



Transforming the stories we tell – from issue to action

Dialogue Matters Ltd

Specialists in designing, facilitating training and advising on co-operative decision making in policy and practice

I will talk about...



- The conventional approach and why it doesn't work
- What does catalyse change
- Storytelling
- What we can all do

CONVENTIONAL APPROACH



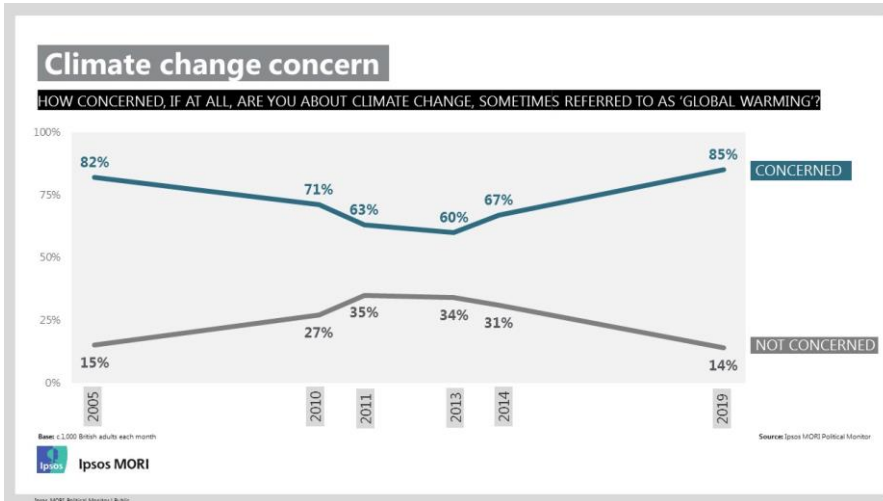
- Currently 98% of environmental stories are negative and framing is all about the issues and threat (news, TV shows, arts, and science articles)
- Assumption that increasing understanding, awareness, concern and fear is necessary for action and behaviour change
- This is flawed!
- It triggers an array of negative psychological reactions
- Action is conceptualised too narrowly as how you consume or activism

Climate and nature

- Doom and disaster
- Existential threat to life on earth
- Loss of our life support
- Awesome terrifying, immense and beyond human control
- Urgent
- Accelerating
- Irreversible
- Crisis
- Emergency



Uptick in concern but not matched by concrete action



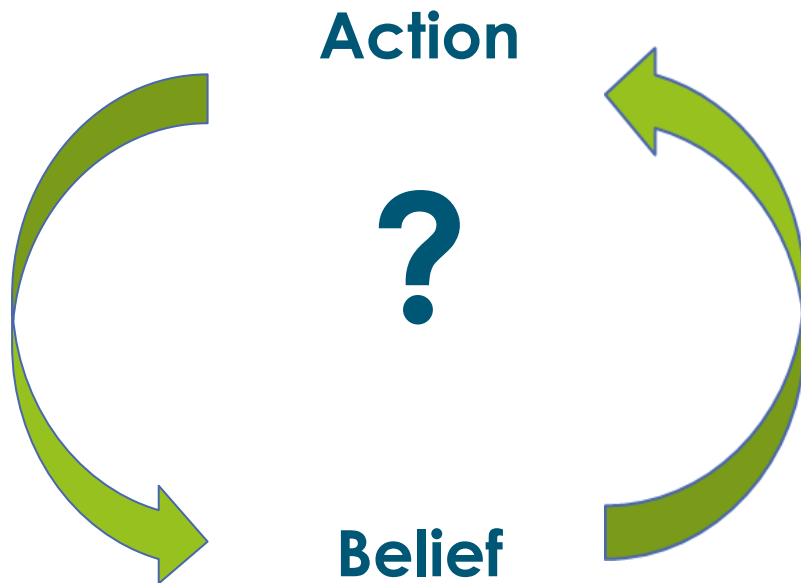
- High levels of concern
 - 82% want action for nature
 - 85% want action for climate
- But take up of pro environmental behaviour is not matching this trajectory
- **Big question is how to turn understanding, concern, and awareness into concrete action?**

