



Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

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Author's Note

This was a presentation at the CDC 8th National Biosafety Symposium, Atlanta, Georgia, 2004.

Communicating in a Crisis is Different

Crises can assault your community in an instant or creep slowly into your midst randomly wreaking havoc until they have you firmly in their grip. Conventional explosions, category-5 hurricanes, chemical releases, shooting sprees, deadly disease outbreaks, 500-year floods, dirty bombs, nuclear bombs, fertilizer bombs, earthquakes, blazing brush fires, infrastructure collapses, and raging tornadoes are just some of the disasters we know threaten somewhere at sometime and are, ultimately, outside our control.

Communicating in a crisis is different. In a serious crisis, all affected people take in information differently, process information differently, and act on information differently (Reynolds, 2002). A well-prepared organization will have communication plans and resources in place to help minimize the number of decisions about communication that must be made in the moment. We can predict both the types of disasters our communities face and the questions the public will have during a disaster. Plan now. Plan with your communication and public information professionals. Plan with your disaster-response partners.

Five Communication Failures that Kill Operational Success

Communication experts and leaders who've faced disasters can tell others what is going to cripple

or even destroy the success of their disaster response operation:

- Mixed messages from multiple experts
- Information released late
- Paternalistic attitudes
- Not countering rumors and myths in real time
- Public power struggles and confusion

1. Mixed Messages

The public doesn't want to have to "select" one of many messages to believe and act on. During the mid-1990s the Midwestern United States suffered a spring of great floods. Response officials determined that the water treatment facilities in some communities were compromised and that a "boil water" directive should be issued. The problem developed when multiple response organizations, government and nongovernment, issued directions for boiling water and each of them was different. The fact is, in the United States, we turn on the faucet and clean water comes out. Few of us know the "recipe" to boil water because we've never had to.

So, what's the big deal? Just pick one and get to it. Not so fast! Consider this: I'm a young mother with an infant son and I need to mix his cereal with water. I'm a middle-aged son caring for his mother who is currently immune-compromised because of cancer chemotherapy. I'm the sister living down the street from my HIV-positive brother whose T-cell count is back on the way down. Or, just maybe, I'm an average person who doesn't like the thought of gambling on a bad case of diarrhea if I don't pick the right boil-water instructions.

In a crisis, people don't want to "just pick one" of many messages; they want the best one or the right one to follow. When faced with a new threat,

people want a consistent and simple recommendation to follow. They want to hear absolute agreement about what they should do from multiple experts through multiple sources. Messages do not have to be wrong to be damaging. If they are inconsistent the public will lose trust in the response officials and begin to question every recommendation (Reynolds, 2002). Local, state, regional, and national response officials and their partners must work together to ensure messages are consistent, especially when the information is new to the public.

2. Information Released Late

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, many people wanted advice on whether or not to buy a gas mask. These calls found their way to CDC. Three weeks after the attack, CDC had an answer on its web site. During the 3 weeks CDC took to develop and vet its answer, a number of experts were willing to give an answer—unfortunately it wasn't the right one. When CDC issued advice to the public not to buy gas masks, the “gas-mask” aisles at the local Army-Navy surplus stores were already empty. In all fairness, few of us could contemplate the consequences of a 9-11 type attack—but all of us can now create a process to quickly react to the information needs of the public. If we can not give people what they need when they need it, others will. And those “others” may not have the best interest of the public in mind when they're offering advice.

If the public expects an answer from your organization on something that is answerable and you won't provide it or direct them to someone who can, they will be open to being taken advantage of by unscrupulous or fraudulent opportunists.

3. Paternalistic Attitudes

Putting on a John Wayne swagger and ostensibly answering the public's concerns with a “Don't worry little lady, we got ya covered” doesn't work in the information age. People want and expect information to allow them to come to their own conclusion. As a leader, it's not enough to satisfy your own worries with copious bits of information and then turn around and state a bottom-line unsupported with the facts you know. As difficult as it may be, help the public to reach the same conclusion you did by shar-

ing with them what you learned to reach that conclusion. What did you learn that made you believe the situation wasn't worrisome? Share that.

Treat the public like intelligent adults and they will act like intelligent adults. Treat them any other way and they will either turn on you or behave in ways that seem illogical to you. You are a leader for the public; you are not their parent. **Never tell people “Don't worry.”** Tell people what they need to know so they can reach the decision that they do not need to worry. Engage the public in the process and they will follow your lead.

4. Not Countering Rumors in Real-Time

During a pneumonic plague outbreak, how successful will your drug distribution program be if a rumor starts that there aren't enough drugs for everyone? What is your system to monitor what is being said by the public and the media? What is your system to react to false information? Don't spread a rumor by holding press conferences every time you hear a rumor, unless it has been widely published already. If the rumor is circulating on the Internet, have a response on the Internet and with your telephone information service ready to deal with the rumor. The media will report rumors or hoaxes unless you can answer quickly why it's false. Have an open, quick channel to communicate to the media if your monitoring system picks up a troublesome rumor. Don't think, “This is preposterous; no one will believe it.” In a crisis the improbable seems more possible. Squash rumors fast, with facts.

