

COMMUNICATION AND STORYTELLING

Opening questions for the reader before reading:

- Have you thought about what does zero waste means to you?
- What kind of messages on zero waste do you want to share/spread?
- Who is the target audience of your message? What could zero waste mean to them?
- How do you usually explain zero waste to people? Is it difficult or easy to do? Why?
- How do you feel when you are challenged with a question or counter-argument?
- What is the role of your audience in zero waste?

Once we have discovered the world of zero waste, it becomes the only right thing to do in our minds. Unfortunately not everyone thinks like this. Sometimes they just don't know enough about it, they don't understand what "zero waste" means, they have misconceptions around it or they simply think it doesn't concern them (even if it really does) and they are not interested.

We may wish to grow our audience or influence our target groups to take certain action. Sometimes our role is only to raise awareness – the need arises from lack of knowledge in the society. In other times, our job is much more complex, with the need to address false information that translates into wrong behaviours and attitudes. In any case, our challenge is to find a way to get people to care about zero waste in order to get them on board with us.

BASICS OF COMMUNICATION – THE THREE PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

The first thing to remember is that every person needs motivation in order to do something. In the *Learning motivation* chapter we have distinguished between trash and quality motivation. For deeper understanding and long term commitment we want to support quality motivation and that comes through supporting the three basic psychological needs of the person we are communicating with. This means supporting:

- **Relatedness** – showing genuine interest and understanding in the thoughts and opinions of other people, recognising their feelings, responding without judgement, making them feel that their contribution is valued and they are a part of a group.
- **Competence** – speaking with people on the level understandable to them, not using field-specific words with a non-expert, helping to understand what is expected of them, what should be done to solve the problem at hand and if needed, helping to do it, at the same time treating them like thinking and capable beings who can take up a challenge.
- **Autonomy** – not forcing your own thoughts and ideas on to people, allowing them to find their own meaning and purpose in the topic, solve posed questions-problems themselves and in their own pace, giving them a choice to make a decision on their own; not letting them feel guilty, controlled, or forced to think, feel or behave in certain way.



One of the easiest ways to put this into practice is asking questions from people about their views and understandings and **truly listening**, before offering our own (expert) perspective, stating our own proposals and explanations. This also means genuinely being interested in their answers and not bombarding them with questions in an interrogative manner, but rather showing an **open curiosity**. You can read more in-depth about supporting the basic psychological needs from the *Learning motivation* chapter.

Asking questions is also a good way to approach people who hold some zero waste myths or misconceptions. In order to truly correct someone's misconceptions, they need to reach the understanding themselves that they have a misconception, which is also connected to supporting their three basic needs. Just stating our correct information to people often does not change their mind. Different methods for correcting people's misconceptions can be found in the *Misconceptions* chapter.

The reason we need to explore how to communicate is because we are talking to people who do not yet share zero waste values or don't have the same knowledge as us. And this compromises our own three basic needs, e.g. we feel that our concerns are not being taken seriously. The tough thing about being openly curious and listening is that, as Zero Waste Ambassadors, you do not talk to people about easy things such as how they decided to get a dog or learn a new language. You are faced with people who make daily decisions that jeopardise the environment and human health – the world that you live in and that you care about deeply. It is a natural response to become defensive and irritated.

Perhaps the most helpful way to make it simpler to support the three basic needs of your counterpart without compromising your own is: understanding another's point of view does not mean agreeing with it.

Be humble, respect the other person's point of view, try to put yourself in their shoes, but if you can't, be mindful that another person's shoes are still theirs.

You cannot force your ideas on anyone just like you cannot force them to wear shoes you like. It is the key to any communication, regardless of whether you are writing an e-mail, designing a poster or attending a meeting. It needs training and is not always easy. However, there are people negotiating with terrorists, not losing their calm and even reaching agreements.¹ It is inspiring to believe that it is possible for us to overcome disagreements or lack of interest about zero waste.

COMMUNICATION AND VALUES

There is almost **no neutral human interaction or communication**, as we don't sense the world neutrally. It always comes through a filter of pre-knowledge, experiences, opinions, values – it's part of being human. Even the things we call neutral, in their deep essence mostly are not so. Our sense of rationality is often just our skill of finding rational explanations to our irrational behaviours. But that's another story.² What is important to remember is that both the sender and receiver of messages see things subjectively, carried by some assumptions and attitudes connected to our values and bigger life goals. In very broad terms our thinking, communication and in turn our actions are carried by either intrinsic or extrinsic values.

