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The Time is Now – Accelerating Climate Change Action

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Elevating Organization-Wide Capacity and Culture on Climate Change is Paramount

So your CEO, Mayor, President, Council or Governor has made an ambitious climate change commitment. Maybe you've gotten a science-based target announced, an aspiration for 100% renewables, and/or a scope 3 emissions goal. Congratulations! You're feeling pretty good ... ready to lead your organization to achieving these goals and then some ... and you should, because it took a LOT to get you this far.

For 13 years, I've written and spoken publicly about the army of qualified, competent and motivated professionals it will take to tackle this challenge. I've had the most senior officials at the White House tell me that civil servants were excited to tackle the executive order mandates on sustainability, and corporate C-suite executives preach their climate and sustainability accomplishments to date.

And here we are, in 2021, and I'm hearing that globally, we are nowhere near achieving the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement ideals of limiting climate change to 1.5 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels. Note, this is the threshold that the credible science community has said we need to meet to maintain a sustainable climate and viable ecosystems upon which our businesses, communities, infrastructure, and security are dependent.

In looking at the commitments made by nations around the world and their implementation strategies/activities, I personally believe we are likely on a 2.5 or 3 degree Celsius pathway by 2100 unless there is a radical transformation in our response trajectory. If I'm right about this, that scenario would result in \$45-50 trillion dollar impact to global GDP according to numerous projections by economists, financial services industry experts and the IPCC. Every nation, business and community will experience their own share of this impact. Some will be far worse than others, but in an economy that is truly global in nature, nobody escapes the impacts.

So what should we do? How do we accelerate and magnify our greenhouse gas reduction efforts to minimize the warming effect? And given that the number of extreme climate events has already, and is continuing to, increase in frequency and magnitude, how do we scale up our capacity to adapt to the change and enhance our resilience to the extreme events that are increasing in frequency and magnitude?

It's actually fairly straightforward, isn't it?

We need to build motivation and capacity in our organizations at all levels of governance and implementation. We need to think about scaling a response with exponential results to reducing emissions, building adaptive capacity in communities, businesses and infrastructure, and resilience to these acute events. You want better policy and technology? The only way we get there is by building an army of professionals working competently and with determination to address climate mitigation and adaptation. Yes, we need hope and excitement. But we also need skills, knowledge, innovation, and perseverance, whether climate change is in the headlines or not. That doesn't just mean having a climate change or sustainability professional ... that means weaving climate change into the DNA of decision-making and practice across the board.

The Six Americas studies from Yale University (and other research around the world) show the fast-growing trend of people becoming alarmed and concerned about climate change. But that awareness is simply not enough to change behavior or spark collective action.

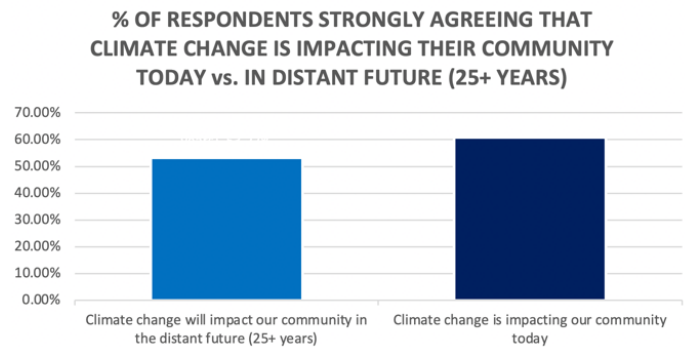
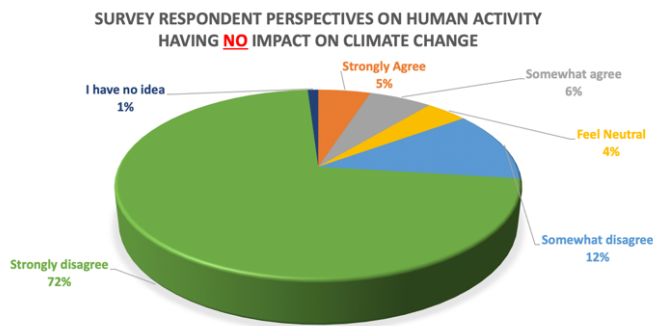
ACCO has done more research on governance, human capital and climate change than any organization in North America (and likely worldwide). Our research has included extensive assessments of climate change governance in higher education institutions, publicly traded companies, and government agencies. From 2016-2019, we conducted an extensive research project for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on workforce capacity in critical infrastructure sectors to develop and implement effective climate preparedness plans, and over the years, have worked extensively with peer professional societies to examine barriers and opportunities related to advancing our field of practice.