Mistaken assumptions about what works

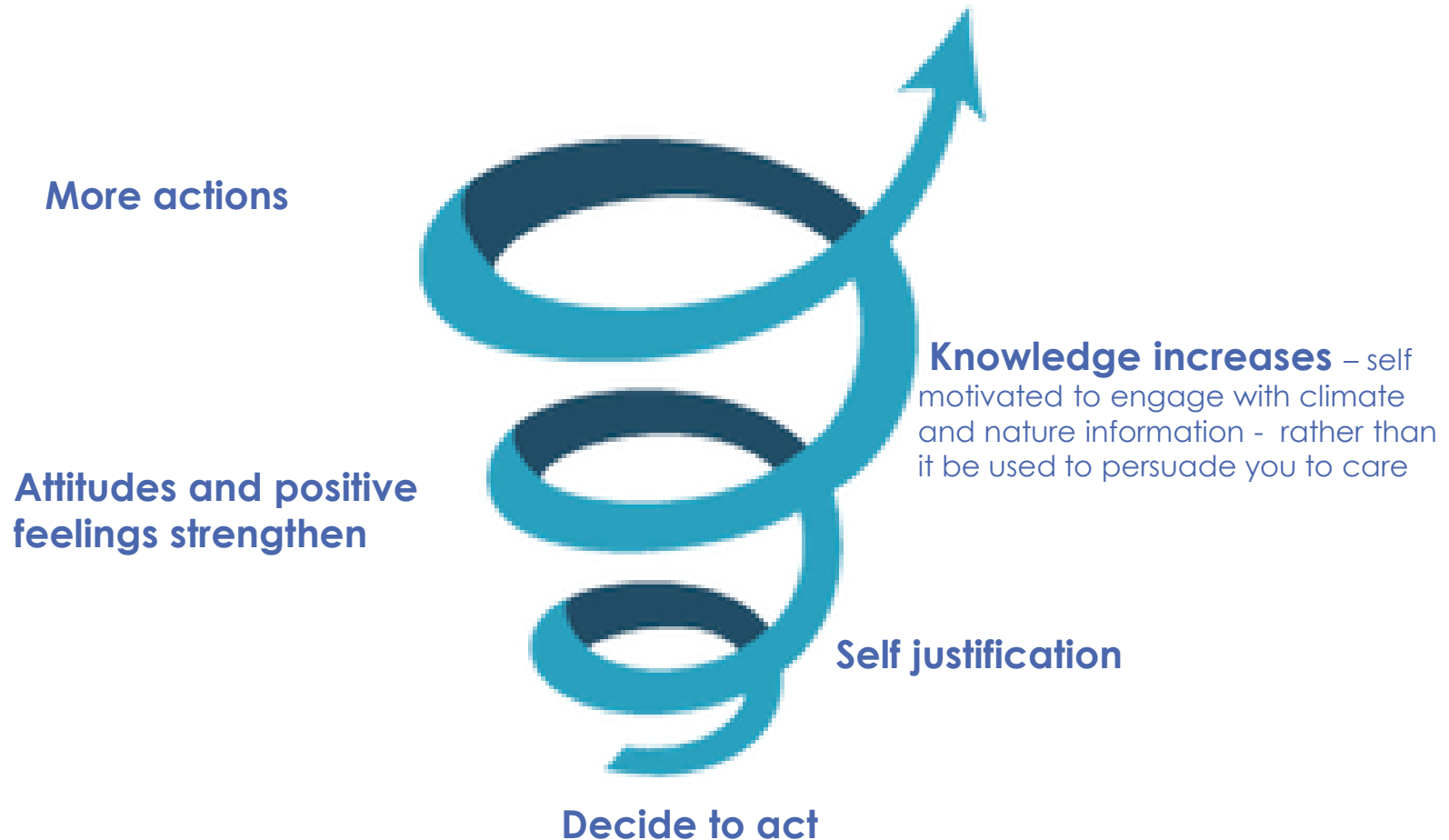
Assumption	Approach	Content	Effect
Information deficit	Blizzard people with info, stats and graphs	Information and issues based	Overwhelming, not well understood – does not set people on a path towards action
Mental states are key to driving behaviour and unlocking action	Communicate in ways that cause an emotion to try to change attitudes	Issues based to catalyse concern, worry, anxiety	Building awareness and concern does not lead to deep engagement Weakly correlated with climate and nature positive behaviour (in env education known this since the late 1970's!)
		Fear appeals	Counterproductive apathy and denial, or high anxiety, depression, even suicide
		Positive success stories - love for nature not loss	Short term inspiration or people think 'oh good someone else is getting on with it I don't need to worry'.