¹ Recommended reading for anyone wishing to improve their negotiation skills and learn about how to deal with emotionally difficult counterparts: Voss, C. (2016). *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating As If Your Life Depended On It*

² If you are interested in the deep irrationality of human nature, read: Ariely, D. (2010). *Predictably Irrational*.

- **Intrinsic values** – creating and keeping close relationships, personal growth, contributing to your community.
- **Extrinsic values** – power and economic success, having material wealth, fame, being popular, looking attractive.

As written in the *Zero waste, wellbeing and values* chapter, zero waste solutions are closely connected to intrinsic values. These values are also something we want to support in our communication and we can use them as a source of inspiration on how to talk and what to talk about with our audience. It starts even with the words we use. For example, the same thing can be referred to in two different ways:

- Taxpayer’s money – stressing individualistic, extrinsic values.
- Public investment – stressing common good, intrinsic values.

When we talk about money, we can talk more about what we need this money for, what kind of life quality it can bring to the wider community, so we shift the focus from extrinsic to intrinsic values. An obvious way to support values is to talk directly about them. For example how zero waste solutions like food sharing initiatives or repair centres help to support a sense of community between citizens. As an effective communicator, you would also know and be forever curious to learn about other initiatives supporting intrinsic goals and which other benefits are associated with them. This is all about knowing what makes your audience tick and offering them, in return, information/expertise about what they value the most.

Let’s explore a few examples on how zero waste benefits can be introduced through different angles to intrinsic values, which may not be the ones that matter most to you. Who do you think could be motivated by these arguments?

Example 1: Zero waste boosts care of place.³ Better maintained, cleaner and greener neighbourhoods often have lower rates of theft and break-ins and discourage potential crimes.⁴

Example 2: Negative brand association. A study has shown that people are unwilling to pay the usual price on a product if its packaging is frequently seen as litter, it is seen worth less and that could lead to a 2% drop in a company’s turnover.⁵

For more explanations and guidance on how to work with values and how to support the intrinsic values in our communication, a good resource is the [Common Cause Handbook](#).

³ Read examples of behavioural intervention methods and their effectiveness from: Spehr, K., Curnow, R. (2015). *Litterology*

⁴ [How Surprising Neighbourhood Factors Like Trees & Trash Impact Crime Rates](#), EzLandLordForms (2015)

⁵ [Litter: its impact on local communities](#), Brailsford Parish Council (2021)

PLANNING YOUR COMMUNICATION

Planning communication is in essence a set of actions to ensure that your message reaches the right people in order to have impact. With the limited time and resources we have, it is better to know that we are doing the most important things and talking to the most important people.⁶

If you are in doubt on whether you are talking to the right people or telling them the right things, you can start by asking yourself three key questions:

1. Who are you talking to? Do you know your target group (who they are, what they know, how they think, why they do the things they do)?
2. What do you need them to know?
3. What do you need them to do?

To take the stress off:

“No, you can not reach everyone and you cannot communicate everything”.

Put out of your mind the latest viral campaign that the ‘whole world’ has heard of and get rid of the idea that everything you have learnt throughout your journey as Zero Waste Ambassador, can be piled onto anyone in an hour, with an e-mail or through a press release. If you can live with that, get to work and get to know your target audience well. The more specific you are, the better. That will allow you to craft the right message⁷ and focus on the most effective channels. Sometimes there is that one key person you need to talk to. Often it is more people and it may happen that at first sight it is unclear who you really need to address or what you really need them to know/believe/understand in order for your desired change to happen.

⁶ Usually taken for two reasons: for communication activities to match the organisation’s strategic goals and to justify budget allocations, since communication is always a cost for an organisation.

⁷ Simple and helpful guide to understanding why some messages stick and others not: Heath, C., Heath, D. (2006). *Made to stick*.

How to choose your messages

There are many tools to help craft the right messages. We suggest here the [micro targeted audience analysis](#). You can start by writing down a simple question you have about a behaviour using the formula:

WHY + COMMUNITY/AUDIENCE + BEHAVIOUR

Exercise:

Imagine your goal is to help the city transfer to reuse dishes at public events, but the current situation is that they have opted for biodegradable ones. Your question could be: **“Why does the city allow biodegradable dishes at public events?”**. The more specific about the question you are, the easier it will be to take the next steps. City may mean city council or its officers.

Continue by examining:

4. Who influences your chosen target group? Try to stretch your list to more than the usual suspects. The more detailed you are, the more opportunities it will give you.
5. What are the beliefs and the **emotional drivers** behind the target group’s behaviour?
6. What does the target group get from this behaviour (their **emotional payoffs**)?