What We've Learned through Organization-wide Readiness Assessments

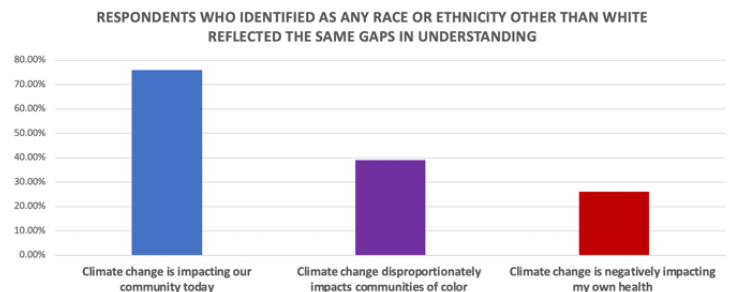
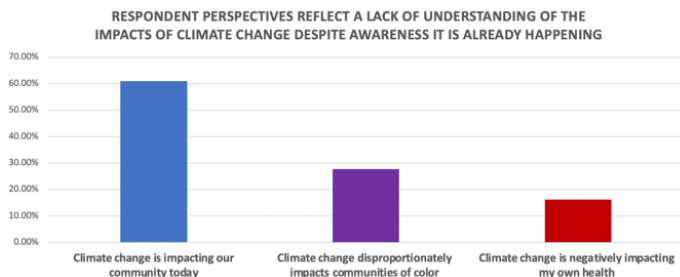
In the past 18 months, ACCO built upon our past research by conducting organization-wide readiness assessments that involved evaluating attitudes, behaviors, perspectives and knowledge of the workforce in large organizations with the support of their chief executives and human resources leadership. ACCO staff surveyed thousands of professionals in each organization, and supplemented that data with interviews of several dozen departmental/unit leaders in each organization. Here are some very compelling and interesting trends we have identified and sought to better understand.

Regardless of role, more than 70% of survey respondents indicate a strong disagreement with the statement that climate change is exclusively a natural activity with no human contribution.

Shockingly, nearly 8% more respondents felt strongly that climate change was impacting their community today than it would in the distant future (25+ years).



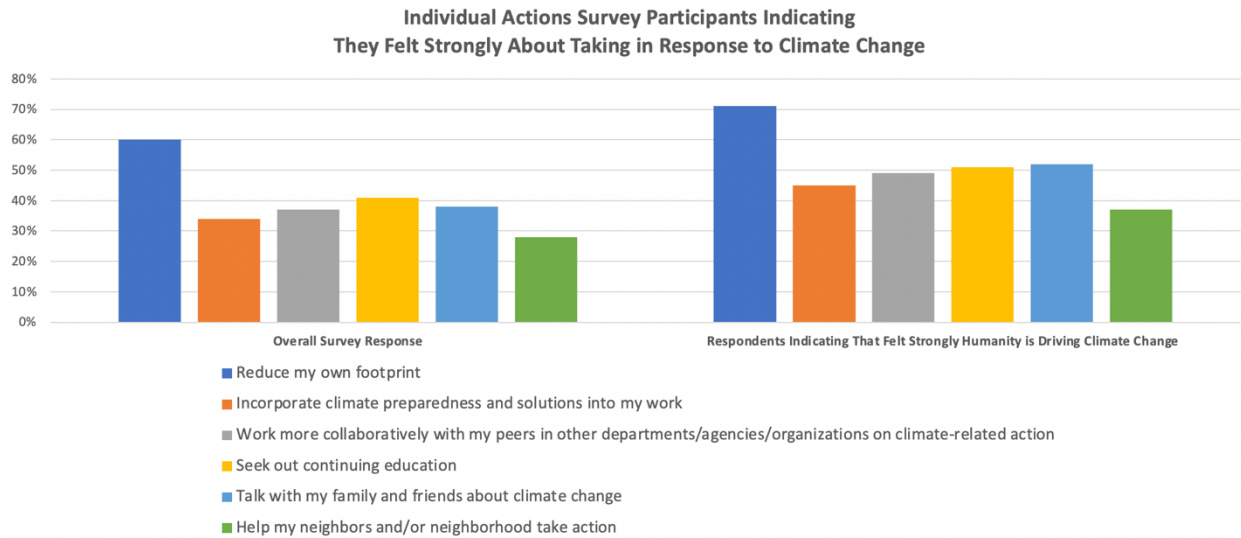
Despite a majority of respondents indicating that climate change was impacting their community today, only a small minority agreed strongly that climate change was disproportionately impacting communities of color, or even their own health. When we filtered the data for perspectives of individuals who identified as any race or ethnicity other than white or Caucasian, the trends reflecting the level of understanding of the impacts upon communities of color or their own health didn't change very much.



