

From “I know I should” to “I am ready to act!”: An Interview with David Gershon



David Gershon is founder and CEO of the Empowerment Institute and author of *Low Carbon Diet: A 30 Day Program to Lose 5,000 Pounds*. The book helps self-organized teams take action to dramatically reduce

their carbon footprint. In a recent conversation with *Leverage Points* editor Vicky Schubert, David described the foundational work behind the book's powerful approach to behavior change.

LP: Your new book, *Low Carbon Diet: A 30 Day Program to Lose 5,000 Pounds*, couldn't be timelier in providing people an action plan for addressing climate change, just when the collective consciousness seems, finally, to be bending in that direction.

DG: When people see Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, they ask "What can I do?" Every network we engage with on climate change is asking this same question. This is an amazing teachable moment.

Low Carbon Diet grew out of my experience over the last fifteen years designing environmental behavior change programs. Many of the changes needed to lower our carbon footprint can be achieved through increasing our energy efficiency with a financial benefit to boot. And people want to do the right thing. The real issue we face is helping people act effectively on this good intention. That is the purpose of the Low Carbon Diet program.

The aspect of the program that helps people get over the hump of taking action is the peer support system. People really love doing this with their friends or neighbors. It builds community around something that is meaningful. And there are few things more meaningful than addressing climate change. What some call civilization's central organizing project. You can be a laggard and say, "I'm going to hold on to the world view I've been accustomed to," or you can grow and develop low carbon lifestyle practices. It's sort of like high tech, right? We entered that world and some people went in easily and some held back. But eventually, because of the way social evolution works, we all eventually get brought along. This is the same thing.

LP: You first started exploring environmental behavior change with groups you called *EcoTeams*. Can you tell us a little about those?

DG: The EcoTeam program, which I created in 1990, was designed to help individuals create environmentally sustainable lifestyle practices. It was built upon my research on personal empowerment. About 30,000 people in the United States and 250,000 people worldwide have participated in this program. On average, participants reduced their environmental footprint by about 25%. And they were able to sustain these changes over time according to many behavioral change research studies.

Low Carbon Diet applies this empowerment technology to the climate change issue. Each action quantifies the carbon reduced by taking it and allows people to set and achieve specific measurable reductions.

The program is designed for exponential growth by having specific actions that help people empower others in their social network, community and workplace to also participate. And by quantifying individual carbon reductions we have a chance to see the drops filling the bucket rather than being a drop in the bucket. These elements are central to its empowerment strategy.

LP: *This question of individual empowerment is really fundamental to your work.*

DG: Yes, this whole process is based on the empowerment methodology that my wife, Gail Straub, and I have developed over the last twenty-five years. That is, enabling someone to see a vision of possibility and then providing them the tools to successfully achieve it. We've learned that this methodology for empowering an individual to accomplish something in his or her personal life is easily extrapolated to organizations, communities and social issues. Our Empowerment Institute trains people in these applications.

With respect to climate change, individuals, particularly in the industrialized world, can have enormous positive impact because we're so wasteful now. The greatest cause of the deterioration of the global ecosystem is the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. The industrialized countries of the world consume 80% of the world's resources, have 20% of the world's population, and waste up to 75% of that through inefficiency and lack of awareness. The United States, with just 5% of the world's population, generates 25% of the planet's carbon footprint. One-third of that footprint is attributable to individual Americans. Through our purchases we influence the other two-thirds. What gets me excited about *Low Carbon Diet* is how big a difference the individual can make if enough of us choose to reduce our carbon footprint.

In the late '80s I started investigating what it would take to get people to transform from

wasteful, inefficient users of natural resources to more sustainable users of resources. My research showed that there was awareness even then, but people didn't know how to translate that into behavior change. I did some focus groups and found that people were not acting because they didn't have answers to four questions:

1. Where do I start?
2. Which are the important actions?
3. How do I do take these actions?
4. Will it make a difference if I take these actions?