Try matching the belief with the chosen influencer. If the city council notices that other similar cities (influencers) are being highlighted in the media for transferring to biodegradables they wish to follow suit (emotional driver). If the public officers are influenced by what is stipulated in the law (influencer) where biodegradable is considered as an alternative to single-use plastic and nothing is mentioned of reuse, they will do the dutiful thing (emotional driver) of following what is written.

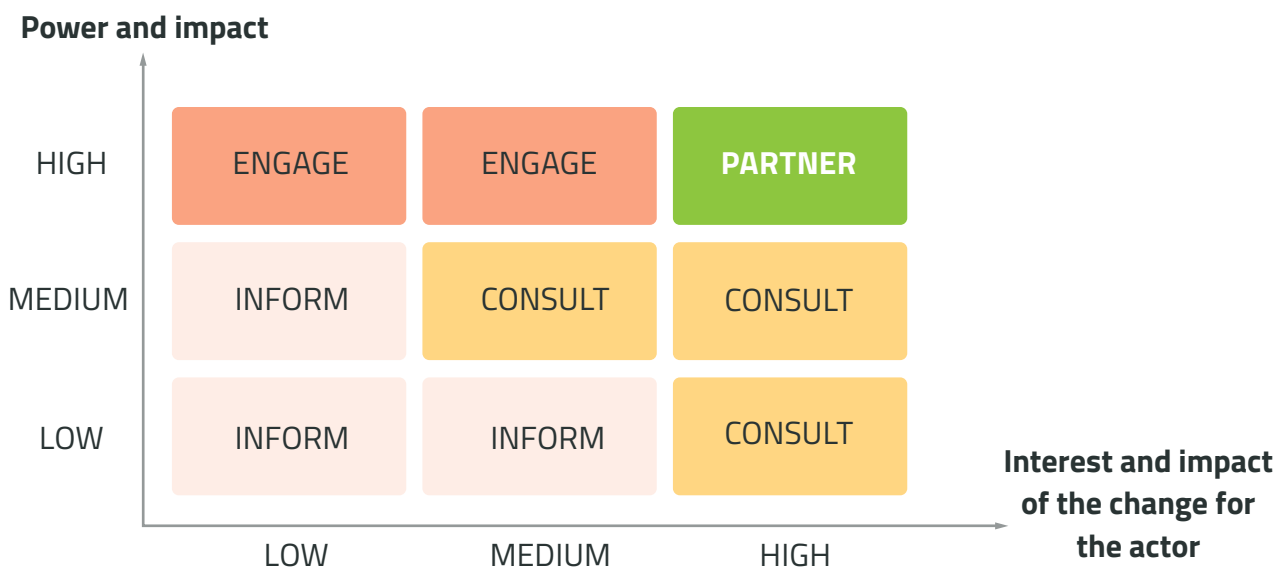
Then look into the target group’s (in this case the city officer) emotional payoffs. How would our hypothetical city officer feel? Possible payoffs: a confirmation of a job well done, feeling safe for doing the right and agreeable thing in the eyes of the employer, pride for putting the city in the spotlight for making a green decision.

Why is it important **how they feel**? Because emotions help us understand what is important to people, where they feel confident, where they are insecure. Emotions can give us information on what they know and believe in. Refer back to the *Learning motivation* chapter to distinguish between trash and quality motivation, to help you work with people’s pre-knowledge and feelings for a meaningful and long-lasting impact. Imagine if you are promoting reuse as an alternative that has not been proven to work, has not received acceptance in the eye of the public and is not prescribed in the law. Your offer to them is provoking insecurity, risk of failure and becoming a bad example. How do you think this affects their three basic needs?

How to choose your audience

If you are unclear who the right target audience is, the only real way to find out is by listing your assumptions and then testing them by really talking to people. By identifying your key stakeholders, you can also identify the key audiences. The power-interest grid allows you to understand who is important, where to allocate your energy but also to avoid frustration from overwhelming engagement from those who do not need to attend every decision-making process or the feeling of being left out by those who feel that their opinions should be taken into account.

The power-interest grid:



The types of communication with different stakeholders:

- **Inform** – to provide balanced and objective information in order to assist in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.
- **Consult** – to obtain feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.
- **Engage** – to work together to ensure that this stakeholder group's concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and they are provided feedback on how their input influenced the decision.
- **Partner** – to work together to formulate solutions and incorporate their advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

Example:

You are advocating for a nation-wide reuse system to be supported with regulation:

- Your **partner** is the ministry drafting the law.
- You should **engage** with the companies and associations who are directly impacted by the law and who are in consultative status with the ministry.

