Safety Culture Needed to Tackle Climate Change

By Venugopal Gupta , head of Espark Viridian (INSEAD MBA '06J)

To get people to take climate change seriously, adopt the rituals of worker safety campaigns.

While the climate change talks were happening in Paris, Chennai, India was being submerged by a freak level of rainfall that it hadn't experienced in the last hundred years. Similar extreme weather phenomena continue to rise with ominous regularity as the world is likely to record it's hottest ever temperatures in 2015.

Climate change is set to inflict severe, widespread, and irreversible damage to people and the natural environment unless carbon emissions are cut sharply and rapidly, according to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. According to **the report**, climate change is projected to undermine food security and lead to violent conflicts by amplifying poverty and economic shocks.

Clearly, we are faced with a global challenge that cannot be left to governments to solve. According to IPCC, solutions exist but what is needed is a will to change. Governments may lack the will as these solutions could

be politically unpopular. Even if the political will is there, these changes would require extraordinary enforcement capacity that may not be in place for many years.

And the luxury of time no longer exists.

Perhaps, the question facing most governments is: how can they make people adopt change voluntarily even when it is for their own survival?

Changing behaviours

An important clue is offered in the following award-winning case study.

Some years back, Alcan, a global aluminium giant set up a huge manufacturing plant in an Asian country. While activating the high capacity plant, worker safety was the CEO's top priority. Ironically, workers lacked sensitivity to their own safety. Safety was seen as the job of the safety department. To them, plant accidents were 'inevitable' and something they had learnt to live with. According to the CEO, workers could not understand why their safety could be more important than production.

While a comprehensive safety manual detailing the processes was created, the challenge was how to bring about a change in people's attitudes and behaviour. Manuals themselves are not enough to change people. Data has its uses, but to inspire change, something else is needed.

The company decided to create a comprehensive narrative around 'respect for human life' and it didn't stop at the plant. Alcan commenced a number of community projects that included promoting traffic safety, awareness about drunk driving and improving facilities at the community hospital. They included workers' families who undoubtedly had a huge stake in plant safety.

The company organised rituals, such as a moment of silence whenever an accident, however small or big, happened in the community. The narrative and the rituals helped move plant safety from the boardroom to the dinner table conversation of workers and their families. The result was a dramatic (and award winning) improvement in plant safety performance.

We need rituals

Similarly, if people need to voluntarily change, issues relating to climate change need to move beyond multilateral summit talks to our dinner tables.

We need a narrative and some rituals. Since the odd environmental changes already provide a compelling narrative, all we need are some new age rituals.

Rituals help us become a part of a narrative. They help us engage with the narrative by doing. According to INSEAD Professor **Herminia Ibarra**, in her book **Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader**, we are much more likely to act our way into a more strategic way of thinking, than to think our way into strategic action. Therefore, rituals can be seen as pre-defined actions that can foster a specific way of thinking. Often culture is defined as a common way of thinking which drives a common way of acting. Hence, carefully crafted 'climate change' rituals can shape an environment-friendly culture.

Psychologists agree and **academic research has found** that organisational culture, which has proved influential in determining the health and safety behaviour of workers, can also help to shape individuals' environmental behaviours.

There could be a tantalising bonus to celebrating rituals too.

Rituals help us belong. Like religious rituals, if we conduct climate change (or carbon emission) rituals as a global community, it can help foster our commitment to solving a global problem together and help us rise above the political boundaries and the myopia it sometimes breeds.

New age rituals not only help us develop the right behaviours and attitudes about climate change, they can also help bind us into a global community. This way, rituals can shape a very powerful community response to this looming environmental crisis.

Governments, that no doubt balk at politically unpopular 'change' enforcements, can look towards nurturing voluntary change. In doing so, they should emphasise the narrative and more importantly, discover some new-age rituals.

Taking a cue from the case study, we would have to observe a moment of silence each day in every school and office around the world for the unreserved devastation that pollution is causing. But, new-age rituals, derived out of a compelling narrative, and promoting the right attitudes and behaviours, could lead the 21st century communities to a cleaner planet.

Venugopal Gupta, is head of **Espark Viridian**, the venture accelerator initiative of **Entrepreneurial Spark, UK** and the **Viridian Group**. He is also the founder of **The Business Parables**. You can follow him on Twitter **@venugopal_gupta**.

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About the author(s)

Venugopal Gupta Venu is a start-up specialist and runs a venture acceleration programme that helps early-stage start-ups build their ideas into sustainable businesses.