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CDC Atlanta, GA

# Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication

What the public needs  
when risks are uncertain

Barbara Reynolds, Ph.D.





# What the public seeks from your communication

## Five public desires. . .

1. Gain wanted facts.
2. Empower decisionmaking.
3. Involved as a participant, not spectator.
4. Provide watchguard over resource allocation.
5. Recover or preserve well-being and normalcy .



# What kills operational success

## Five communication failures

1. Mixed messages from multiple experts.
2. Information released late.
3. Paternalistic attitudes.
4. Not countering rumors and myths in real-time.
5. Public power struggles and confusion.





## What do people feel inside when a disaster looms or occurs?

### Psychological barriers

1. Denial
2. Fear, anxiety, confusion, dread
3. Hopelessness or helplessness
4. Seldom panic



## How we communicate about risk in an emergency matters

### All risks are not accepted equally

- Voluntary vs. involuntary
- Controlled personally vs. controlled by others
- Familiar vs. exotic
- Natural vs. manmade
- Reversible vs. permanent
- Statistical vs. anecdotal
- Fairly vs. unfairly distributed
- Affecting adults vs. affecting children



## Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

### Under promise and over deliver . . .

Instead of making promises about outcomes, express the uncertainty of the situation and a confident belief in the process to fix the problem and address public safety concerns.



## Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

### Allow people the right to feel fear

- Don't pretend they're not afraid, and don't tell them they shouldn't be.
- Acknowledge the fear, and give contextual information.





## Six Principles of CERC

- **Be First:** If the information is yours to provide by organizational authority—do so as soon as possible. If you can't—then explain how you are working to get it.
- **Be Right:** Give facts in increments. Tell people what you know when you know it, tell them what you don't know, and tell them *if* you will know relevant information later.
- **Be Credible:** Tell the truth. Do not withhold to avoid embarrassment or the possible “panic” that seldom happens. Uncertainty is worse than not knowing—rumors are more damaging than hard truths.



## Six Principles of CERC

- **Express Empathy:** Acknowledge in words what people are feeling—it builds trust.
- **Promote Action:** Give people things to do. It calms anxiety and helps restore order.
- **Show Respect:** Treat people the way you want to be treated—the way you want your loved ones treated—always—even when hard decisions must be communicated.



## What the Public Will Ask First

- Are my family and I safe?
- What have you found that may affect me?
- What can I do to protect myself and my family?
- Who caused this?
- Can you fix it?



## Social Pressure: Social Amplification of Risk

- What will I gain?
- What will it cost me?
- What do those important to me want me to do?
- Can I actually carry it out?



## Trust and Mistrust

- Stakeholders judge the response to an issue or crisis based on trust.
- Trust is the natural consequence of promises fulfilled.
- Mistrust is an outgrowth of the perception that promises were broken and values violated.
- CDC fulfills trust by combining our best science with strong ethics and values.



## Consequences of Mistrust

- Health recommendations ignored and disease and death go up.
- Demands for misallocation of resources.
- Public health policies circumvented.
- Opportunists prey on others in the “trust gap.”
- Fiscal and medical resources are wasted.

***We can't accomplish our mission.***





## Acting Trustworthy

- Share information early.
- Acknowledge the concerns of others.
- Under promise and over deliver.
- Select a spokesperson who is never condescending.
- Engage third-party validators and advocates.



# Engaging with Angry People

**Anger arises when people. . .**

- have been hurt
- feel threatened by risks out of their control
- are not respected
- have their fundamental beliefs challenged



# Deescalating Conflict

Seek input early.

Seek common principles.

Approach the process fairly.

Acknowledge emotions, appeal to reason.



## Lessons We've Learned to Benefit You

1. Be prepared to answer with: “I don’t know.”
2. Avoid bureaucratic speak at all cost.
3. “Based on what we know now . . .”
4. Be the first to raise the question that hasn’t been answered.
5. Leaders: share more, expect criticism, inspire others.

**RIGHT**

The **right** message at the **right** time from the **right** person  
can save lives...



