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Tap into Social Identities and Affiliations

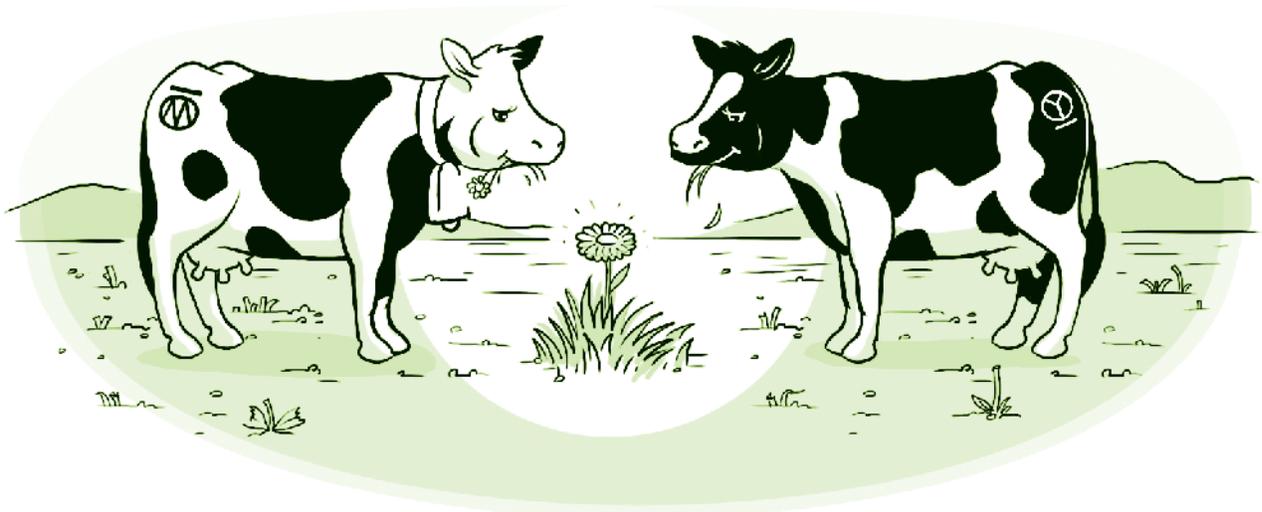
The Tragedy of the Commons theory is as old as Aristotle, who said: **“That which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it.”**

WHAT IS THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS?

The tragedy of the commons presents a conflict over resources between individual interests and the common good. Commons dilemmas describe conflicts resulting from free access and unrestricted demand for a finite natural resource. This ultimately threatens the resource

and leads to exploitation. The benefits of exploitation go to individuals, each of whom is motivated to maximize his or her use of the resource, while the costs of exploitation are distributed among all who share the resource.⁵⁴ Overfishing of the world’s fish populations and pollution of the earth’s atmosphere are modern day examples of a “tragedy of unmanaged commons.”

Environmental decisions pose a similar dilemma to the tragedy of the commons scenarios, in that an individual’s benefit may or may not be the same as what benefits society. In other words, deciding to engage in behaviors that help mitigate climate change, a benefit for society, may seem more of a cost than a benefit to the individuals who would engage in them, at least in the short term. Climate change communicators need to recognize this dichotomy and address it by tapping into



multiple identities in their audiences, creating a sense of affiliation with each other, the environment, and the society that enjoys the benefits of its natural resources.

HOW TO TAP INTO GROUP IDENTITY TO CREATE A SENSE OF AFFILIATION AND INCREASE COOPERATION

An individual comprises numerous roles and identities, each of which has its own set of goals. In any given situation, an individual may call into play multiple identities (household member, town resident, CEO, parent, member of religious organization), even when the goals of the various identities may conflict with each other. To resolve that conflict, an individual has to decide which identity is most relevant in a situation.⁵⁵ The strength of affiliation that someone feels toward other members of a group (or the people that may be affected by a decision) can determine which identity that person chooses to apply in a particular situation.

When people make decisions, they recognize the situation, their identity in that situation, and the rules that are most appropriate given the situation and their chosen identity.⁵⁶ CRED research suggests that group affiliation may influence whether an individual decides to cooperate in a group decision or not for several reasons:⁵⁷

- Group affiliation can activate social goals (i.e., concern for others, maximizing the good of the group);
- Participating in a group allows group norms to exert a stronger influence on individuals;
- Participating in a group also leads to greater intrinsic reward for individuals when group goals are achieved.

