Atelophobia, laziness or learned helplessness?

The complexity of guidance and scientific language enacts a deep routed human response of learned helplessness creating inaction. If we understand that learned helplessness is a triggered response to complexity and the fear of getting things wrong born from early experiences with science at school, experts, observers, and standard bearers for science need to understand that they are part of the problem of inaction.

Introduction

The UK's Paris Agreement commitments are measured and monitored through the well-established methodologies set within the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory (NAEI), reported annually to the IPCC and audited by the independent Climate Change Committee with their emission budgets.

The methodologies for calculating these emissions are internationally respected and have been around from the days of the UK's Kyoto Protocol commitments.

We appear, though, to have a systemic problem across the UK in creating comparable, consistent, accurate, complete data for 'net zero' declarations at an organisational or project level.

There are a number of reasons for this but one of the largest issues are the 100s of independently created guidance, definitions, methodologies, toolkits and opinions on what and how emissions should be calculated.

The unintended consequence of this noise is 1000s of inconsistency and incomparable business and project emission data sets causing confusion for policy creators, decision makers and regulators.

And the answer is not more guidance.

Declarations of net zero outside of Government's Net Zero

For many organisations emission reporting requirements are coming from many different angles each with their own individual nuances and demands.

For example, a PLC housebuilder may be required to report GHG emission data up to 6 different ways using 6 different methodologies.

This is not unique to building sector. Many sectors are bombarded with multiple reporting requests each with their own independently created guidance.

Very few of these guidances and methods are aligned with each other. Many of them use completely different carbon emission factors and equations leading to huge discrepancies in data, so by de facto not aligned to the Paris Agreement's need for consistency and comparability to establish transparency.

The multiple asks are now causing failings in transparency

The result of corporations responding to a broad spectrum of stakeholders' opinions and asks on what measuring and reporting should look like is creating a problem with transparency.

It's extremely hard to offer transparency in a corporate sustainability report if its trying to be everything to all people. We now see sustainability reports that are over 100 pages, locked in a .pdf file. The upshot is a lack of comparability and consistency in reporting across competitors, sectors and the economy.

The ability to achieve net zero is significantly diminished if a company's climate change leadership is having to spend more time reporting what they're doing than actually doing it.

Perhaps it's time to take the foot off the neck of corporate reporting and create a simplified measure, report and verification process for every sector?

Complexity is a turn off for most decision makers

At Aether we are hearing first hand that for decision makers that this complexity of measuring and reporting is too complicated. They are switching off and delegating climate change responsibility downward within their organisations.

And if the real decision makers are not engaged, there is little hope in achieving net zero.
Is the problem therefore that decision makers not engaging, or the system being created by observers and standard bearers too complicated?

The science is scary, why are we surprised that decision makers avoid it?

For a good majority of people (including the C-Suite) science and maths is something they left at the exam table aged 15. Now they are faced with being asked whether they are carbon neutral, net zero carbon, absolute zero carbon, true zero carbon, nearly zero carbon, or zero carbon ready from new stakeholders who they don't know.

We hear the expression "well it's all too complicated isn't it?" far too often in our work.

Learned helplessness is a psychological state where following repeated stressful situations a person believes they are unable to control or change a situation, so they do not try to, even when opportunities for change are available.

This is contributing to the emerging picture of an enormous disconnect in action on climate change in the public and private sector.

Understanding the complexity is really important in our journey to net zero. But to avoid learned helplessness enforced by the complexity of science details perhaps the targets should remain in a language everyone would understand that is not science based.

The majority of people we speak to with Paris Agreement aligned targets have never actually read the Paris Agreement, so such 'science' targets don't hold much integrity in the first instance.

Perhaps a simple target set to reduce their role in supporting fossil fuel extraction and nature depletion through the creation of a costed action plan with accountability would be a more easily understood target than the current targets like a Pledge to Net Zero through a Science Based Target aligned to the Paris Agreement 1.5 degrees.