



DEPOLARIZING WITHIN for Science Communicators

*** PRINT OUT PRIOR TO WORKSHOP BUT ONLY COMPLETE DURING WORKSHOP***

Workshop Goals

- More awareness of our own inner polarizer and ways to counteract it
- Skills for being critical without stereotyping, dismissing, ridiculing, or contempt
- Skills for intervening in a constructive way in social conversations that veer into contempt and ridicule for people who are skeptical of science

Part 1: Recognizing My Inner Polarizer

You can use the following questions to think about your inner polarizer. Circle a number.

1. How often do I find myself thinking about “those people” who are skeptical about science without much regard for the variation among them?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or never feel it
all the time

I feel it

2. How often do I find myself assigning mainly self-serving or negative motives to the other group--and mainly positive motives to my group?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or never feel it
all the time

I feel it

3. How often do I find myself focusing on the most extreme or outrageous ideas and people who are skeptical about science thereby making it hard to see how a reasonable person could remain in that group?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or never feel it
all the time

I feel it

4. How often do I find myself comparing the *worst people* who are skeptical about science with the *best people* on my side?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or never feel it
all the time

I feel it

5. How often do I feel a “rush” of pleasure with colleagues when we ridicule those crazies who are skeptical about science

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I rarely or never feel it
all the time

I feel it

6. Which of the following is closest to my overall or most common emotional attitude towards the majority of people who are skeptical about science?

Circle the one closest to where you are now and then the one you aspire to, if they are different.

- Hate. They are enemies out to destroy the country.
- Disdain. They are ignorant and should know better.
- Pity. They are well meaning but duped.
- Basic respect. They make contributions even if they are mostly off base.
- Respect and appreciation. They make unique and necessary contributions.

Part 2: Strategies to Counteract My Inner Polarizer

Following are ways to offset polarizing thoughts and feelings when you notice them arising in you. These are ways to “edit the story” you tell yourself about people on the other side. You may also have other strategies that work for you.

1. Challenge your stereotypes

- Stereotypes are how outsiders over-simplify, dismiss, lump together, and disparage the Other. Based on Braver Angels workshops where we ask each side to identify the most common stereotypes they run into about their own side, these are the most common stereotypes (using climate as an example):

- Those skeptical about climate science think scientists see them as uneducated, selfish, earth haters, anti-science, nationalistic, living the “wrong” kind of life, and don’t care about future generations.
- Scientists think those skeptical about climate science see them as arrogant/elitist, “tree huggers,” valuing the environment over people, and wanting to take your hamburgers away
- Ways to counter stereotypes in your own thinking
 - Tell yourself that the other side is more varied than the stereotype.
 - Acknowledge that their views and motivations are no doubt more complicated than the rhetoric you’ve been hearing.
 - Recognize that the life experiences informing their views are likely different from your own.
 - Develop relationships with a variety of people who differ from you in their perspective on this topic. Relationships tend to undermine stereotypes.
 - Read and listen to thought leaders who talk about how we can engage with others we disagree with in productive ways.. Three authors and books we recommend are:
 - “How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate” by Andrew Hoffman
 - “The Righteous Mind” by Jonathan Haidt
 - “High Conflict” by Amanda Ripley
 - If you want to go all out, you can read books and articles that provide healthy skepticism. Two authors and books we recommend on climate:
 - “Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It Doesn't, and Why It Matters” by Steven Koonin
 - “False Alarm” by Bjorn Lomborg

2. Make depolarizing distinctions

- Distinguish between positions and people. You can believe that a viewpoint is completely wrong without believing that everyone who holds it is stupid or ill motivated. For example, you may feel that people who have chosen to not get vaccinated are wrong, but that doesn’t mean those who oppose vaccination are unconcerned about public health.
- Distinguish between policies and core values. Policies are means to ends, ways to support or enact values, not the values themselves. People can differ sharply on the role of government in mitigating climate change yet have similar ultimate goals for protecting the environment.
- Distinguish between inconsistency and hypocrisy. Resist the pull towards assuming that inconsistencies on the other side always reveal hypocrisy. Inconsistencies between stated values and actual behavior can also come from blind spots and from the inevitable tensions between competing values. Be

reluctant to assign the label of hypocrite to large numbers of fellow citizens who disagree with you on an aspect of science, even when their positions seem contradictory to you. (You seem inconsistent to them.)

