

Opinion: Why billionaires should take the lead and declare their own emissions-cutting targets

January 22 2024, by Steve Westlake



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The annual glitzy gathering of world leaders and billionaire CEOs in

Davos, Switzerland, allows us to marvel once again at the [environment-wrecking](#) effects of private jets and lavish lifestyles.

Many believe it's [incongruous](#) that company bosses and world leaders speak passionately about [climate change](#) while traveling in the most carbon intensive way possible.

The high-flyers hit back with various counter-arguments. Tight schedules, security considerations and essential international networking all justify private jet use and the most opulent hotels, while "offsets" in theory undo the damage.

More broadly, they say, the behavior of individuals is a distraction and an irrelevance. Instead we need political, systemic and technological progress—things they are [working hard](#) towards.

Many in the climate movement actually agree that [it's wrong](#) to focus on the behavior of individuals. They suggest the topic is divisive, causes paralyzing guilt, and plays into the delay tactics of big oil companies.

We all cause some emissions, and focusing on individuals can quickly descend into an energy-sapping pursuit of unachievable personal purity. This undermines the coalitions necessary to transform our economies.

Prestigious people shape society

But there is a big problem with giving individuals a free pass. That's because, as humans, we pay a huge amount of attention to how other people [behave](#), particularly those with prestige.

In my [Ph.D. research](#) I found leaders who maintain high-carbon lifestyles undermine trust and reduce everyone's willingness to change their own behavior.

Unnecessary high-carbon behavior from leaders therefore actually slows down the fight against climate change. These people make the rules and shape [what we aspire to](#), so the public expects and wants them to lead by example—because it is a fundamental part of leadership.

In a survey I conducted, 90% of the public agreed that "people with the biggest carbon footprints should make the biggest [lifestyle](#) changes to tackle climate change," and only 3% disagreed. Some 86% agreed that "politicians, [business leaders](#) and celebrities should set an example by making [lifestyle changes](#) first."

And I found that leading by example works in practice. Among people who stopped flying for a year because of climate change, 74% said they had been influenced by someone else who had done the same, and this rose to 85% if it was a high-profile person setting the example.

Avoiding a focus on individual behavior might sound nice in theory, but it is simply unrealistic. The media will continue to highlight apparent contradictions between elite behavior and climate concern, and the public will recoil from anything they see as hypocritical.

It's a question of fairness—and repeated research shows that [fairness](#) is essential to achieving [emissions reductions](#) and maintaining [support](#) for climate policies.

Therefore avoiding the topic of individual behavior change serves mainly to protect the lifestyles of the wealthy, [who have the most choice](#) to act in lower-carbon ways.

But how should leaders do it?

Leading by example sounds great in theory, but what about the realities of everyday life? Surely we can't expect leaders to switch to ultra-low-

carbon lifestyles overnight, and some of their activities will naturally incur more emissions than the average person.

The answer again comes down to a fundamental element of leadership: direction of travel. Leaders (and the rest of us) don't have to make an instant switch, but they have to move clearly in the right direction, and be seen to do so.

This is why an idea such as personal emissions targets could work. As part of the Paris agreement, countries sign up voluntarily to nationally determined contributions ([NDCs](#)), where each nation sets ambitious public targets to reduce their own emissions. The veracity of these targets can then be discussed and negotiated.

The same could be done by climate leaders—we could call them "personally determined contributions," or PDCs. They could clearly set out how leaders are going to reduce their personal emissions over time—not by using offsets, which are well understood to be highly problematic, but by publishing how they will continually decarbonize their lifestyles.

PDCs could include: getting rid of the private jet, optimizing travel, changing diet, reducing household size and energy use. High-carbon investments could be addressed too.

This would send a signal to the world that leaders really are serious and counteract the widely held perception that others aren't willing to change. Crucially, PDCs have the benefit of maintaining freedom of choice—a high political priority.

They would likely supercharge leaders' drive towards low-carbon solutions, and might even change their mindsets about [climate](#) change as a problem. After all, we are what we do, not what we say.

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