This should alarm you, but not surprise you. Awareness does not mean understanding of the implications. But as it turns out, awareness also does not mean that you will get the desired response.

We asked these respondents how they planned to respond to climate change individually. Across all surveys, approximately 60% of respondents indicated they would take steps to reduce their own footprint (e.g. turn off the lights, buy energy efficient products, use public transportation). This was only a small dropoff from those who recognized that humanity was causing climate change, so we were pleased to see that strong number.

BUT ... when we asked about specific things they could do professionally and their communities, the challenge became clear to us.

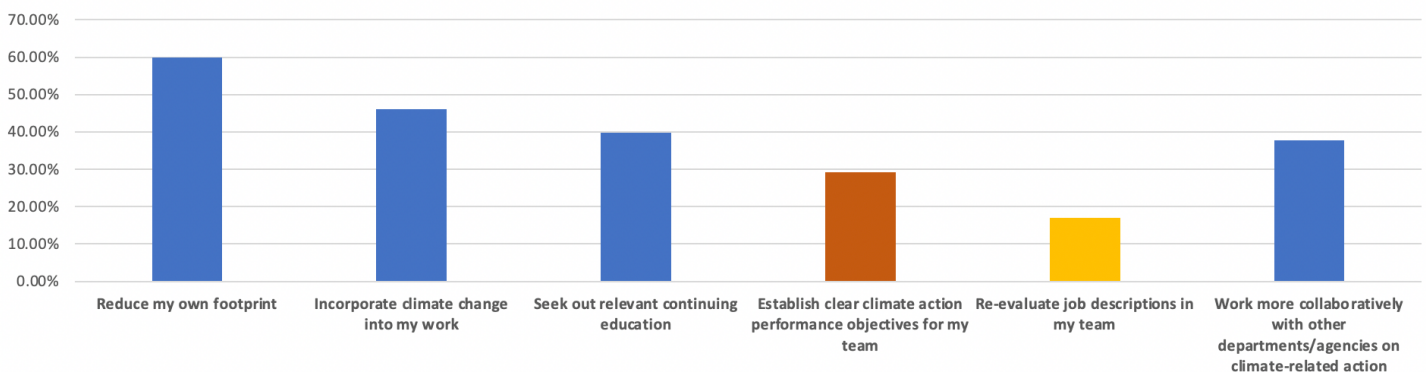


There are some crucially important takeaways in these findings:

- There is a steep drop off from the strong conviction of reducing an individual’s footprint to taking steps professionally to incorporate climate change into their work and in discussing with others.
- The plummeting figure of willingness to help neighbors and neighborhood take action is alarming, but not surprising given the political polarization of this topic.

Among senior personnel, we also noted the same trends reflected in the general workforce’s indications toward individual actions, but also a deficiency of actions that we believe leadership should be taking in organizations.

EVALUATING THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP RESPONDENTS' PERSPECTIVES TOWARD ACTIONS THEY FELT STRONGLY ABOUT TAKING INDIVIDUALLY



We also asked the survey respondents if they were properly supported and equipped to work on climate change in the workplace. These responses highlight some of the most staggering and important perspectives we have seen. No organization we assessed had more than 10% of their senior leadership, mid-management and staff with climate-related technical responsibilities strongly agree with any of the following statements:

- “My employer provides sufficient tools and resources to incorporate climate change into my work”
- “I have authority to focus intently on climate change”
- “My employer provides opportunities for me to engage the community on climate change”
- “My work contributes positively to the [organization’s] climate change efforts”

The takeaway is simple ... despite substantial climate change commitments and initiatives, these organizations are simply not arming employees sufficiently with the skills, knowledge, tools, support and opportunities to participate at the level that we need to successfully meet the challenges posed by climate change.

