Climate Change Engagement & Communications Practice Review

A summary resource

Purpose of this summary

This summary highlights key insights from the Climate Change Engagement and Communications Practice Review, undertaken in 2023.

It includes the research findings that we believe will be most relevant to practitioners seeking guidance to support engagement with communities around climate change and its impacts on bushfire risk.

While this summary has been developed from the Practice Review, its focus is on the development of a process called the Climate Reflective Practice, rather than the detailed findings of the Review. The concepts and applications outlined in this summary are being tested in regional settings in partnership with local communities and agencies.

We encourage readers to explore the work further in the Practice Review.

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands in Victoria from which we gathered to collaborate on this work. We honour and respect Elders past and present, their deep enduring relationship to Country, and the significance of the knowledge, wisdom, and stories that this generates for ongoing cultural practices and connections.

01/ Who is this summary for?

This summary is for land and fire agency practitioners working with communities around bushfire risk and preparedness within a changing climate.

It provides essential evidence-based insights and principles from the Climate Change Engagement and Communications Practice Review. It can be used to support practice adaptation and skills development, enabling us to work more effectively and collaboratively when addressing the complexities and uncertainties of climate change and its impacts on bushfire risk.

Climate Reflective Practice, developed through this work combines research with practitioner insights to prompt reflection during engagement, and the application of behavioural communication principles.

It considers the interaction of community-based social values with the biophysical impacts of climate change on bushfire risk.

02/ What does this mean for bushfire agencies and communities?

Climate change is causing more frequent and extreme weather events and climate-related disasters worldwide.

This results in increased severity and impact of heatwaves, droughts, rainfall, floods, and bushfires.

These changes will affect our health and well-being, economies, livelihoods, infrastructure, and societies. In Victoria, higher temperatures and reduced rainfall during the cooler seasons have already been observed. These conditions are expected to worsen according to climate change projections. Fire risk is changing as the overall drivers of fire change: weather, fuel, dryness, and ignition.

Understanding the influence of climate change on bushfires and the implications for bushfire management is complex.

As seen through the care of Country by First Nations people, fire has been a natural part of Australia's ecosystem for millions of years.

There is evidence that changes in vegetation due to colonial management practices and suppression of Aboriginal burning practices have contributed to more shrub cover and less grassy understories, increasing bushfire risk in forest and woodland areas across Victoria. Aboriginal-led cultural land and fire management practices play a significant role in healing Country, which could reduce bushfire risk. This is alongside partnerships with land and fire organisations.

Climate change is adding to the complexity and uncertainty for communities and for the response of land and fire agencies.

As bushfire risk changes, it is critical to develop ways of engaging, supporting, and enabling both agency and community preparation and response to these changes.

The growing occurrence of these extreme weather events means that the emergency services sector needs a greater diversity of engagement and partnership practices to adaptively navigate the relationships they have with communities around the impact of climate change.

The resources outlined in this summary will support us to better understand what is important to communities, to inform the relationships we have with communities and each other, to draw on diverse sources of experience and knowledge to adapt our engagement practice, and to better utilise behavioural insights in how we work together and with communities.

How we engage with communities about climate change and the decisions we make together to take action is central to how we manage bushfire risk into the future.

Climate Reflective Practice

**Four loops to reflect on working with communities around climate change.**

Climate Reflective Practice is an approach to support engagement with communities around climate change and bushfire risk.

It prompts critical reflection on how we are engaging with communities, and is a starting point for adapting practice in response to the complexity and uncertainty of climate change. It is not prescriptive, but rather provides guidance in using reflection and learning processes to tailor engagement to local context and needs.

It is organised into four iterative loops which are designed to inform each other.

Biophysical and social change in bushfire and climate change.

