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How to Bridge the Climate Change Stalemate

Research Focus on Sustainability, Management and Organizations featuring Andy Hoffman

In a new book, Michigan Ross Professor Andy Hoffman explains how to have a more productive conversation about climate change.

The public discourse on climate change has become polarizing — so much so that two-thirds of Americans won’t bring up the subject in polite company.

Is there a better way to approach the subject? Michigan Ross Professor Andy Hoffman thinks so. His new book *How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate* (Stanford University Press) shows how we got to this point and how to lead a more engaging discussion. The social side of climate change and the role of academics in public debates are both topics of Hoffman’s recent research.

“If you think hitting people with more data and science will fix the issue, it won’t,” says Hoffman, Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise and director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise. “You need to understand where people are coming from when they resist what science says about climate change.”

https://michiganross.umich.edu/rtia-articles/how-bridge-climate-change-stalemate
That’s because what started as scientific research is now part of the culture war. The majority of people who identify as Democrat believe climate change is real. The majority who identify as Republican do not.

Hoffman says this is a natural result when scientific conclusions challenge beliefs and behaviors. Public opinion often lags scientific consensus in those cases. For example, it took the public decades to believe that cigarettes increased cancer risks.

“It’s really about how we process information,” Hoffman says. “We look at things through our own filter. We all do it. Right now, conservatives tend to do it with the reality of climate change and liberals tend to do it with the safety of eating GMOs. Both opinions go against the scientific consensus.”

To avoid the shouting matches, Hoffman spells out ways to have a more informed discussion:

- **Don’t judge.** When somebody tells you their opinion, listen first. Don’t start your science lecture. Instead, start thinking about where they are coming from. Why are they resisting?
- **Recognize people’s values.** “In negotiations, we teach people to negotiate about interests, not positions,” Hoffman says. “You can come up with a price, but the real discussion is about what’s behind that price.” With climate change, people resist the science for a host of reasons that include distrust of environmentalists or scientists, fear of bigger government, even a threat to their belief in God.
- **Frame messages and solutions in a way that a particular audience can accept.** When speaking with evangelicals, talking about our role as stewards of God’s creation is a better way to start. Keep in mind that liberals tend to gravitate toward community solutions while conservatives tend to focus on the individual.
- **Business leaders respond to ideas about market shifts.** For example, climate change will affect any company that needs fresh water, such as agribusiness. It will also influence public policy in a way that impacts business.

“In every debate, the loud extremes dominate,” Hoffman says. “The way to tone it down is not to engage the extremes — neither the climate change contrarians nor the alarmists. The vast majority are undecided. If we focus on them, I think the polarizing will be temporary.”