

# FOSTERING READINESS FOR CLIMATE ACTION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

By Joanna Burris, for RRU Climate Week 2024

## Project team

I worked on this project during my MACAL internship placement at Dalhousie University, under the supervision of Dr. Teri Balser.

## Defining the Problem

There is currently a gap between municipal climate commitments and action across Canada.<sup>1</sup> According to Cappell et al. (2022), “[M]unicipal employees are passionate about these issues and want to be a part of the solution, but many of them have no training in dealing with climate change, understanding how climate change will impact their work, or identifying the best solutions to reduce emissions.” Additionally, in many smaller municipalities, climate action work is often conducted within a single department, and sometimes by a single employee.

Based on my experience and conversations with my peers across the country, a significant part of the challenge is getting staff from across the entire organization to understand that climate change is relevant to their jobs and how to integrate climate considerations into their work.

## Theories of Change

### Organization level

“**IF** the organization fosters an organizational cultural that prioritizes climate literacy and shifts the responsibility of climate action from one individual/department to the entire workforce, **THEN** a municipality has the enabling conditions for meaningful climate action.”

### Individual level

“**IF** municipal employees are educated about climate science, engaged in shared discussions about climate change with their colleagues, and trained on its relevance to their jobs, **THEN** they will begin to integrate climate considerations into their work.”

## Project goals

Encourage a shift in organizational culture to better enable impactful and systemic climate action at the local level.

Encourage municipal staff from all departments to consider climate change in their work.

Support individuals to face and work through ambivalence, anxiety, and fear about climate change.

Bridge the gap between municipalities' climate goals and their capacity to achieve them.

Shift the responsibility of climate action from one person or one department to the entire organization.

Create a shared understanding of climate change among employees and develop shared language to talk about it.

Build a sense of collective agency among employees.

## Research Findings

I conducted desktop research on a number of topics to fill my knowledge gaps and help inform our approach to the workshop. Here are some key findings:

- Most of the existing climate training resources available for municipal staff are online modules and courses for individuals.
- Key themes that recognized institutions include in climate literacy educational materials, such as the difference between climate and weather, how the Earth's energy & climate systems work, the causes of climate change, and evidence of human impact.
- Adult learners have life experience and knowledge to contribute, are goal-oriented, and benefit from a participatory approach.<sup>2</sup>
- Messaging about climate should include three parts: the challenge, the pathway, and the benefits.<sup>3</sup>

## Interviews

I conducted three interviews and one focus group to ground-truth the proposed workshop format and content to ensure it aligns with the needs of municipal government employees and addresses the real-world barriers to climate action they experience.

A few key outcomes from these consultations included:

### Validation of proposed method & goals New ideas & insights

- The workshop could fit into a climate action plan planning process to foster staff buy-in.
- Employees will be more eager to engage in climate action if they have a sense of ownership.
- Climate considerations fall by the wayside when there are urgent issues to address.
- Few communities have a formal process for applying a climate lens to decisions.
- The perceived expense of climate action is common cause of inaction.

## Next Steps

- Work with Dr. Balser to develop a learning plan for workshop delivery.
- Develop participant survey and workshop evaluation criteria to evaluate impact, as well as a facilitator guide.
- Curate a library of relevant resources to provide to participants.
- Run a pilot workshop with an NS municipality.
- Refine the workshop based on pilot and participant feedback.
- Apply for funding and seek delivery partner(s).
- Roll out a series of workshops across Canada.

## Want to learn more?

Watch my full presentation about this project [HERE](#).

## Workshop Design

### Audience

The audience for this workshop is employees of municipalities of any size located anywhere in Canada. The workshop is designed for municipalities that have struggled to make meaningful progress on their climate action goals and that have not fully integrated climate considerations into all departments and activities.

### Format

12-15 participants — a group size small enough for full group discussions but large enough to be divided into 3-4 smaller groups for activities.

In-person, when possible, to encourage relationship building and enable collaboration.

### Rationale for Workshop Approach

Because the workshop is intended to encourage communication and collaboration among staff and between departments, each session will include a blend of employees from each department. They will develop a shared understanding of climate issues and a shared language that will empower them to continue the conversation after the workshop.

Working with mixed groups will help to break down the silos that are prevalent in municipal government. Employees will be able to learn from one another and will develop a better sense of the ways climate issues cross departmental boundaries.

## References

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