Type of relationship between agencies and communities.
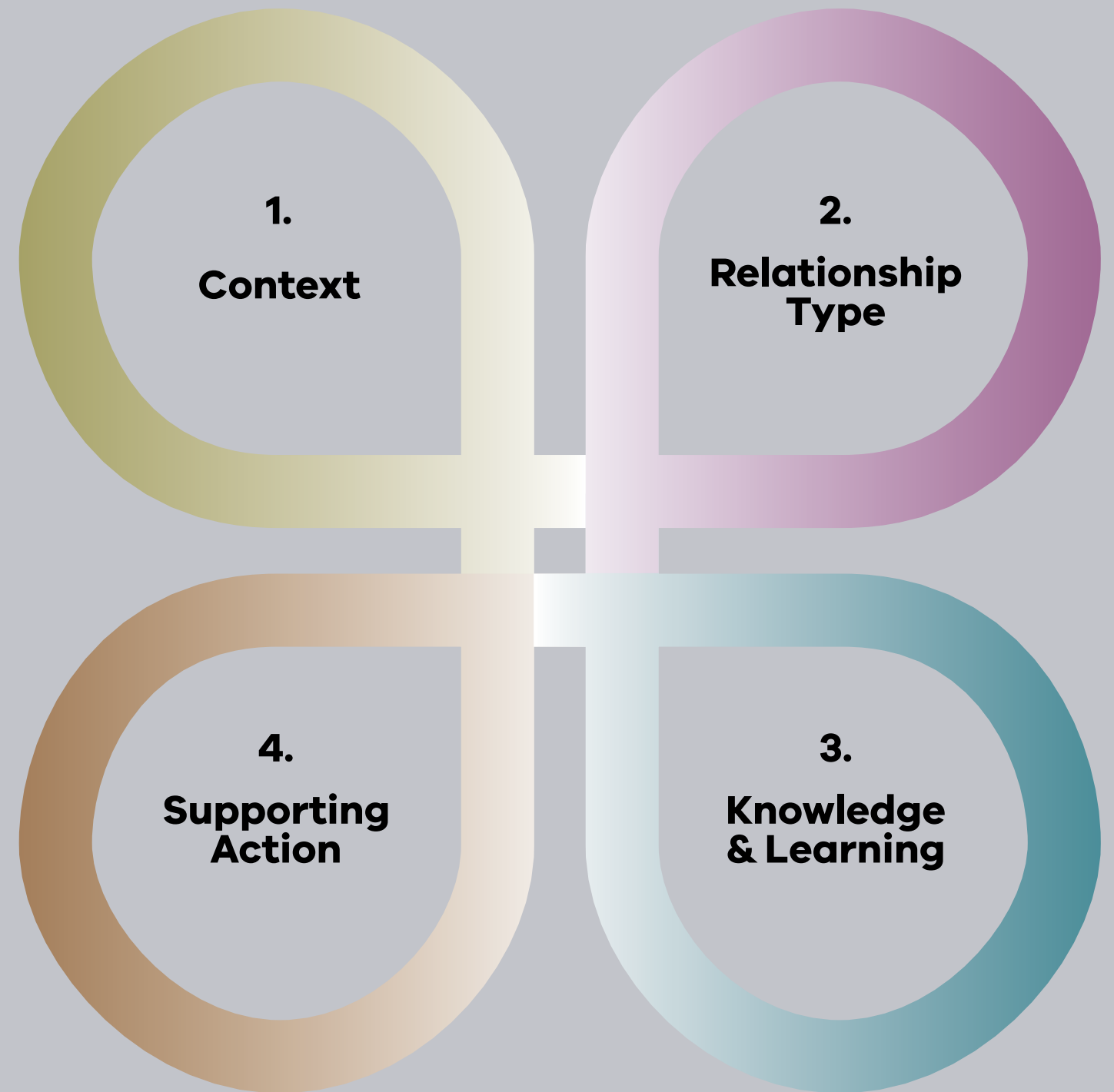
1.

Context

2.

Relationship Type

4.

