

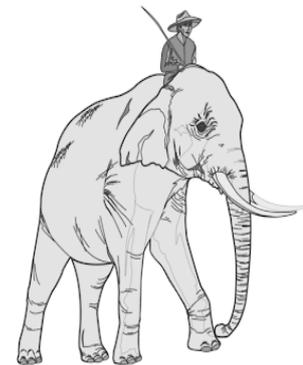
# NET ZERO INNOVATION PROGRAMME: SEVEN INSIGHTS TO MANAGE THE COMPLEX NATURE OF CLIMATE ACTION DELIVERY

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This is a brief overview of the seven insights covered in Net Zero Innovation Partnership Development workshop. You can think of it as a crib sheet, with links to books, videos and articles where you can find more information. You can share this document with others in your organisation, but please do not publish it online or share it via social media at this moment in time.

## **Insight 1: Speak to the Elephant**

Our brains think in two fundamentally different ways, intuitive thinking and deliberative reasoning. Neither is 'right' or 'wrong', they coexist, and are brought to the fore in different circumstances. A useful metaphor to understand how they interact is of an elephant for the intuitive, experientially-oriented side, and its (much smaller) rider for the deliberative one. The rider is rarely in control, but always making up stories as to why it is. The profound, and subtle, implication of this is that when engaging with people on climate change it is important to start from their personal, lived experiences. This applies to citizens as well as to professionals within the context of their professional expertise.



## **Where to find out more**

The Elephant and Rider metaphor comes from psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book [The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion](#). The metaphor is similar to Daniel Kahneman's System 1/System 2 description of intuitive thinking and deliberative reasoning in [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#).



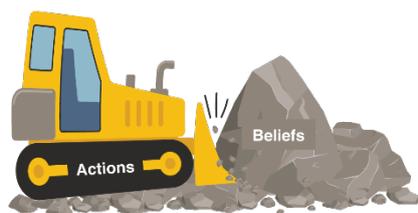
## **Insight 2: Ginger-the-Dog: what we think we say is often not what other people hear**

Words and phrases may lack clarity or have opposing meanings to different groups. This often happens across professional communities. Unhelpful reactions, powerful ones, to the misunderstanding that this creates, are often based on intuitive rather than deliberative thinking.

## **Want to find out more?**

Ginger-the-Dog - as we apply it to climate change - is a specific instance of a recurring problem throughout history: how language can break down when terms become instilled with different meanings. A recent overview of this is provided in Mark Thompson's 2016 book [Enough Said: What's Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics?](#)

### **Insight 3. Actions drive beliefs - rather than beliefs/awareness/concern driving action**



The conventional view is that beliefs, understanding, knowledge, awareness and concern lead to action. This is correct - but only when we have strong convictions about a particular thing. That does not explain where strong beliefs and convictions come from. Nor does it explain what happens when our opinions are weak, or when we experience difficult choices between different options that

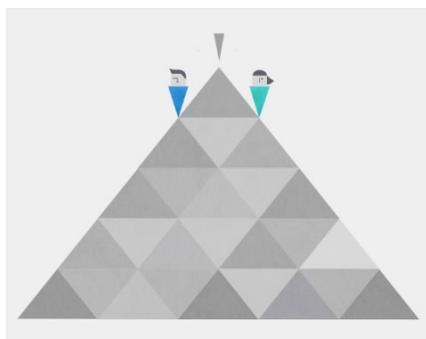
matter to us. In these circumstances the direction of causation is the opposite: our choices and actions will, over a period of time, change our beliefs and awareness through a process of self-persuasion. This insight is a major challenge to much conventional wisdom, which seeks to change beliefs and convictions as a precursor to changes in behaviour.

#### **Where to find out more**

*The idea that actions drive beliefs originated with cognitive dissonance theorists in the 1950s. A good introduction can be found in Elliot Aronson's article [The Power of Self-Persuasion](#). A stark example of the profound impacts this can have in real life is explored in documentary [Right Between Your Ears](#) – co-produced by Kris.*

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### **Insight 4. Climate change and - particularly - ideas about climate action are polarised**



At first sight a statement of the obvious, this is a profound point. The forming and strengthening of an opinion or worldview can be likened to starting at the top of a pyramid and, tentatively at first, choosing one side. As a loosely held belief becomes more strongly held through self-persuasion, we are moving down the pyramid and progressing ever further from someone who took their first step down the other side. The more entrenched our views become, the greater the degree of rationalisation our elephant-driving minds will produce.

As concerns about climate change in society have been increasing, and in the absence of enough recommendations for actions that people feel are concrete, doable, and meaningful, more and more people will make decisions as to what *they* think the correct course of action is to climate change. These decisions trigger a process of self-persuasion, a descent down the pyramid. Without a sense of common purpose and alignment between different views, the idea of 'climate action' could splinter into many incompatible and competing interpretations. This is likely to lead to an increased 'action paralysis' - similar to how views on how to best deal with Brexit splintered into many opposing camps which led to years of gridlock.

