

Best Practices in Public Health Risk and Crisis Communication

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The World Trade Center tragedy of September 11, 2001, the subsequent anthrax attacks, and other recent events have heightened public health agencies' awareness of the need to enhance their risk and crisis communication skills. The threat of chemical and biological weapons, and the risk posed to human populations, presents a unique opportunity for public health agencies to assess and elevate their level of communication preparedness for all risk and crisis scenarios. Following is a checklist of best practices that should be included in any public health risk and crisis communication plan.

Best Practice 1. Accept and Involve Stakeholders as Legitimate Partners

Guidelines:

- Demonstrate respect for persons affected by risk management decisions by involving them early, before important decisions are made.
- Involve all parties that have an interest or a stake in the particular risk.
- Include in the decision-making process the broad range of factors involved in determining public perceptions of risk, concern, and outrage.
- Use a wide range of communication channels to engage and involve stakeholders.
- Adhere to the highest ethical standards; recognize that people hold you professionally and ethically accountable.
- Strive for mutually beneficial outcomes.

Best Practice 2. Listen to People

Guidelines:

- Before taking action, find out what people know, think, or want done about risks. Use techniques such as interviews, facilitated discussion groups, information exchanges, availability sessions, advisory groups, toll-free numbers, and surveys.
- Let all parties with an interest or a stake in the issue be heard.
- Let people know that what they said has been understood and tell them what actions will follow.
- Empathize with your audience and try to put yourself in their place.
- Acknowledge the validity of people's emotions.

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- Emphasize communication channels that encourage listening, feedback, participation, and dialogue.
- Recognize that competing agendas, symbolic meanings, and broader social, cultural, economic, or political considerations may complicate risk communication

Best Practice 3. Be Truthful, Honest, Frank, and Open

Guidelines:

- Disclose risk information as soon as possible; fill information vacuums.
- If information is evolving or incomplete, emphasize appropriate reservations about its reliability.
- If in doubt, lean toward sharing more information, not less—or people may think something significant is being hidden or withheld.
- If you don't know or are unsure about an answer, express willingness to get back to the questioner with a response by an agreed upon deadline. Do not speculate.
- Discuss data and information uncertainties, strengths, and weaknesses—including those identified by other credible sources.
- Identify worst-case estimates as such, and cite ranges of risk estimates when appropriate.
- Do not minimize or exaggerate the level of risk; do not over-reassure.
- If errors are made, correct them quickly.

Best Practice 4. Coordinate, Collaborate, and Partner with Other Credible Sources

Guidelines:

- Coordinate all inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications.
- Devote effort and resources to the slow, hard work of building partnerships and alliances with other organizations.
- Use credible and authoritative intermediaries between you and your target audience.
- Consult with others to decide who is best able to take the lead in responding to questions or concerns about risks. Document those decisions.
- Cite credible sources that believe what you believe; issue communications with or through other trustworthy sources.
- Do not attack individuals or organizations with higher perceived credibility.

Best Practice 5. Meet the Needs of the Media

Guidelines:

- Be accessible to reporters; respect their deadlines.
- Prepare a limited number of key messages before media interactions; take control of the interview and repeat your key messages several times.
- Keep interviews short. Agree with the reporter in advance about the specific topic of the interview and stick to this topic during the interview.
- Say only what you want the media to repeat; everything you say is on the record.
- Tell the truth.
- Provide background materials about complex risk issues.

- Provide information tailored to the needs of each type of media. For example, provide sound bites and visuals for television.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, focus on what you do know and tell the reporter what actions you will take to get an answer.
- Be aware of, and respond effectively to, media pitfalls and trap questions.
- Avoid saying “no comment.”
- Follow up on stories with praise or criticism, as warranted.
- Work to establish long-term relationships with editors and reporters.

Best Practice 6. Communicate Clearly and with Compassion

Guidelines:

- Use clear, non-technical language appropriate to the target audience.
- Use graphics and other pictorial material to clarify messages.
- Personalize risk data. Use stories, narratives, examples, and anecdotes to make technical data come alive.
- Avoid embarrassing people.
- Respect the unique communication needs of special and diverse audiences.
- Express genuine empathy. Acknowledge, and say, that any illness, injury, or death is a tragedy to be avoided.
- Avoid using distant, abstract, unfeeling language when discussing harm, deaths, injuries, and illnesses.
- Acknowledge and respond in words, gestures, and actions to emotions that people express, such as anxiety, fear, anger, outrage, and helplessness.
- Acknowledge and respond to the distinctions that the public views as important in evaluating risks.
- Use risk comparisons to help put risks in perspective; make sure those comparisons take into account the distinctions the public considers important.
- Identify specific actions that people can take to protect themselves and to maintain control of the situation at hand.
- Always try to include a discussion of actions that are under way or can be taken.
- Be sensitive to local norms, such as speech and dress.
- Strive for brevity, but respect requests for information and offer to provide desired information within a specified time period.
- Only promise what you can deliver, then follow through.
- Understand that trust is earned—do not ask or expect to be trusted by the public.

Best Practice 7. Plan Thoroughly and Carefully

Guidelines:

- Begin with clear, explicit objectives—such as providing information, establishing trust, encouraging appropriate actions, stimulating emergency response, or involving stakeholders in dialogue, partnerships, and joint problem solving.
- Identify important stakeholders and subgroups within the audience; respect diversity and design communications for specific stakeholders.
- Recruit spokespersons with effective presentation and personal interaction skills.
- Train staff—including technical staff—in basic, intermediate, and advanced risk and crisis communication skills. Recognize and reward outstanding performance.

- Anticipate questions and issues.
- Prepare and pretest messages.
- Carefully evaluate risk communication efforts and learn from mistakes.
- Share what you have learned with others.