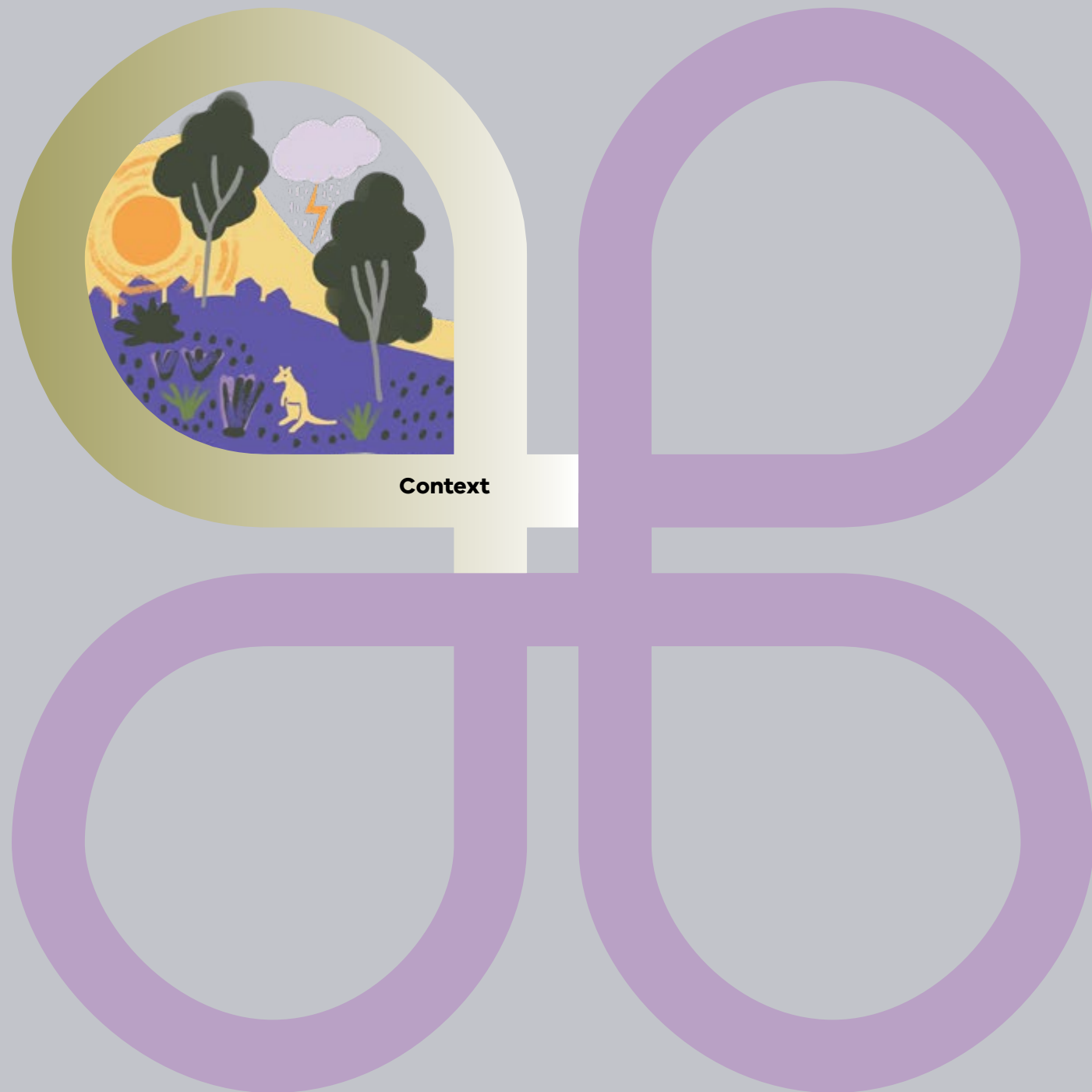**Supporting Action**

3.

Knowledge & Learning

Principles for communications that aim to support behaviour change and knowledge sharing.

Community engagement principles for uncertainty and change.

Context

Biophysical and social change in bushfire and climate change.

Context

How is climate change impacting your community's bushfire risk and what they value?