CATALYSING CHANGE

Which comes first action or beliefs?



- **Beliefs drive action** when: attitudes are strong, action feels achievable and do-able, and consistent with your self view
- **Actions drive belief** when: attitudes are weak or uncertain, there are difficult choices, doing something threatens our identify and self image....so then taking action leads to self justification and self persuasion.



How does self persuasion work?



- Works in concrete specific actions
- Once people take actions it strengthens within that sphere e.g. water conservation measures does not automatically lead to energy conservation action or nature action
- What comes to feel meaningful and doable to one person/group does not automatically feel so to others

A key to self persuasion: Agency



- Agency – knowing how to act in order to bring about an intended effect
 - Individual agency - feelings its in your gift to act
 - Collective agency – pool knowledge and skills for action

So what creates agency?

THE 6 COMPONENTS OF HIGH AGENCY



INTENTIONALITY



POWER



RATIONALITY



FORETHOUGHT



SELF-REGULATION



SELF-EFFICACY

1. Social learning – learning from the actions and experiences of others
2. Self efficacy - believing you have the ability to act (a strong predictor of action)
3. Knowing how to act to bring climate and nature action into their personal, professional and civic life, and the roles and identities they already have

STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL LEARNING

If they can
do it
so can I

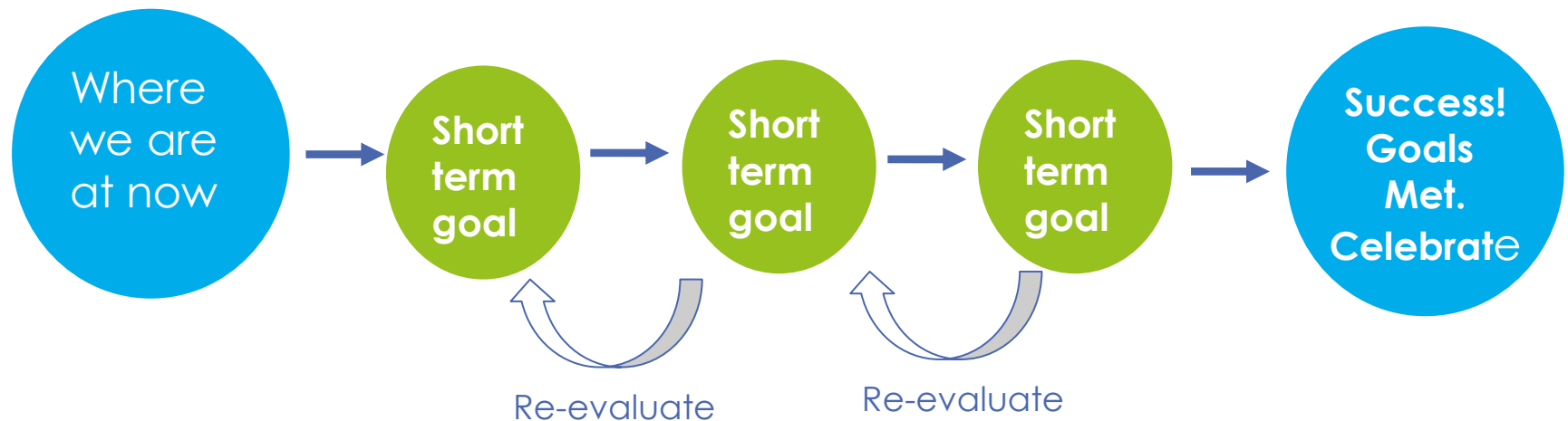
- **Communities of place:** telling stories of place based localised action
- **Communities of practice** telling stories in your sphere: media, architects, education, health, scientists



- Primary purpose is to encourage people to act – to take their first step in self persuasion and develop their own agency (not to raise concern)
- Create stories about relatable people or groups solving a specific challenge
- Storyline informed by reliable/reputable information
- Active voice, good reading ease, everyday language
- Entertaining/engaging - element of surprise

Narrative pattern in summary:

- Start from where people are at now
- Iterative goal setting - solving concrete short term challenges one at a time – practical and social
- Reaching long term goals and enjoying the benefits