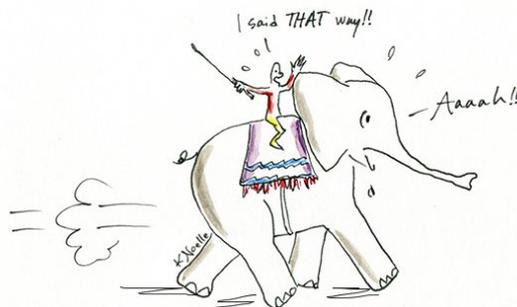
#### **Where to find out more**

*The Analogy of the Pyramid stems from Carol Tavris's and Elliot Aronson's book [Mistakes Were Made \(but not by me\)](#) and is also explained in [Right Between Your Ears](#) (see Insight 7). How this translates into the splitting of public opinion on many pressing societal issues is explained in Kris's TEDx talk [The Genie of Polarisation](#).*

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### **Insight 5. On climate change, fear and threat messaging can be counterproductive**

Is it ever useful to scare the Elephant? Fear can be an effective motivator of personal change, but only if the threat is accompanied by recommendations that feel *concrete, doable* and *effective* to reduce the threat. Communications about climate change rarely meet these criteria - yet these are the messages that many instinctively reach for. The unwelcome consequences of this can be paralysing anxiety, but also numbness or angry denial.



#### **Where to find out more**

The idea that fear and threat messaging can have adverse effects is prevalent in the work of many psychologists. One excellent entry point is Elliot Aronson's 2008 article [Fear, Denial and Sensible Action in the Face of Disasters](#).

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### **Insight 6. All 'factual' debates are profoundly social**

All high-stakes debates in society that are thought to be factual, are actually dominated by social factors. The positions we take in these debates critically depend on how our brains interpret the intentions and motivations of the people we disagree with ('stupid-crazy-evil' reasoning); whether we trust particular messengers or not; and what people around us think about the same issue. On the upside, we also learn readily from stories about the actions and experiences of other people, and we can empathise with them when we manage to truly understand their perspective, rather than succumb to snap judgements.



#### **Where to find out more**

[Social: why our brains are wired to connect](#) by social neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman provides an excellent overview of the main social sides there are to the human brain. [The Social Animal](#) by Elliot and Joshua Aronson is a classic textbook in social psychology - yet very readable. 'Stupid-crazy-evil' reasoning in the context of climate change is explored in Kris's article [Sustainability: 'Us' and 'Them'](#).

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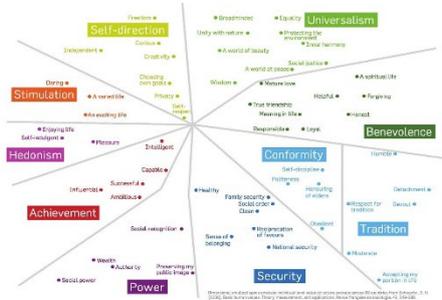
### **Insight 7. Values offer a shorthand to understand what resonates with people's Elephant**

'Values' - loosely defined - are answers that people give to the question "What do you care about in life?" Several frameworks exist that look at how to foster people's pro-environmental values; or how to connect with people who put other values above pro-environmental ones. From our perspective, values are a shorthand to help understand what resonates with our intuitive, elephant brains. They can help to understand why certain stories and message frames may lead to

engagement, while others may lead to indifference or even angry rejection. They can also help to understand why different groups of people can be engaging in the same behaviour for different underlying reasons.

### Where to find out more

A lot of the research in the psychology of values traces back to [Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values](#). In the UK, work on how to foster pro-environmental values is spearheaded by organisation [The Common Cause Foundation](#). Two market research and consultancy organisations with a focus on connecting to different value groups on environmental issues are [Cultural Dynamics](#) and [Campaign Strategy](#). The value segmentation framework of the latter 2 organisations ('Settler – Prospector – Pioneer') is explained in Chris Rose's book [What Makes People Tick](#).



### Putting it all together: from 'behaviour change' to 'building agency and community'

The 'action drives beliefs' notion – although it is the way that our attitudes and behaviours change in real life - is rarely applied in designing behaviour change interventions. One reason is that it goes against the conventional wisdom (see above). Another reason is that it may seem harder to put into practice, as it seems to require bespoke, individualised interventions.

The latter objection can be resolved by moving away from thinking about 'behaviour change' towards 'developing agency' – in other words, helping people to discover *how* to change, rather than telling them *what* to change; and by working with and empowering communities to make the changes to their practices as a community rather than as individuals. This recipe of agency and community building can be applied to citizens as well as to professionals who need to bring climate change into the context of their job role and organisation.

'Actions drive beliefs' can be readily adopted in communication: positive stories of how people take action are more effective to get people to act than communicating about a problem. One reason is that our brains are optimised to understand stories of people; another reason that the story of the actions is like a recipe which other people can then apply in their own lives.

Beyond communication, the 'self-persuasion' form of how we change our own behaviours can be put into practice for climate action through a cycle of helping people to identify starter actions, enabling them to adopt these actions, helping them to reinterpret what they already do through a pro-environmental lens, and finally to rinse and repeat this cycle.