Understanding the Individual’s Attitudes and Conviction

After we had concluded a few of these assessments, we consulted a group of sociologists and psychologists to help explain why someone was willing to reduce their footprint recognizing we need to take serious action, but wasn’t willing to take any of the other actions we had inquired about in the tables above.

Here are some of the example rationales and mentalities they theorized would likely explain the results:

- “It’s not my job”
- “I don’t have the skills, support or mandate to do this at work”
- “The politics around this are exhausting and uncomfortable”
- “Someone else will take care of it”
- “It will resolve itself”

These sentiments certainly validated our initial thoughts. But tackling these behaviors shouldn’t be rocket science. We know how to drive organizational change and address culture, attitudes and behavior – we’ve studied this and found practices and methodologies that support transformation. We need to apply these skills and practices toward climate action. And we have to establish sound governance and organizational cultures while finding the right leverage points for action and change.

Building a Culture for Climate Action

It’s time to mature beyond the legacy of past environmental efforts and beyond a relatively small group of people trying to solve a problem that requires an army. We simply won’t succeed with modest measures ... as the IPCC reported, we need to embark upon unprecedented transformation of our business operations, infrastructure and policy.

Regardless of the sector you’re in, here are some areas we’d encourage you emphatically to consider if you want to build a culture for sustained, strategic and effective climate action in your organization.

1. Governance: We know that large institutions across the public and private sectors have not sufficiently built the internal capacity to tackle climate change. The designated leadership for climate change, whether by committee or individual, is not senior enough. Every study we have conducted has reflected that reality and the sentiment of thousands of practitioners in the field who insist it is vital that this leadership function reside in the highest levels of the organization. Get the right person(s), with the right skills, and the right authority into position, and that’s an important step in the right direction.

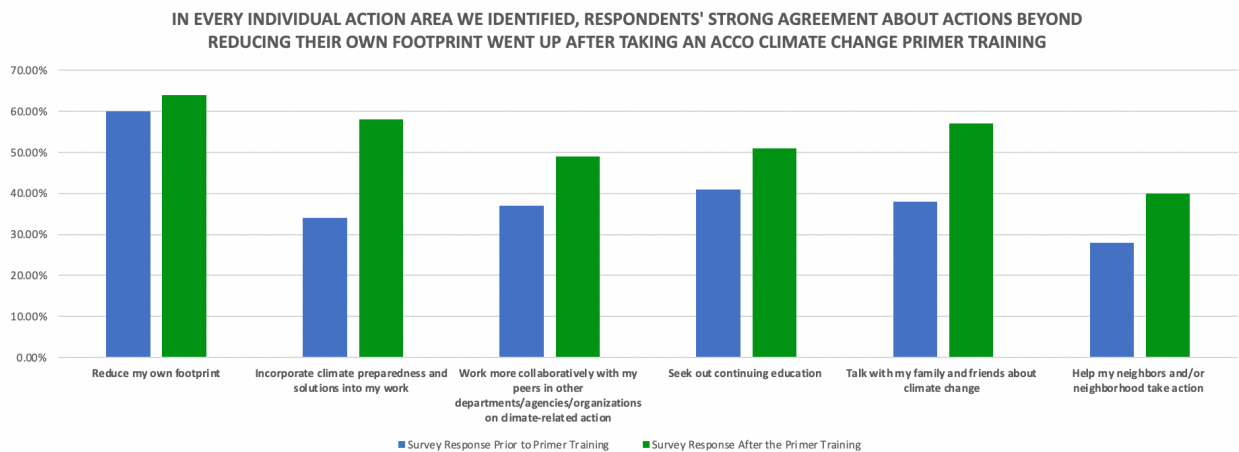
ACCO will be conducting a series of calls to action to CEOs, boards of publicly traded companies, elected officials, policymakers and human resources executives – a track at the CC-P Summit taking place in December is devoted to this topic.