The first loop of the Climate Reflective Practice is Context; to understand the known biophysical impacts of climate change on bushfire risk in Victoria. It links these impacts to the values that communities care about most in their environment.

How is climate change impacting bushfires in Victoria?

Climate change is increasing extreme fire weather, worsening seasonal drought severity, and leading to longer fire seasons. This is projected to worsen, presenting new challenges for bushfire management.

Weather

- Extreme hot, dry, and windy conditions and more frequent heatwaves are driving an increase in severe fires throughout Victoria.

- Longer fire seasons and changing opportunities for prescribed burning to reduce fuel load, means more dry vegetation for bushfire fuel.

- Fire weather in Victoria is expected to increase, with some areas experiencing a tripling in the number of 'Very High' fire danger days.

Key drivers of bushfires in Victoria

Fuel dryness

- Drought conditions from warmer temperatures and reduced cool-season rainfall are causing soil and vegetation to dry out. This creates more flammable fuels that are easier to ignite and carry fire.

- Climate change will likely continue to increase drier landscape conditions, leading to more extreme fire behaviour.

Fuel to burn

- The amount, structure and connectivity of vegetation is changing. Complex factors including higher carbon dioxide concentrations, warmer temperatures, rainfall patterns, fire, and competition from invasive species are all contributing to vegetation growth and fuel changes.

- Research indicates that colonial management techniques and the suppression of Aboriginal burning practices have altered vegetation, leading to more shrub cover and less grassy understories. This increases extreme bushfire risk in Victoria's forest and woodland areas.

Ignition source

- Ignitions are more common under severe dryness and fire weather conditions, whether from dry lightning or a range of human sources. As these conditions intensify, more ignitions are expected.

Weather conditions

Fuel to burn

Ignition source

Fuel dryness

Social values are useful for identifying and monitoring what is important to communities in responding to climate change and bushfire risk.

The term 'values' is used here as a general term to describe what is important to people and why. In the bushfire social ecological system, it helps us to understand how people relate to all aspects of their physical and social environment that can be affected by fire. These values include:

Natural environment
(biodiversity, carbon, water)

Human health
(life & physical health)

Human health
(mental health)

Infrastructure

Human relationships
(family, friends & community)

Community enjoyment of the natural environment

Animal welfare

Livelihoods & economy

GROCERIES

Local

Cultural and personal history and heritage – Indigenous

Cultural and personal history and heritage – non-Indigenous

Relationship Type

Type of relationship
between agencies and
communities.

Context

Relationship Type

What kind of relationships do agencies and communities want to form with each other?

The second loop of Climate Reflective Practice draws on the understanding that ongoing, trusting relationships are the basis for navigating short-term events such as bushfires and planned burning and long-term change, such as climate change.

Four relationship types with communities and stakeholder groups were identified, and each have varying practical applications depending on agency or community need.

Authoritative

Agency-led involves planned decision making where community has extremely limited roles. Framing and decision-making power is held by agencies. For example, evacuation and dissemination of information about fuel management.

Managerial

Echoes a top-down, command and control approach to governing and decision-making. It includes forms of community engagement and recognises diversity in communities but maintains agency control of decision-making. For example, Strategic Bushfire Management Planning processes.

Interactive

Participatory approaches where community have a greater role in defining institutions while supporting negotiation in the context of uncertainty and change. For example, Community Based Bushfire Management (CBBM) in which communities co-design decisions with agency.

Relational

Centres on building trust to facilitate inclusive and continuous discussions and actions among diverse communities. A relational approach involves shifting power away from the dominant agency-based worldview and embracing diversity within communities. Relational work is also focused on how we reflect the rights and needs of people and nature more equally.

Why this is important?

We need transparency in the kinds of relationship-types that are guiding agency practices. We can tailor community engagement practices to suit different relationship types, including short-term, operational decision-making and long-term work in contexts of uncertainty and complexity.

A mis-match in relationship type sought by community/stakeholders and agencies can be a source of tension and challenge.

How can you apply this?