- You should **consult** users or alternative service providers who are impacted by the change but who do not dictate the dominating narrative yet, such as reuse system providers, supervising agencies who determine what alternatives can operate and shops, cafeterias and other user groups to understand their needs for adjusting to new systems.
- You should **inform** the general public who is the end user of reuse packaging. They are the ones whose behaviour and attitudes do not affect the law directly, but who can have a direct impact on influencing the process and discourse of the legislative process.

STORYTELLING

The world around us consists of stories and narratives. And storytelling is perhaps the most powerful tool for any message to come through. We can use it as an educational tool so target groups can easily relate to zero waste topics.

A **story** is one single tale with a beginning and an end and with an **underlying moral**.

A **narrative** is a collection of these stories. It can influence the way people generally think of a certain topic, organisation or a person.



Most often, our job is to shift the whole social narrative around waste. That may mean anything from littering behaviour to designing national zero waste strategies. In order for a narrative to change, we can use stories as tools everywhere: in social media posts, blogs, articles, researches, campaigns and meetings.

Exercise:

The dominating narrative – *single-use plastic is normal, littering is bad.*⁸ The solution in the majority's mind is to educate people to separate waste and not litter.

What do we do to challenge this narrative?

One option could be to sway the narrative to this direction:

Single-use of any durable material is a waste. The companies producing plastic packaging should rethink what options they are putting on the market and take responsibility for the damage it ends up doing in the environment. Single-use plastics have only been around for some decades and they are avoidable in most cases. Despite separate collection, most of the waste ends up incinerated or landfilled, because single-use materials often have no value on the secondary market or they are not recyclable altogether.

⁸ Notice, who is doing the wrong thing in this narrative? Who or what should change? How does that sway your attention?

What has been done for this: first, civil society organisations started to make public transparency requests to corporations about their strategies to tackle waste problems as a part of their producer responsibility. This opened the topic of “who creates and can solve single-use plastic problems”. Over time, more and more initiatives, such as the [Brand Audits](#), have challenged the dominating narrative. Thus educating the public and triggering change.

The better we understand the narrative frame we operate in, the more successful we are in achieving our goal. Just make sure that when you are telling your story, your audience is the good guy. It is best if they are the hero in your story, but you may attribute other positive roles (such as a fairy godmother, a mentor or other similar character who has a key role in allowing the hero to succeed). Storytelling is an art in itself, but the easiest for anyone to get started with it, is choosing a story you like and know best and start investigating the dynamics of the characters and playing around with your role and the role of your audience.⁹

Example 1. The hero story.

Most stories we hear and tell are hero stories. A good story consists of elements that each listener craves for and allows for your audience to follow and keep or lose interest. It doesn't matter if it is a 30-second pitch, a graph or a training session, the full story or a segment of it can be present in them all. What role have you assigned to your audience? Do you think it is an active or passive role? Is the audience a positive or negative character? How would you like your audience to identify themselves?



The hero story in practice:

Imagine you are presenting an idea of separate collection to your local municipality, using the example of [Ljubljana](#) since they are comparable in size and profile. It is good to get acquainted with the resources provided by Zero Waste Europe for these case studies. You want your audience to empathise with Ljubljana through the struggles they faced in the beginning and the success they are attributed after. You want Ljubljana to be the hero and your audience to feel inspired to be the hero too. Alternatively, imagine if you walked in the room like you are the saviour of the city and the municipality representatives (your audience) are the obstacle that keeps you from overcoming the evil. What reactions do you think this would provoke in your audience?

Example 2. The underdog story.

The story of someone who is most likely to lose. Think of Robin Hood or Cinderella. Are you in a position of most likely losing? Describe the apparent hopelessness of the situation. What are the lucky events or hidden talents that can turn the situation for the better. Who is the villain? The underdog stories can be very powerful in making the audience feel like you need them to succeed.

⁹ Find inspiration to build your story: Amlani, A., Bertels, S., Hadler, T. (2016). [Storytelling for Sustainability](#), Embedding Project



Underdog story in practice:

Imagine presenting the idea of becoming the first zero waste city to a municipality that has always been considered the worst. It is lagging behind economically, its residents are moving to other cities and due to low income, it is losing its attraction as a place to live. The story of using its industrial heritage for developing new circular business models and providing new services, playing on the “nothing to lose” position for trying out new things, and imagining the potential for creating new jobs and transforming the community into a green and attractive one, can be just the boost the municipality needs for a new found morale. As long as you know what motivates your audience, the worst place to start from might become the best reason to get started.