2. Human Resources & Job Requirements: We have also learned that executives and human resources units have yet to understand the complexity and necessity of integrating climate change into job descriptions, performance evaluations and hiring qualifications. We need to focus intently on conducting an evaluation of what positions and roles need to have climate-related competencies ... and we need to institutionalize those skills. Don’t necessarily expect professional societies of fields like engineers, architects, financial professionals and energy management to lead the way ... while

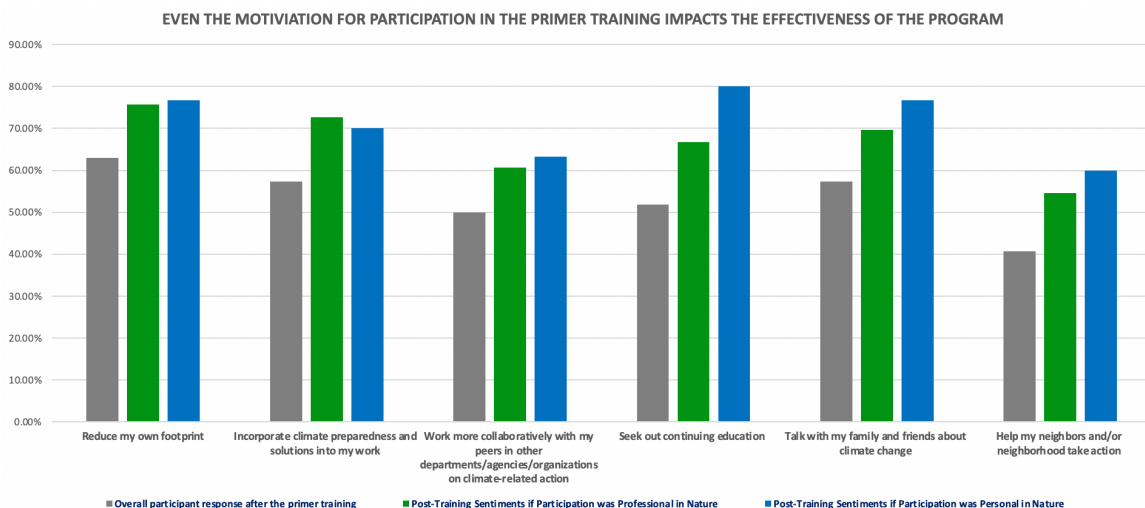
many of them are evaluating their codes of ethics and standards of professional conduct in the context of climate change ... and even more of them have membership committees and working groups focused on climate change and sustainability, the requirement for those fields to be competent in climate change in the context of their work is simply not there. Why not? Because the market (i.e. employers) is not demanding it, and they tend to be reflecting the status quo rather than setting the standard.

Climate change and sustainability professionals should be focusing intently on conversations with their human resources (HR) departments. ACCO is developing toolkits for HR professionals that include templates for performance review, important climate-related qualifications and responsibilities for key functions, practices for building employee morale and creating a culture of climate action.

3. Education & Training: It turns out that even a series of 5-7 minute microlearning videos and half-day/full-day primers for leaders can make a huge difference. Our survey of a group of 57 professionals who took a primer that was an abridged version of the Certified Climate Change Professional (CC-P) curriculum showed a jump in 10-25 percentage points in each of the individual action areas, thus substantially closing the gap from willingness to reduce one’s individual footprint to the other action areas we had inquired about. We had seen similar jumps in those data points in other training event polls we had conducted during this and a variety of other programs. While we fully intend to examine this in greater depth, we believe this approach is an effective tool to help.



Understanding and impacting the participants’ motivation for attending the training is important as well. Our data showed that if the individual genuinely felt a professional or personal motivation to participate, that the training was more likely to yield a strong motivation to take actions beyond reducing their own footprint (and it even increased the likelihood they would focus on their own footprint).



Creating a Culture for Successful Climate Action: Create a culture of dialogue and collaboration without judgment or politicization. Make working on climate change safe, fun and rewarding. Inform your personnel about what you're doing, get them involved, and get them excited. Newsletters, internal awards, town hall discussions and other similar approaches will make a huge difference.

Over the next year, ACCO will produce a series of reports evaluating in substantially greater depth the tactics and practices that yield the greatest results in building organizations that have the breadth, depth and culture to tackle climate change. We will also produce webinars and case studies sharing the insights of leading practitioners focusing specifically on these topics.

About ACCO

The Association of Climate Change Officers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization for executives and officials worldwide in industry, government, academia and the non-profit community. ACCO's mission is to define, develop and support the functions, resources and communities necessary for effective organizational leadership in addressing climate-related risks and opportunities. For more information about ACCO, please visit www.ClimateOfficers.org.

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