• Identifying the type of relationship we are trying to form, indicated through policy, practice, guidelines.

• Considering the relationship type that communities or stakeholders are seeking.

• Identifying the relationship type that we are seeking by critically engaging with the practices, problem-framing and worldview that is guiding our work.

• Building trust by working with people who are trusted within their communities.

Want to learn more?

Learn more about how to apply these relationship types and helpful tools for relationship building in the Practice Review.
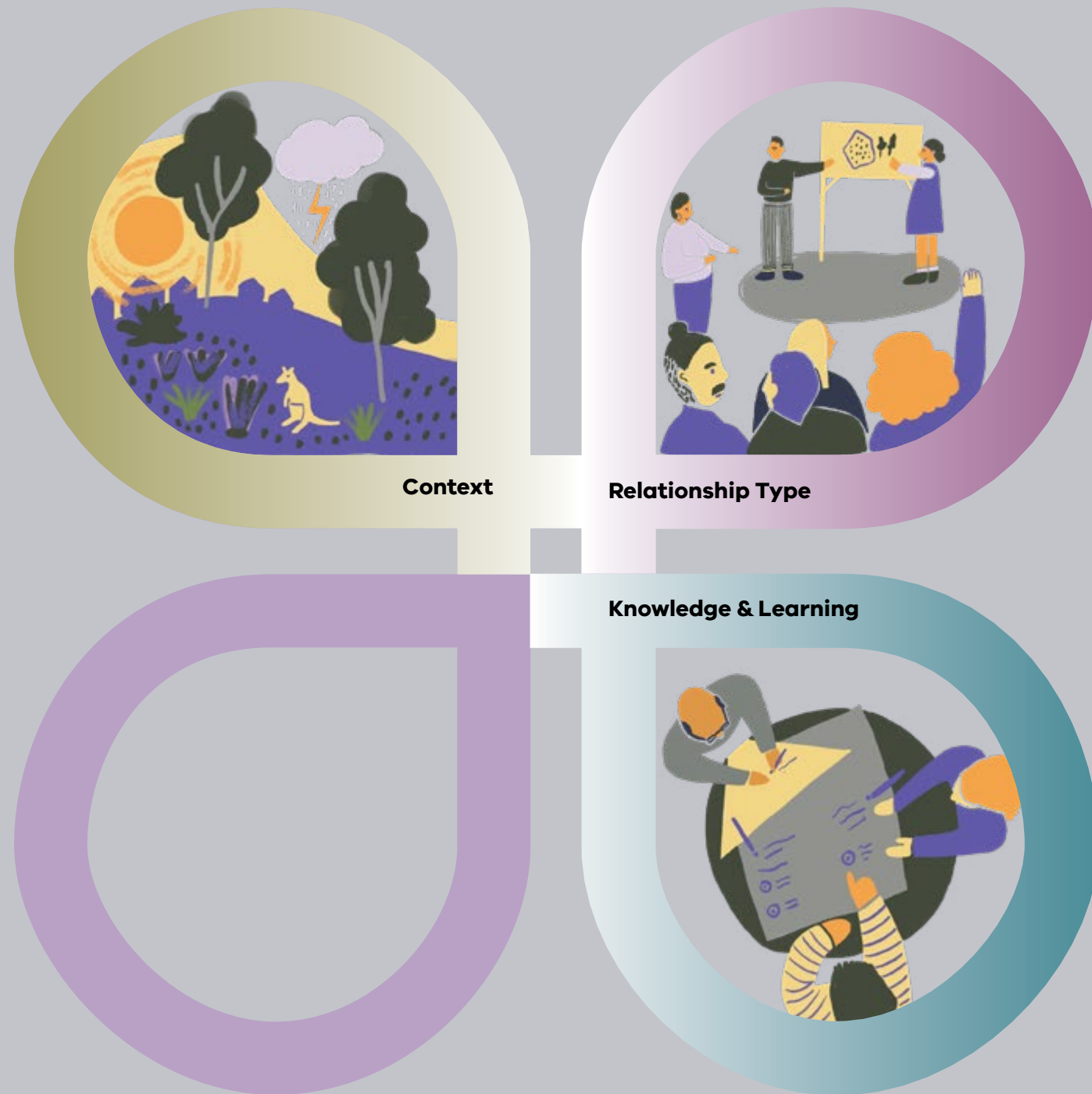
Access the Practice Review here.