Struggle stories vs success stories

Often, in order to inspire others to follow the zero waste path or pursue anything really, we tell success stories of what others have achieved in this field. But studies¹⁰ have shown that people find it easier to relate to the struggles within those stories rather than just the successes, and even get them more interested in the field. This means talking about and even putting the focus on the mistakes made and challenges met on that journey, and then how they were overcome and the success achieved. It's more about sharing the story of the process, dead-ends and eventual progress, not just the achievement. On every hero's journey, there is first the struggle with the way things are until there comes a 'change or die' moment that gives the hero the courage to take matters into their own hands and fight for a better new world. **The hero is just like us who makes mistakes and has doubts.** It is natural for a hero to not succeed at first try. If it were so, the movies we watch and books we read would be much shorter. At our training courses we also ask the people sharing local zero waste case studies to tell their struggle stories. It's the parts of their challenges and overcoming them, which are most captivating to listen to.

This is not to say that success stories are not good. There is a time and place for everything. Always look for the most valid examples or elements in any success story to spark your audience's interest. It may be a surprisingly high separate collection rate or lowest waste management fees in the country. But the rest is about making your audience believe that they can be just as good (or even better). More often than not, the struggle story is a tool to use with the target audience who actually has to make the change happen. They find comfort in knowing that others have faced the same challenges and that no one can know all and do everything perfectly at once. But it is the followers and supporters who want to be encouraged and given confidence that they are following and supporting a winner, unless you are certain that you can play out to be a great underdog :).¹¹ What do you think is the reason that successful crowdfunding campaigns kick off with an encouraging pre-agreed donation pool?

¹⁰ Lin-Siegler, X., Ahn, J. N., Chen, J., Fang, F.-F. A., & Luna-Lucero, M. (2016). Even Einstein struggled: Effects of learning about great scientists' struggles on high school students' motivation to learn science. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(3), 314–328.

¹¹ There is also charm in being an underdog. It is really about the way you are writing your story and which archetypes you believe will work out best for you. Further reading: [Capitalizing on the Underdog Effect](#), Harvard Business Review (2010)

How to tell a story?

Once you know your target group and you know what you want them to know, there are unlimited ways to convey your message. The first key element to success is obviously – you! Your passion, interest and understanding of the topic but also, what makes you most comfortable. If your super power is data, present that. If you are a highly sociable person, do just that. Always keep in mind to **support your audience's three basic needs**. Whether you are advocating a new policy, presenting data to illustrate your point or talking about the technicalities of waste treatment, you can always be mindful of your audience's need to make sense of things in a familiar way. Just because your graph¹² is correct doesn't make it automatically either interesting nor comprehensible. If you struggle making your data interesting, at least allow your audience to draw conclusions themselves from the information you present them. Regardless of whether they are wrong or right, a dialogue is better than just proving that you are right.

Also fight the urge to show all your slides or present all your data if your audience is showing obvious signs of not being interested. Well laid out plans, graphs and analysis that you have worked on so long and hard, only work for the purpose of building confidence and pride in you. Have comfort in having them to back you up but avoid overwhelming people with information. Always come back to reminding yourself, what was that one thing you needed them to know, understand and act upon? All the rest is supportive information to achieve the initially set goal. But the true success depends on whether and how well your audience **feels their concerns and questions** about the topic are being addressed.

For exploring, practicing and preparing how to approach and communicate with stakeholders, you can use this training [video](#). Imagine, how would you feel in the shoes of the different parties in the video and look for possible exercises to go with it in the *Training video guide for Zero Waste Ambassadors*. What in the way people talk, look and behave support the three basic needs and what is in breach of them?

¹² It is not a coincidence that a graph is used here to illustrate a possible mistake in addressing your audience. A graph equals a slide that has too much text on it. If you want data to really make an impact, make sure the information you want the audience to know really stands out. And that is either one single point or three interesting finds the most. For some tips on how to present your data better, check the *Waste data basics* chapter.

Ending questions for the reader to reflect upon:

- What parts in this chapter were most confusing or difficult for you to understand? Why do you think it was so?
- What makes you listen to other people and get on board with their ideas?
- In your experience in talking about zero waste, what kind of questions, facts, stories have seemed to work the best?
- What are the most memorable stories on zero waste you have heard? Why are they memorable?
- What do you want to take with you from this chapter?
- If and what next steps do you want to take in your work regarding this topic?
- What do you want to know more about?

