
CASE STUDY

ASSOCIATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE OFFICERS



PRESENTED BY
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Strategic Communications



ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE OFFICERS

Founded in 2008, the Association of Climate Change Officers (ACCO) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization that defines, develops, and supports the functions, resources, and communities necessary for effective organizational leadership in addressing climate-related risks and opportunities. ACCO serves as the premier professional development organization and cross-sector community of practice for individuals addressing climate change in their organizations' operations and mission.

ACCO membership spans multiple sectors including public and private corporations, municipal, state, regional and federal governmental organizations, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations. The organization advances climate officers by connecting members to peers, thought leaders, and decision makers across sectors while synthesizing research findings and producing industry-leading education and training events.

Central to ACCO's mission is the Certified Climate Change Professional (CC-P®) credential, a rigorous certification program designed for mid-level practitioners that reflects their dedication to professional development and competency in the fundamentals of climate change preparedness and strategic planning. The program requires mastery of core competencies including climate science and vulnerability assessment, greenhouse gas accounting, organizational governance and stakeholder engagement, and enterprise risk management.

THE CHALLENGE

ACCO's expertise was in teaching classes, seminars, hosting conferences, and developing an accreditation process to help civil servants, business people, and academics gain industry-recognized competency in climate change issues. Their participants included experts in public works and engineering, business leaders, and elected or appointed officials – all seeking expertise in climate change and related issues.

While their work had largely been successful, ACCO identified a gap in their training approach: while participants possessed deep technical knowledge, they struggled to communicate effectively about climate-related decisions without escalating political tension.

Specifically, the organization faced several communication challenges:

- Technical experts understood their domains well but lacked the skills to persuade decision-makers to make necessary investments based on climate projections and risk assessments
- Participants managed practical operational requirements daily while having to navigate highly politicized conversations about climate-related spending and priorities
- Training efforts had become insular, reinforcing existing knowledge among like-minded professionals rather than building capacity to communicate with broader, more diverse audiences

Acknowledging how fraught climate change communications can get, particularly when dealing with misinformation, ACCO decided that they needed to teach people how to communicate better and persuade others more effectively in the face of such challenges. However, this was particularly difficult because many participants operated on short-term political cycles or quarterly business reports while needing to make decisions with ROI measured on much longer time horizons.

Without addressing this communication gap, ACCO-trained professionals risked struggling to translate their technical expertise into the persuasive narratives needed to drive climate action in their organizations and communities.

MY APPROACH

After seeing my documentary work, ACCO approached me to discuss how I design narratives and tell stories that overcome political and cultural barriers around contested issues. The organization recognized they needed to move beyond their standard conference and seminar formats.

I proposed a custom solution role-playing exercises to address what I saw as the core issue: ACCO was teaching participants about climate communication, but wasn't giving them opportunities to practice actually communicating. The exercises were designed to put participants in realistic scenarios where they could develop and test their communication skills in a controlled environment.

MY METHODOLOGY INCLUDED:

- **Character Development:** Participants received detailed character descriptions with backstories, temperaments, priorities, and world views, requiring them to inhabit different perspectives and develop empathy for various stakeholder viewpoints.
- **Mock Town Hall Simulation:** The exercises replicated the community forums participants regularly encountered — public meetings, city council sessions, and budget hearings where they needed to defend decisions and respond to challenging questions.
- **Real-Time Coaching:** The format allowed for immediate feedback and course correction, with opportunities to retry approaches and experiment with different communication strategies.
- **Improvisational Techniques:** The exercises incorporated theater and improv principles, particularly the "yes and" approach that builds on ideas rather than shutting them down, fostering collaborative problem-solving.

My overall approach emphasized creating an engaging, enjoyable learning environment where participants learned more effectively because they were free to experiment and take risks, in contrast to more traditional training formats that are less conducive to this kind of exploration that forces us from our comfort zones.



THE RESULTS

THE ROLE-PLAYING EXERCISES DELIVERED SEVERAL OUTCOMES:

- **Enhanced Communication Skills:** Participants learned to identify trusted messengers, avoid hot-button rhetoric that might inflame tensions, mind their body language, and engage in collaborative solutions processes. They also developed the emotional intelligence necessary to understand, empathize with, and build better messaging around different perspectives – especially those of skeptical audience members, colleagues, stakeholders, and constituents.
- **Increased Confidence:** People who were typically reticent when speaking publicly, especially about controversial positions, gained courage and found their voices in the supportive environment.
- **Improved Training Format:** ACCO achieved a level of participant education that had not been possible with their standard conference or seminar style approaches to climate change communication.

These exercises taught participants not just public speaking, but how to read a room, understand their audience, and tailor nuanced messages depending on who they're addressing – all essential skills for people in positions of authority dealing with climate-related decisions.



KEY INSIGHTS

This project reinforced several lessons about effective communication training:

- **Narrative Foundations:** All progress requires an understanding that narrative is the foundation for advancement, especially for those in positions of authority who have the responsibility to master basic communication skills.
- **Experiential Learning:** Role-playing exercises that require participants to step into different perspectives build emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity more effectively than theoretical instruction.
- **Preparedness for Spontaneity:** Real-world communication involves unexpected moments. Training must prepare participants for "yes and" situations where they need to adapt quickly while maintaining productive dialogue.
- **Safe Practice Environments:** Creating spaces where people can experiment, make mistakes, and try different approaches builds confidence that translates to real-world situations.
- **Personal Connection:** Effective communication doesn't happen in a vacuum; it relies on nuanced, in-the-moment interactions. There is no substitute for looking someone in the eyes, reading their emotional state, and responding to their demeanor in real time.

The work with ACCO demonstrated that when organizations face communication challenges around contested topics, simulation-based training provides a practical alternative to traditional lecture-based approaches. The method works because it mirrors the actual stakeholder dynamics participants encounter spontaneously in their professional roles, giving them tools they can immediately apply when they return to their municipalities, agencies, and organizations.

ABOUT ROGER SORKIN

I AM A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT...

...who specializes in helping organizations communicate effectively when business interests intersect with contested public issues like sustainability, climate, infrastructure, defense, public health, and more.

My work includes developing communication strategies, designing simulation exercises that prepare teams for high-stakes discussions, coaching executives on media and stakeholder engagement, and producing content and messaging that build narrative cohesion.

If you're facing communication challenges in a complex environment and need guidance or support, please send an email to roger@rogersorkin.com or check out www.rogersorkin.com to learn more about how I could be of assistance.