Knowledge & Learning

Community engagement principles for uncertainty and change.

Context

Relationship Type

Knowledge & Learning

How will you work with your community to explore this complex environment?

In this loop, practitioners are encouraged to reflect on principles for community engagement in the context of uncertainty and change, and how these are incorporated in their own practice.

Why is this important?

Climate change creates uncertainties for land and fire agencies and communities. While we understand that it leads to shifting fire regimes and seasonal patterns, we can't predict the exact impact or timing of these events. This ongoing change challenges traditional organisational and engagement practices.

Principles

Principle 1
Incorporate local knowledge

What this means

Incorporating local knowledge, expressed through stories, values, and lived experience, along with science and modelling, builds trust and shared understanding, and leads to better decisions.

Why it's important

Local people have knowledge and experience about what will work in their landscapes. Incorporating local knowledge in decisions prevents agencies from missing this insight and also builds trust.

How can you apply this?

- Reflect on the assumptions that shape our engagement practice, and identify opportunities for learning and knowledge generation WITH local people.

- Acknowledge and value local experience as valid evidence to incorporate in decision-making.

Principle 2
Consider people's values and beliefs about forests, bushfires, and climate.

What this means

How people judge or interpret different climate actions by agencies depends on their values and beliefs about human-nature relationships.

How can you apply this?

Design engagement processes to explore peoples values, beliefs and ways of thinking.

Why it's important

Fire and land agencies face challenges with developing and planning ways to adapt to climate change that will be supported by communities.

Knowing people's values and beliefs can help to understand and respond to the varied levels of community support for climate adaptation and bushfire management activities, and to design relevant and meaningful engagement processes.

Principle 3

Riding the waves of uncertainty: Adaptive Doing and Adaptive Hope

What this means

Continuous change can be challenging for agencies and communities. Shifting our approach to focus on learning and adaptation can build and maintain hope in the face of growing uncertainty in issues such as climate change and bushfire.

Why it's important

Community engagement policy and practices are inherently underpinned by uncertainty. Working with communities can involve opportunities to develop a shared understanding of local concerns, context and expectations. However, there are few practices to support agencies in building this understanding.

How can you apply this?

Identify moments of disruption as opportunities to adapt your approach and practice through discussions with communities and colleagues.