People who feel an affiliation with a group are thus more likely to cooperate in environmental decisions, such as joining a town's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Further, people may continue such behaviors due to the "reward" found in helping the group reach its climate change goals, as demonstrated in the example on the right. Although any appeal to group identity

EXAMPLE

CRED Lab Experiment on Group Affiliation and Cooperation

CRED researchers designed an experiment to measure the effect of social goals, in particular the effect of affiliation on cooperation.⁵⁹ Students were split randomly into four-person groups (analogous to four large greenhouse gas emitters). The researchers created different levels of affiliation among the group members (temporary, short-lived connections). Groups then played a game that rewarded those who chose to defect rather than cooperate. CRED researchers found the following: that as affiliation increased, so did cooperation; that affiliation made social goals (e.g., the concern for others) a greater priority; and that the added benefit of cooperation more than made up for the sacrifice (in this case: monetary sacrifice). Students reported that they felt good about cooperating. Communicators who want to promote cooperation should try to activate social goals by integrating social and economic goals and by emphasizing an affiliation among group participants.

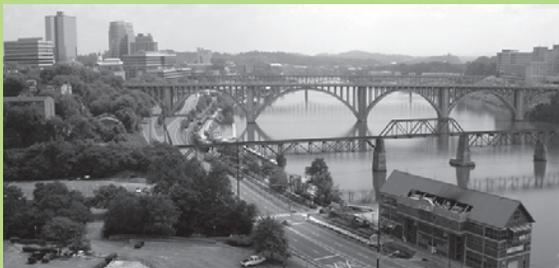
CRED research also suggests that local "messengers" (both individuals and institutions) may be more likely to get a response for calls to action on climate change than emissaries from distant locales. People are more likely to take action when they feel a strong sense of affiliation with the individual or institution making the request. Communicators from "out of town" may want to enlist someone locally known to help create a connection with their audience.

can help trigger group goals and cooperation, affiliations with smaller groups, such as a sorority or house of worship, can be stronger than those with larger groups, such as a political party or country.⁵⁸ Communicators will find it effective to create a sense of group affiliation within an audience, and they should try to find the most common yet smallest affiliation that the audience can identify with.

The example (below, left) illustrates the power of a local organization tapping into area residents' identity with the city to motivate new behaviors to help mitigate climate change. It also shows the importance of rewarding individual actions taken toward a group goal to reinforce such behaviors. The example (below, right) illustrates the power of tapping into social identities and creating "green" social norms.

EXAMPLE

Knoxville, Tennessee, Greens Up



Zereshk, commons.wikimedia.org

Knoxville's "Make Downtown Green, Block by Block" campaign achieved great success by drawing on city identity. The Knoxville Utilities Board (KUB) and the city of Knoxville, along with their initiative partners, engaged downtown residents and businesses to purchase 400 blocks of green power, representing the 400 city blocks of downtown Knoxville. Through the Tennessee Valley Authority's Green Power Switch program, KUB now provides downtown Knoxville with energy created by renewable resources. The city celebrated in the spring of 2009 with comments from the mayor and recognition of the downtown residents and businesses that participated. KUB distributed 400 dogwood saplings during the event in honor of these environmentally-committed customers. This campaign emphasized people's identity with the city, utilized local messengers, and acknowledged the participating members of the community, providing a social incentive for others to act.⁶⁰

EXAMPLE

The Energy Smackdown: Using Reality TV to Inspire Lower Energy Consumption

The Energy Smackdown, a reality television series, engages the greater public on the issue of climate change by showcasing what citizens of a community can do to reduce their own energy consumption. In season two, teams of households from three different communities in Massachusetts—Arlington, Cambridge, and Medford—competed to see which community could make the biggest energy reduction over 12 months. The "challenges" included biking to work, weatherizing their homes, eating locally grown food, and replacing shower fixtures and light bulbs with eco-friendly alternatives—all simple steps for the greater American audience to emulate. In addition, contestants were expected to talk to other community members about reducing carbon emissions. The first-place winners reduced their household consumption of energy by a whopping 73%. This contest simultaneously tapped into the contestants' identity within the household, the neighborhood, and the town and created new "green" social norms for all of the participating towns and possibly for viewers across America.



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