The hero's journey

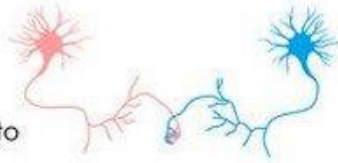


- Describe the character/s and known context
- Show how they took action and set out from the known
- Show the iterative goal setting on the way
- Show their progress one goal at a time, in a context of support and opposition from other characters (modelling positive and negative attitudes and behaviour)
- Show them encountering and overcoming challenges pioneering and innovating as they go
- Show them modelling desired changes through the actions and experiences they have
- Describe them enjoying the benefits and success

HOW STORYTELLING AFFECTS THE BRAIN

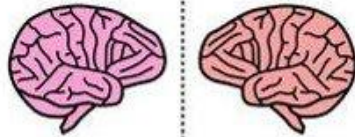
NEURAL COUPLING

A story activates parts in the brain that allows the listener to turn the story into their own ideas and experience thanks to a process called neural coupling.



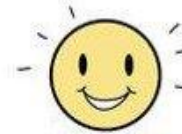
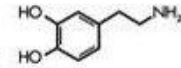
MIRRORING

Listeners will not only experience the similar brain activity to each other, but also to the speaker.



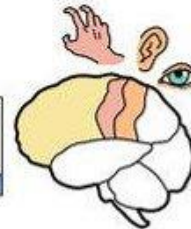
DOPAMINE

The brain releases dopamine into the system when it experiences an emotionally charged event, making it easier to remember and with greater accuracy.



CORTEX ACTIVITY

When processing facts, two areas of the brain are activated (Broca's and Wernicke's area). A well-told story can engage many additional areas, including the motor cortex, sensory cortex and frontal cortex.



Infographic highlighting the effectiveness of using 'Whiteboard Animation' for storytelling @stayingaliveuk - www.stayingaliveuk.com

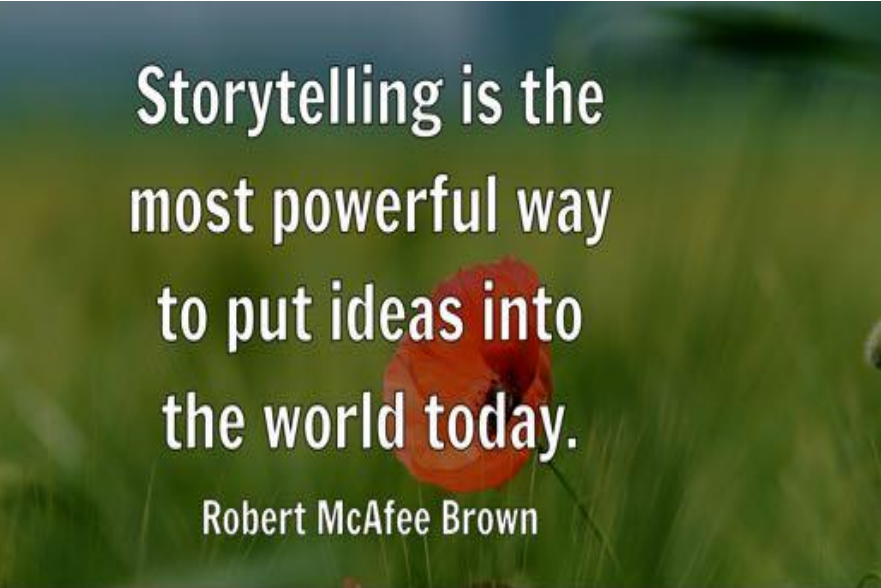
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SO WHAT CAN WE DO?



Storytelling is the
most powerful way
to put ideas into
the world today.

Robert McAfee Brown

- Build your agency as a story teller. Start by taking an action and get on your self persuasion spiral!
- Use all forms: one way, interactive, fiction, non fiction, spoken, science, environmental education, written, song, film, arts.
- Tell stories of characters and what they are doing in all walks of life, sectors, governance, spheres, ages – so others like them know how to act
- Even policy outputs can be action based not issues based

Transforming what we do

Conventional issues based approach

Poverty of stories

Widespread lack of agency

Opportunities conceptualised too narrowly:

- What we consume
- Activism



Future approach

Myriad of action based stories

Storytelling encourages agency and self persuasion
- “If they can do it so can I”

Myriad of ways to act
Myriad of opportunities to act

It is 2030. Everyone is taking climate and nature action because we keep inspiring each other with stories of how we overcome challenges, discover and share new ways to do things, and celebrate and share our successes. As a result nature is recovering, we are limiting and adapting to climate change, and overcoming environmental injustice.

Questions?