Adaptive Doing

Community engagement and communication can be grounded in a process called Adaptive Doing. This is a collaborative process for learning and practice change that enables practitioners to engage with complex and uncertain circumstances to build a shared understanding of a context, such as bushfire and climate change governance.
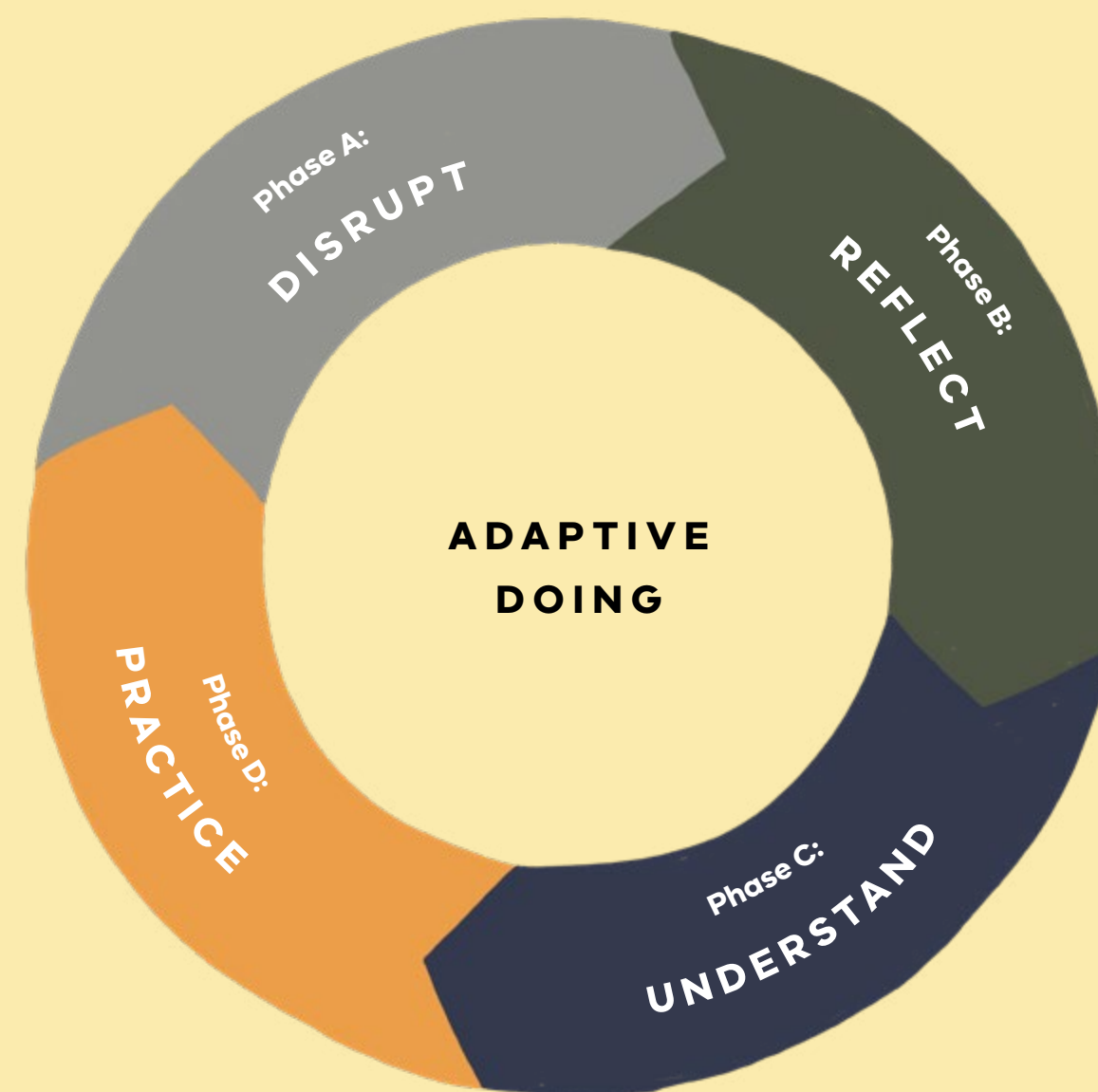
PHASE A: Disrupting the status quo
PHASE B: Critical reflection and discussion
PHASE C: Developing a shared understanding
PHASE D: Returning to practice

Adaptive Doing and Adaptive Hope: learning and practice change

We can also connect Adaptive Doing with Adaptive Hope, which suggests that we need ways to build and maintain hope in the face of growing change and uncertainty in issues such as climate change and bushfire.

Considerations around Adaptive Doing include recognising that:

- A shared understanding and adaptive practice can be critical for addressing social ecological change.

- Drawing on Adaptive Doing enables practitioners to recognise moments of disruption and change as opportunities for conversations.

- Uncertainty and climate change can be a source of grief and Adaptive Hope can support communities to find strategies for working with uncertainty.

Want to learn more?

Learn more about how to apply these principles in the Practice Review.

Access the Practice Review here.

Supporting Action

Principles for communications that
aim to support behaviour change
and knowledge sharing.

Context

Relationship Type

Supporting Action

Knowledge & Learning

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

**How can you communicate effectively with
communities to facilitate change?**

The fourth loop applies a behavioural
science lens to present principles for
communications that aim to support
behaviour change and knowledge sharing
within the context of bushfire preparedness
in climate change.

