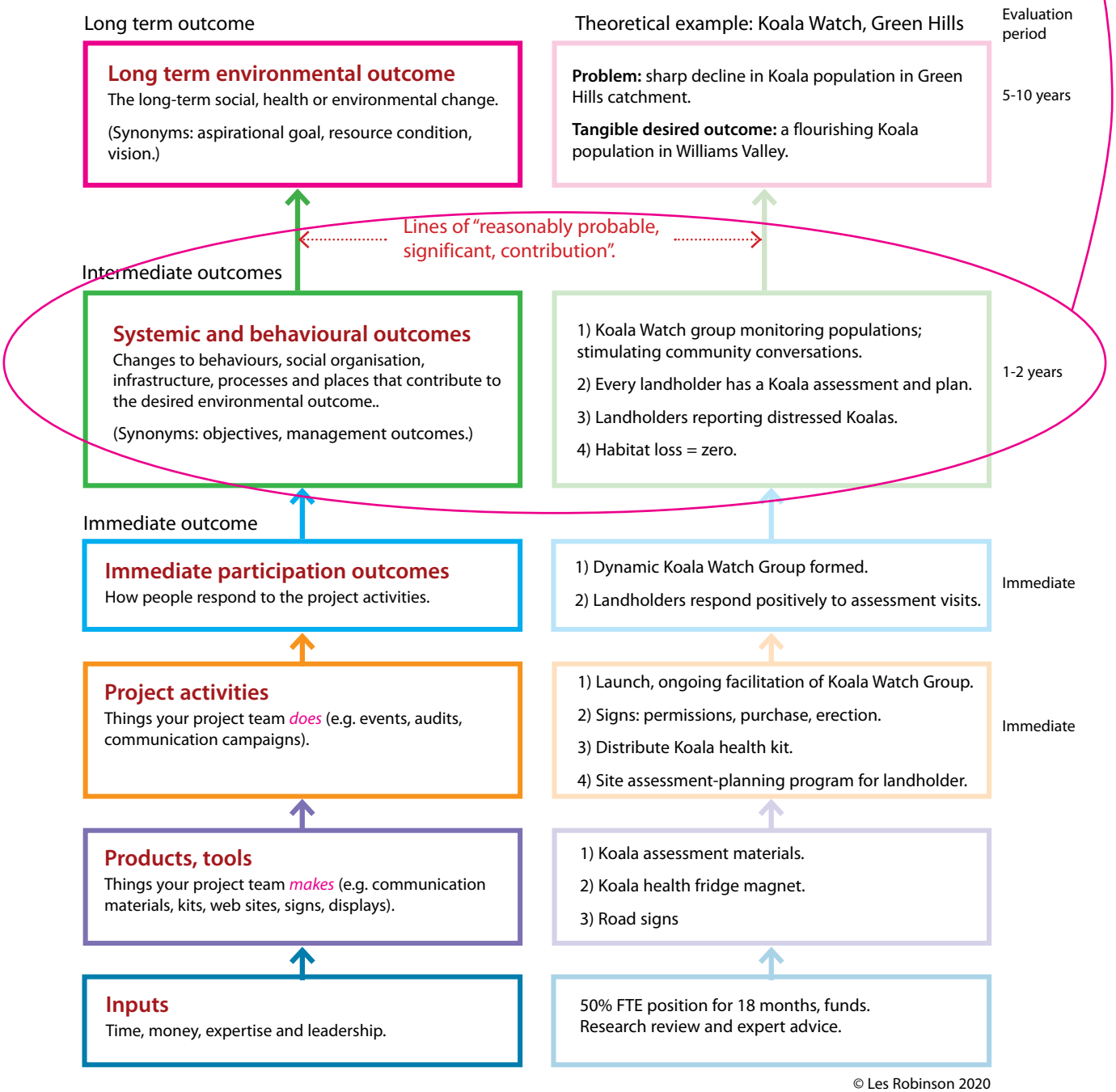
* Also called a theory of change, outcomes hierarchy, or logframe.

Your project should be based on a 'logic' or 'Theory of Change'. This should be a simple, plain English answer to the question: "What needs to happen for there to be an improvement in the tangible environmental outcome?"

A good way to visualise your project is with program logic.

This tells the story of your project, showing how each element contributes to the long term outcome. The arrows show the assumptions your project will test.

The most vital part is your 'intermediate outcomes'. These are the changes you want to observe during your project. They're your 'best hunch' about *why* your project will make a positive impact on the long term outcome.



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Whimsical steet art influences social norms and sparks conversations. Main street, Beechworth, Victoria.