Part 3: How to Talk about the Other Side in a Non-polarizing Way

1. What to avoid

- Using pejorative labels: “anti-science”, “uneducated” for those who are skeptical about science
- Using the phrase “they all” This is a classic stereotyping phrase.

2. Criticize the idea or the policy, not the motives of everyone who holds it.

“Climate change skepticism is the riskiest idea I’ve seen in my lifetime because we’re running out of time to prevent lasting damage to the planet” versus “Climate change deniers care more about the fossil fuel industry than about the planet.” “I’m worried that if people don’t get vaccinated, it will lead to more COVID variants over time”

3. Criticize your own side too.

“We are losing some people because we have been overly alarmist about the impacts of climate change.” or “Sometimes we talk as if we think vaccines and masking are the complete solution to preventing COVID, and I don’t think that is necessarily the case

4. Say something positive about the other side.

“I read a commentator who said something interesting about how natural immunity protects against COVID”.....” or “I think their criticism of some of the models that have been put forth to predict climate change have some validity even if I don’t agree with their solution.”

5. Try this “eavesdropper” thought experiment

How would a rational and well-intentioned member of the other group feel when listening to you describe their side?

- i. Respected (even if strongly disagreed with) or disrespected
- ii. Understood (at least partly) or grossly misrepresented

Goal: For the other side to say “Steve gets it.”

Part 4: Skills for Depolarizing Conversations with Like-minded People

Four mistakes to avoid

1. Coming across as judgmental or more enlightened (“I read a commentator who said something interesting about how natural immunity protects against COVID”.....” or “I think their criticism of some of the models that have been put forth to predict climate change have some validity even if I don’t agree with their solution.”)
2. Coming across as defensive for the other side (DON’T SAY: “Why are you being so nasty to them?”)
3. Coming across as contemptuous of both sides—being cynical or questioning is not depolarizing.
4. Getting caught up in defending particular leaders or fringe groups who are skeptics of science. Focus on what is being said about the broad swath of people on the other side.

Listen, Acknowledge, *Pivot*, offer Perspective: LAPP

Listen for the other person’s values and emotions influencing the stereotyping, ridicule or contempt—often it’s from frustration, fear, worry for the country or groups in the country, or personal experiences of being put down by people on the other side. When there are strong emotions, there’s a deeper story there.

Acknowledge what you are hearing and agree with whatever you can agree with, usually the position or concern being shared, while avoiding agreeing with the stereotyping of people on the other side.

“I hear you and I’m also very troubled by....”

- the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere
- how politicized the issue of climate change has become

Pivot: After listening and then acknowledging at least once, signal a shift in your part of the conversation. Pivoting offers a context for why you are introducing another perspective. Be personal here, with I-statements. So, after another “I’m with you on...” say something about yourself that leads you to offer another perspective.

“I’ve been realizing that I am so angry at those skeptical about science that I’ve stopped trying to understand them.” Can I share more?

“OR

“I read a really good article on how to talk with skeptics about climate change, especially when I get frustrated. Can I tell you about it?”

When you pivot, don’t include your perspective on the issue or on the people on the other side. Think of pivot as signaling that you are going to make a left or right turn in your car; the actual turn comes later.

Perspective: Offer a depolarizing viewpoint. Here are five kinds of perspective comments:

1. “I’ve been learning that while many people understand that climate change is real, they may have different ideas about how fast it is happening or how we should solve it.
2. It’s more complicated. “I have learned to see more complexity in why some people support or oppose vaccine or mask mandates... It’s not just because they are uninformed.
3. Different backgrounds and experiences. “It’s easy for me to judge others for not supporting science but I’m aware that I’ve not been in their shoes.”
4. Our side is not perfect. “Our side has at times gotten our modelling on climate change incorrect..”
5. Not useful to dismiss them. “ I’ve come to the conclusion that we’re going to have to understand and respect each other more if we’re going to solve our country’s challenges.”