# The Leadership Mandate

## Strategies of Meta-Leadership and Swarm Leadership

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A joint program of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health  
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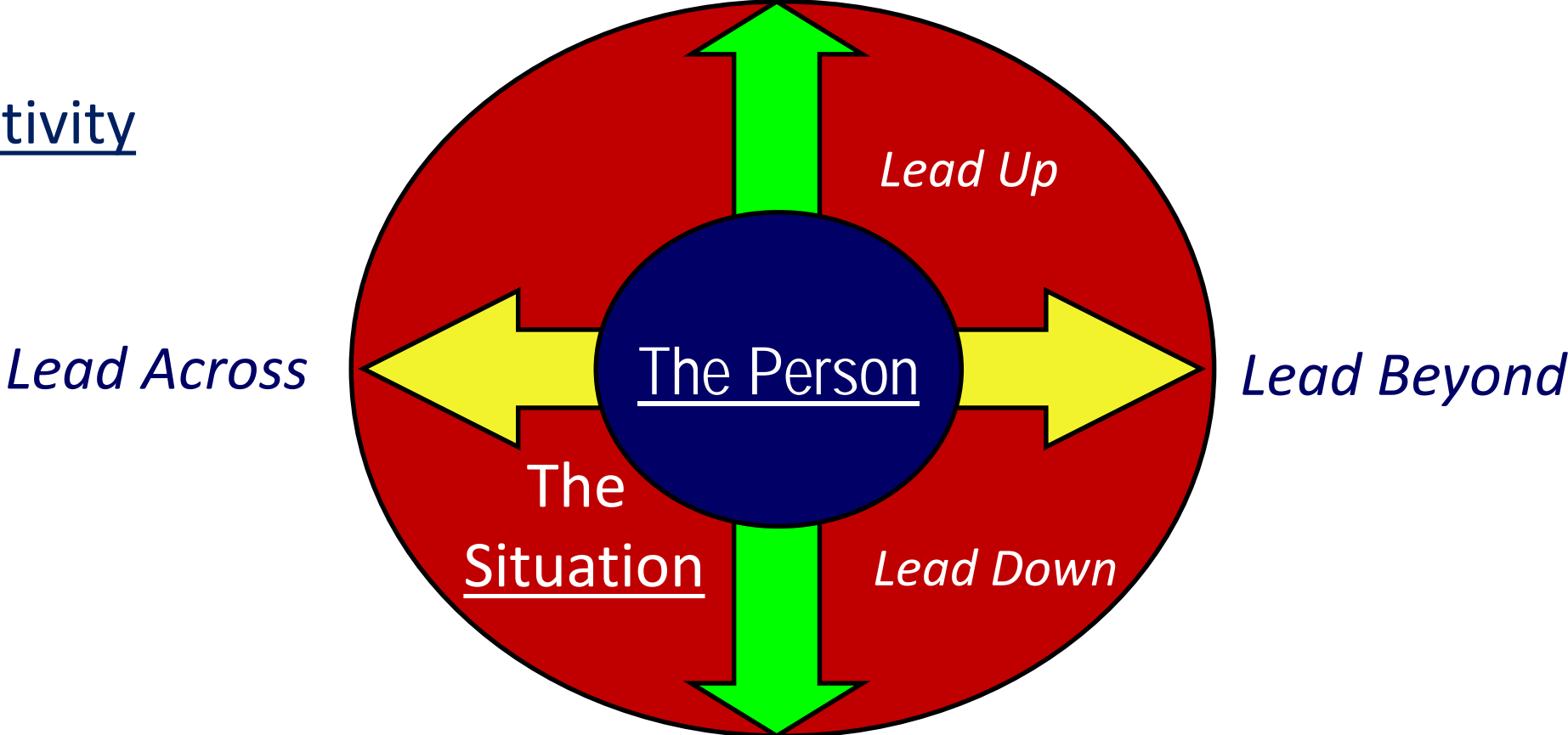


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# META-LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Connectivity



“How can I make you a success?”