Why is this important?

These principles focus on elements within communications that can enhance their effectiveness, rather than the communication medium or method of engagement. They can be approached flexibly based on the nature of the relationship between the person communicating and the community.

Keep things action focused and achievable

What this means

When engaging with community about topics like bushfires, it's more effective to focus on practical steps that people can take to manage their risk rather than just highlighting the negative consequences of inaction.

Why it's important

Focussing on effective, practical steps to reduce risk emphasises what people CAN do, increasing their sense of agency and motivation to act. It can be disempowering to focus only on risks without offering guidance on how to address those risks.

How can you apply this?

Be specific when communicating the actions. Instead of using vague terms like 'act,' 'prepare,' or 'shared responsibility,' clearly define the preparatory action and provide observable examples. This includes specifying who needs to do what and providing contextual information like when and where.

Address barriers to action

What this means

It can be easy to make assumptions about why people do or do not perform specific actions, which can hinder effective communication and engagement with community. Gaining a deep, evidence-based understanding of what gets in the way of people taking steps to reduce their risk can help to address important barriers and enable change.

Why it's important

Factors beyond knowledge and attitudes can get in the way of people performing positive actions. Understanding what barriers exist for specific preparedness actions and supporting people to overcome these barriers can inform tailored communications.

How can you apply this?

- Gain an understanding of what 'gets in the way' of the community taking steps to reduce their barriers to risk.

- To keep messages clear and simple, focus on addressing one key barrier for one key action at a time. Prioritise the most relevant barrier based on the situation and audience.

- Recognise that misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge can be addressed through communication, while other barriers may require different approaches.

Principle 3
Keep motivation high

What this means

When communicating about topics that we are knowledgeable and passionate about, it's important to not overuse technical terms or rely solely on information provision.

Try to keep messages clear, simple, and jargon-free, and engage people with the communication and the action of interest.

Why it's important

Providing information alone is often insufficient to motivate people to change their behaviour. Practical and engaging strategies can help boost motivation and encourage positive change.

How can you apply this?

• Make communications easy so people understand the message and know what action to take.

• Use social norms and encourage a public commitment to an action.

• Involve people with shared values, common interests and trusted community leaders to communicate or endorse messages.

• Frame actions to be simple, achievable, and appealing to encourage participation.

Principle 4
Make sure it's relevant to the audience

What this means

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to effectively communicate about climate change or bushfire risk and preparedness. By customising the content, processes, and guidance in our approach, we increase the chance that engagement will connect, motivate and lead to action.

Why it's important

An engagement approach that works for one person may not be appropriate or effective for the next. If people cannot relate to the situation being communicated or see the relevance of the information to their own lives, they are unlikely to pay attention, engage with the message or be motivated to act.

How can you apply this?

• Try to grab attention by using personalised language and content and make it specific to people and their situation (e.g., second person language, local information, place names and images).

• Connect with community experiences, knowledge and values, so that engagement and communication aligns with their context.

• Tailor information about climate change impacts to local risk and landscape.

05/ Conclusion and future practice

This research demonstrates that practitioners are working in a highly dynamic space that requires ongoing skills development, embedded reflection and learning opportunities, and practice adaptation.

Understanding how community engagement practices change within different institutional, social, and environmental contexts is crucial.

Putting community at the centre is essential when addressing the complexities and uncertainties posed by climate change and bushfire risk. It is important to continue exploring the dynamics of knowledge and power within agencies and community-agency relationships throughout this process.

Climate Reflective Practice will continue to be tested and applied in regional settings in partnership with local communities and agencies.

We invite you to apply it, improve it and bring your own experiences and perspectives into it.

06/ About us: who is behind this work?

The Climate Change Engagement and Communications Practice Review has been led and supported by the Safer Together Community First program across CFA and DEECA.

This work has been a collaboration of many people:

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If you have any questions or comments about the work, feel free to contact the Community First team.