

Crisis Communication I:

How Bad Is It? How Sure Are You? (Page 1)

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1. Don't over-reassure.

When people are unsure or ambivalent about how worried they should be, they often become (paradoxically) more alarmed when officials seem too reassuring. This can lead to anger and skepticism as well, and to loss of essential credibility if the truth turns out more serious than predicted. A potential crisis is a classic high-magnitude low-probability risk; if you keep assuring people how unlikely it is, they tend to focus all the more on how awful it would be.

2. Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses.

When giving reassuring information to frightened or ambivalent people, it is helpful to deemphasize the fact that it is reassuring. "Even though we haven't seen a new case in 18 days, it is too soon to say we're out of the woods yet." This is particularly important when the news is good so far, but there may be bad news coming. Practice converting one-sided reassurances into two-sided good-news bad-news combinations until the technique comes naturally.

3. Err on the alarming side.

While it is obviously ideal to estimate risk correctly, if you have to get it wrong, it is wiser to err on the alarming side. In a fluid situation, the first communications should be the most alarming. "It's better than we feared" is a far more tolerable day-two story than "it's worse than we thought."

4. Acknowledge uncertainty.

Sounding more certain than you are rings false, sets you up to turn out wrong, and provokes adversarial debate with those who disagree. Say what you know, but emphasize what you don't know ... and the possibility that some of what you "know" may turn out wrong as the crisis evolves. Show you can bear your uncertainty and still take action.

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5. Share dilemmas.

When it is not obvious what to do, say so. If you're still trying to decide, ask for help; if you have tentatively decided, seek feedback; if your decision is firm already, point out that it was a tough call -- and explain the case for and against the major options. Acknowledge that difficult decisions can raise the anxiety level both inside and outside your organization, but insist that it is important for people to bear this reality. One dilemma that always needs explaining: the tradeoff between additional precautions and additional costs.

6. Acknowledge opinion diversity.

Help the public learn that not all decisions are unanimous. Show that you can bear these differences of opinion, and that each side knows and respects the other side's arguments -- that opinion diversity has not fractured your ability to cope with the crisis. Instead of muzzling advocates of differing positions, try to share information and even share the platform. Message consistency is still the ideal, but only if it reflects genuine unanimity.

7. Be willing to speculate.

Speculation has had a bad press. But in a crisis you can't just say you'll have a report out next month; the information vacuum demands to be filled now. So take the risk of being quoted out of context or turning out wrong, and speculate ... but always tentatively rather than over-confidently, and with due focus on the worst case, the likeliest case, and the other possibilities you haven't ruled out. Notice how often your organization speculates about possible good outcomes (without even considering it speculation), compared to your reluctance to speculate about bad ones. For better results, reverse the proportions.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) - www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy (Feb 2003) -- www.psandman.com/articles/dilemmas.pdf
- "Fear Is Spreading Faster than SARS" -- And So It Should! (Apr 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/SARS-1.htm
- It Is Never Too Soon to Speculate (Sept 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/speculat.htm

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Crisis Communication II: Coping with the Emotional Side of the Crisis (Page 1)

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8. Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic.

Panic is a relatively rare (though extremely damaging) response to crisis. Efforts to avoid panic -- for example, by withholding bad news and making over-reassuring statements -- can actually make panic likelier instead. Officials need to rethink their tendency to imagine that people are panicking or about to panic when they are merely worrying ... or perhaps disobeying or distrusting you.

9. Don't aim for zero fear.

People are right to feel fearful in a crisis. A fearless public that leaves you alone to manage the problem is not achievable. Nor is it desirable; vigilance and precaution-taking depend on sufficient fear. Humans, moreover, are hard-wired to experience and tolerate fear, often becoming less fearful of one object as we become more fearful of another. The extremes of apathy, panic, terror, and denial are all harmful, but in a crisis proportionate fear is not a problem; it is part of the solution.

10. Don't forget emotions other than fear.

When people are faced with a crisis, the "fear family" is only one possible set of responses. The "empathy/misery/depression family" is also extremely common, and deserving of the crisis manager's attention. Among the other responses: anger, hurt, and guilt. These emotional reactions to crisis are all normal, in emergency responders as well as in the public. But resilience is also normal; most people can cope.

11. Don't ridicule the public's emotions.

Expressions of contempt for people's fears and other emotions almost always backfire. Terms to avoid include "panic," "hysteria," and "irrational." Even when they are accurate, these labels do not help -- and usually they are not accurate. Even when discouraging harmful behavior, such as stigmatization, it is important to do so with sympathy rather than ridicule. If you are frustrated with the public, express your frustration privately, so it doesn't leak out unless you want it to.

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12. Legitimize people's fears.

Instead of leaving people alone with their fears, help them bear their fears by legitimizing them, and even sharing some of your own. Even technically inaccurate fears can be legitimized as natural, understandable, and widespread: "Despite the evidence that the health risk is very small, even I felt a little nervous this morning when I heard someone coughing on the bus."