# THE SITUATION

*The Leader Understands and Communicates*

KNOWN KNOWNS

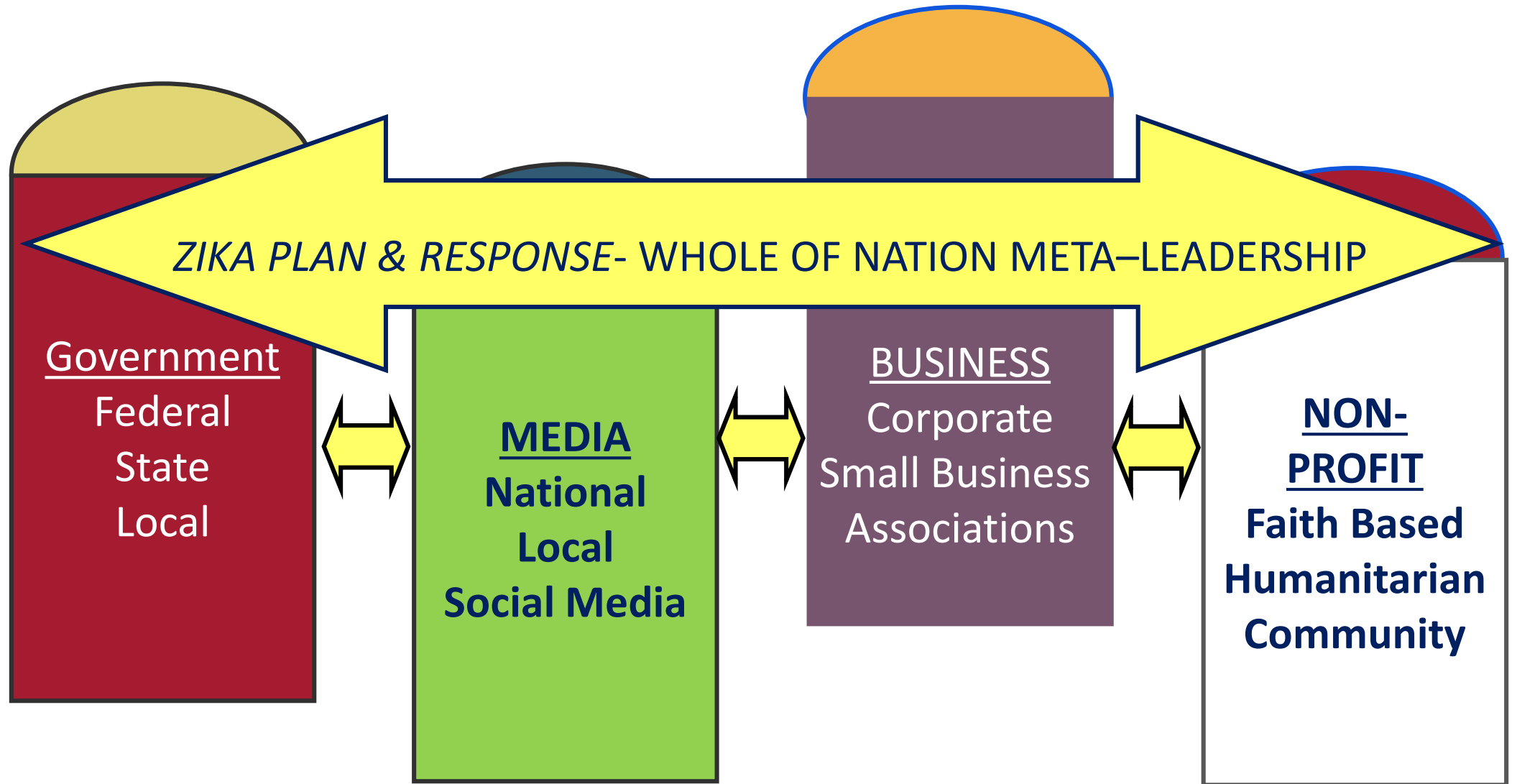
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# CONNECTIVITY



# APPLYING SWARM LEADERSHIP TO NAVIGATING STRATEGIC, ENTERPRISE CONNECTIVITY

## “How can I make you a success?”

### Swarm Leadership

1. Unity of Mission

*Leaders set the tone: clarity across your Zika Action Plan enterprise:*

*What does the whole effort strive to accomplish? Clear strategy.*

2. Generosity of Spirit and Action

*Is there return on investment: organizational and professional?*

3. Stay in Lanes/  
Help Others Succeed

*Does every task have an agency responsible? Is there role clarity? Is mutual success valued?*

4. No Ego – No Blame

*Leader Emotional Intelligence: Leadership matters!*

5. A Foundation of Relationships

*Trust & confidence among leaders: respect & support together.*

**Order beyond control**

**Clarity: Robust & productive leaders committed to full enterprise complex problem solving – leveraged connectivity of effort**

# The Leadership Mandate

## Strategies of Meta-Leadership and Swarm Leadership

For more information, contact CDC  
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The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