These were the barriers to action. I realized that to get people to act, you had to answer those four questions meaningfully. So, I set out to reduce the overwhelming amount of environmental information that was out there by breaking it into five distinct action areas—solid waste, water, energy, transportation, green purchasing. With a team I assembled, we created distinct environmental actions within each of these topic areas in a step-by-step recipe format. We started with just the workbook and found that people could take the actions, but had a hard time following through. So, we said, "Well, what if we had some kind of support system?" And we discovered that a peer support system made it a lot easier and more fun. That is the genesis of what I came to call an EcoTeam.

LP: *What kind of groups did you work with?*

DG: We worked with social networks, workplaces, faith-based groups and neighborhoods. The neighborhood was the most intriguing because it didn't have the natural limits of social networks or businesses and it had an additional benefit. People were attracted to the idea of meeting their neighbors.

My instinct was to go towards the neighborhood as an organizing strategy because of the yearning I observed in people to meet their neighbors, but no realistic way to do this. The program stepped into this void. It

was amazing how this added benefit took the program from something I should do, to something I want to do. Trying to sell the environment by itself was hard when competing for people's limited time. This co-benefit of getting to know my neighbor while creating a healthier and safer neighborhood made a big difference in competing for the limited time in people's super busy lifestyles.

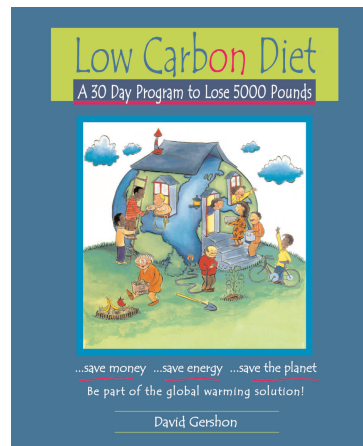
LP: *It must be gratifying to see these design principles playing out with the success of the Low Carbon Diet.*

DG: The readiness for change on the issue of global warming has gained great momentum in the last year as people have digested the grave danger Al Gore helped us see in his movie. This is not an issue that is going to go away; this is not a trend. People get this and want to take action. We're getting an amazing response to my book from a diverse number of sources. From Al Gore to MoveOn, from faith-based to environmental groups, and from cities to businesses. Any person or group who is awake to this issue—and they are growing by the week—when presented with this simple to use how-to resource, is interested. That isn't to say they are all ready to change their behavior, but the early adopters are for sure. And they are the ones we need to engage at this stage to generate the tipping point needed to enable low carbon lifestyles to proliferate.

It's also wonderful to see individuals after taking personal responsibility to lower their carbon footprint, then become advocates in the political system. It's a new kind of political action. It is an empowered accountable type of action. People are saying to their elected political representatives, "I'm doing my part and I need your help to take the next steps. Please help us create a new bike lane, public transportation system or fuel efficiency standard." It's mutual accountability. I don't request anything of you, my political representative, unless I'm willing to do my part. The political and the personal are becoming integrated.

Given the magnitude of the global warming challenge, traditional methods of societal change such as passing laws, new tax policies and protest need to be supplemented with methods that enable people to take direct personal responsibility. It's a slow and onerous process to use command and control or pay people to change. This is where the empowerment social technology comes in. It is a process that engages people to voluntary change behavior because the new game is more attractive than the status quo and people are given the tools to play. This, combined with traditional social change approaches for those who will not change any other way, has great potential to help us respond successfully to the grave challenge of global warming.

Will we succeed in this endeavor? I am hopeful that knowing the consequences of not changing will awaken the political will. This has begun to happen thanks to An Inconvenient Truth and the media that has grown out of it. And being provided with a compelling vision and effective tools to achieve it will help activate that political will. I feel *Low Carbon Diet* is a step in this direction. I have bet on humanity my whole life and not been disappointed.



Suggestions for further reading:

Low Carbon Diet: A 30 Day Program to Lose 5,000 Pounds

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