13. Tolerate early over-reactions.

One of the main ways people absorb new risks is by "over-reacting" at first. We stop doing things that suddenly seem dangerous; we become hyper-vigilant about the news and maybe even strangers on the street; we personalize the risk and take precautions that are unnecessary or premature. Psychiatrists call this an "adjustment reaction." It is a useful form of rehearsal, emotional and logistical, and it should be tolerated -- if handled well by officials it is the teachable moment. People will settle soon enough into the New Normal.

14. Establish your own humanity.

Professionals are understandably preoccupied with looking professional. But especially in a crisis, the best leaders reveal their humanity. Express your feelings about the crisis and show that you can bear them; that will help the rest of us bear our own feelings, and help us build a stronger alliance with you. Express your wishes and hopes as well. Tell a few stories about your past, your family, what you and your officemate said to each other this morning about the crisis.

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- Beyond Panic Prevention (Feb 2003) -- www.psandman.com/articles/beyond.pdf
- Duct Tape Risk Communication (Feb 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/ducttape.htm
- "Fear Is Spreading Faster than SARS" -- And So It Should! (Apr 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/SARS-1.htm
- Fear of Fear: the Role of Fear in Preparedness, and Why it Terrifies Officials (Sept 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/fear.htm

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Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication

Four Kinds of Risk Communication in Community Outreach

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Health and safety officers need to communicate about risk in several radically different sorts of situations.

But they often use just one kind of risk communication – something close to public relations – for all purposes, even though the situations, the barriers to communication, and the target audiences in predictable ways.

Using Peter Sandman's "Risk = Hazard + Outrage" model, four kinds of risk communication will be described. Health and safety workers usually define risk as "probability times magnitude." Sandman calls this "hazard." The public – and even experts when they are at home – also add "outrage factors" into their calculus of risk: voluntariness, fairness, trust, control, dread, responsive process, and others. Neglecting the outrage is the main problem in poor communication.

1. Public relations (and health and safety education):

high-hazard, low-outrage situations

Your target audience is apathetic, inattentive, uninterested, unaware. For instance, employees ignore safety rules because of familiarity; patients don't follow medical advice; the public doesn't care that a flood is coming. (Another relevant group: teenagers who feel invulnerable!) Practitioners may vary in their skill at PR; but they all know this is part of their communication job. Reaching out to the community about unfamiliar and potentially alarming risks with uncertain parameters and unknown implications – as happens with environmental public health tracking and biomonitoring – usually requires different communication skills, not public relations.

2. Stakeholder relations (with interested stakeholders)

usually medium-hazard, medium-outrage situations

The audience is interested but calm; it is open to your message; it wants you to hear its views too. This is the easiest kind of risk communication. The goal of the other three kinds of risk communication is to create a communication environment as close to "interested stakeholder relations" as possible.

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3. Outrage Management:

low hazard, high-outrage situations

The audience is outraged – possibly at you and your agency, or at a corporation – about a hazard you are almost certain is minimal. The most extreme outraged fanatics on the fringe are the most vocal. A larger less angry group is watching closely to see how the controversy evolves. You often have to deal with your own (usually suppressed) outrage or frustration at these people! And the ways to reduce audience outrage feel unattractive when you are angry or under attack: listening; apologizing for bad prior behavior and bad “process”, sharing control over monitoring and managing the hazard; increasing transparency and public involvement; and other outrage-reducing techniques. The largest barrier to doing good risk communication in this situation is the seductive tendency to focus on how low the hazard is, as proven by “sound science,” instead of diagnosing, bearing, and addressing the audience's outrage.

4. Crisis Communication

high-hazard, high-outrage situations

This model is adaptable for many public health tracking situations where uncertainty is high, and people are likely to become justifiably alarmed, at least at first, about a serious or potentially serious hazard. Your task is to validate and help them bear their fear, harness their concern, recruit their involvement in responding to the problem, and guide their actions. The tendency to over-reassure, to minimize scary news, and to see people as over-reacting may be overwhelming, and will make things worse. Crisis communication techniques and principles to deal with these tendencies can be learned and rehearsed in advance, for huge national disasters and for local clusters of frightened people. Of the twenty-five crisis communication recommendations on the next page, several of the recommendations for coping with the public's emotional responses will be the main focus.

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Crisis Communication Recommendations

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3. Err on the alarming side.
4. Acknowledge uncertainty.
5. Share dilemmas.
6. Acknowledge opinion diversity.
7. Be willing to speculate.
8. Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic.
9. Don't aim for zero fear.
10. Don't forget emotions other than fear.
11. Don't ridicule the public's emotions.
12. Legitimize people's fears.
13. Tolerate early over-reactions.
14. Establish your own humanity.
15. Tell people what to expect.
16. Offer people things to do.
17. Let people choose their own actions.
18. Ask more of people.
19. Acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.
20. Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.
21. Be explicit about "anchoring frames."
22. Be explicit about changes in official opinion, prediction, or policy.
23. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths.
24. Aim for total candor and transparency.
25. Be careful with risk comparisons.

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