Expect a Pushback and Repeat LAPP (after a “Yes, but” or “Wait a minute. Are you defending...?”

- You may have to go through multiple rounds of LAPP skills before the other person takes in your depolarizing perspective.
- You may have to reassure the person that you are indeed a true member of their in-group and that you share many common values and concerns.
- If you sense no openness to your depolarizing perspective, summarize it one more time and move on. If you escalate, you’ll start polarizing with this person and undermine your message.

Part 5: DEMO- COVID vaccines

SKILLS: Paraphrasing, Clarifying, Acknowledging/Agreeing, Pivot, Perspective

SKILL	Speaker	Phrase
	Depolarizer	Hi Steve, I’m glad we could get together today for an outdoor lunch. I’ve just got my second COVID booster. I feel like I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and we are finally putting COVID behind us. .

	Polarizer	I'm happy you feel good about the vaccine and boosters. I'm frustrated that we continue to have so many ignorant people who refuse to get vaccinated.
Acknowledge	Depolarizer	I hear you. It is frustrating when people don't want to get vaccinated. Can you tell me more about what you're feeling? I really want to understand where you are coming from.
	Depolarizer	Can you tell me more about what you're feeling? I really want to understand where you are coming from.
	Polarizer (still angry)	(sigh) I don't know where to begin. For one thing, people don't seem to realize that getting the vaccine and boosters can prevent severe disease, including hospitalization and death. And they are putting people who are immunocompromised at risk! They are totally selfish! Why don't they listen to the experts?
Acknowledge Pivot	Depolarizer	I agree with you that I wish they would listen to the experts and recognize that getting vaccinated is the healthiest choice. PAUSE. I read an interesting article about why people don't follow science. Can I share what I learned? PAUSE.
	Polarizer (calmer)	Sure, go for it.
Perspective	Depolarizer	I learned that anytime there is uncertainty, like assuming that the vaccine will prevent COVID and then seeing people get sick even if they have been vaccinated and boosted, can affect people's trust in science.
	Polarizer (more calm)	That makes sense. It's true that things could have been handled better in how we communicated uncertainty about COVID to the public.
Perspective	Depolarizer	I've also been reading that really listening to others who are "skeptical" and being curious about their points of view, can promote trust. I'm trying to get better at that.
	Polarizer	That's interesting. I would like to hear more about what you are reading. I wonder if any of what you are reading could help me talk with my Uncle Fred when I see him on Labor Day weekend at our family reunion.

Part 6: Activity: Practice Depolarizing Skills

Scenario Assume the scenario of a large climate rally - lots of science and environmental advocates meeting together. There will be a large range of polarized attitudes in such a meeting.

Prompt for Acknowledgment:

“We have only a few years before the climate crisis becomes irreversible. Those who refuse to act upon the urgency of the climate crisis are putting so many lives in danger, especially people who don’t have resources to recover from hurricanes, floods, and fires that are forced on them. Those crazies willfully ignore the science while they drive their SUVs through the hamburger drive-thru line! “

Prompt for Pivot:

“I’m glad you agree with me about this. Those people are basically heartless about the state of the planet we are leaving to our grandchildren.”

Model response:

“I used to feel that way. But recently, I read an interesting article on this topic and gained a new insight. Can I share with you what I’ve been learning?”

Part 7: Final Thoughts: A Long-Term Perspective on Being a Depolarizer

1. Being a depolarizer is not just being high-minded. It’s also being pragmatic about the future. Useless to be polarized as a strategy for change. Things will not change if you are polarized.
2. Your depolarizing influence in your social circles is apt to occur over time, not necessarily in any individual conversation or with every individual. If you come across as genuine and use your skills, people will remember what you said and think about it.
3. A long-term goal could be to be able to explain the other side’s views in such a way that they would say, “You got it.” This requires reading, listening, and suspending disbelief long enough to understand the worldviews and policy views of people you differ with. (That’s why it’s a long-term goal for those who decide to embrace it.)
4. If you really want to take a road less traveled, practice identifying your skeptic. Make sure you see these as positive aspects of you, Be genuinely curious. The lesson: the “Other” resides in me as part of what I value about myself.