5. Public Power Struggles or Confusion

Did you hear about the governor who held a press conference about a public safety crisis at the same time the mayor of the city was holding one on the other side of town? It really happened and it set the tone for a lot of speculation about who was in charge and what was or was not true.

In this information age, it's easy to see how this could happen. Sometimes there may be a power struggle over jurisdictions or other issues. The important thing is to make sure these are worked out quickly and confidentially. It's naturally disconcerting to the public to think that the people responsible for helping them are not getting along. All partners

need to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. When they overlap, and they do, make sure you can settle concerns without causing headlines about power struggles or, worse, confused response officials. When all else fails, stay in the scope of your responsibility and refrain from declaring “I’m in charge” without being certain that you are.

Even if everyone shows up at the same press conference, the officials could send the wrong message to the public. If people are jockeying for the microphone or looking back and forth at each other hoping someone will answer a question posed by a reporter, the public will be left with the impression that there are power struggles or confusion going on.

Early in the sniper shooting incident in metro Washington, DC, Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose had to formally request involvement by the F.B.I. Although there were natural concerns about what that might mean to local law enforcement, the chief chose to involve the F.B.I. and did it quietly and what appeared seamlessly to the public. At no time did the public perceive a power struggle among the response agencies. This, however, was a community that had previously survived a terrorist attack at the Pentagon and an anthrax attack at the Capitol. They had learned the value of a united front with multiple jurisdictions working cooperatively for the good of their community. Turf wars need to end at the moment the crisis begins. A good plan can help avoid turf wars from the start.

Five Communication Steps for Success

Could it be as simple as five steps to communication success in a disaster? Yes and no. These five steps are the keys to success, but each step is a challenge in itself. However, every bit of research in the area of successful communication, especially in a crisis, unanimously agrees you can’t skip any one of these and expect to be successful. Remember, the reason you as a leader are focused on better communication is because most of this burden will fall to you, according to peers who’ve been there before you.

The following are the five steps to communication success:

- Execute a solid communication plan.
- Be the first source for information.

- Express empathy early.
- Show competence and expertise.
- Remain honest and open.

1. Execute a Solid Communication Plan

Working from a communication plan is as important in a crisis as working from a logistics plan—stuff won’t get where it needs to go when it needs to be there without a good plan. (A later segment will discuss the elements of a communication plan. Consult with your communication director or public information officer.) As a leader, you need to know that the public judges the success of your operation, in great part, by the success of your communication.

Any doubts? Consider what CDC experienced during the 2001 anthrax incident and then in the 2003 SARS outbreak. A full year after the 2001 anthrax incident, national media were still criticizing CDC’s anthrax operation. However, the theme of the criticism was consistently about its inability to effectively communicate to its partners, important stakeholders, and the media. In 2001, CDC did not have a crisis communication plan and adequate resources dedicated to the effort.

A lot changed at CDC following the anthrax incident, especially in the area of crisis communication. Then in late 2002, people started dying from an emerging disease around the world, SARS. While the SARS outbreak was still unfolding, and there was great uncertainty about the magnitude of the outbreak, national media were praising CDC for its effective operational response. The change the media perceived was not in the operational functions, because both in anthrax and in SARS CDC had smart, dedicated people responding. The difference perceived by media, stakeholders, and partners was the speed and consistency of its communication. CDC had a plan, the plan was executed, and the plan made a huge difference in the public’s perception of its ability to do the job.

2. Be the First Sources of Information

There are two important reasons to strive to be the first source of information in a crisis. The public uses the speed of information flow in a crisis as a marker for your preparedness. No matter that the HAZMAT team showed up in 2 minutes, evacuated

the scene, and determined that the fire at the chemical plant should be allowed to burn out instead of putting water on it which could spread hazardous chemicals into the water table. The operational response was perfect. Yet, when this happened recently in Atlanta, the local news coverage was filled with angry families who saw the black smoke and wanted to know if they should evacuate but weren't able to find out as quickly as they wanted. Parents, gripping the hands of their small children, castigated the people who knew but didn't tell them that they were safe. Living in the information age means being expected to not only save lives, but also to be able to tell people while it's happening that you are saving lives.

The second reason is a psychological reality. When people are seeking information about something they do not know; the first message they receive carries more weight. The tendency is for people to typically accept the information and then if they hear a second message that conflicts with the first, they start to weigh them against each other. This is especially dangerous if the first message is incorrect but it sounds logical.

For example, the news media reports that health officials are swabbing the noses of congressional staffers for anthrax spores to see if they need to take antibiotics. So, Mr. Public is exposed to a white substance in the breakroom of his factory, and he thinks he should get a nose swab too. In fact, a positive or negative nose swab for anthrax spores is not a reliable way to determine if someone should be given antibiotics. That determination is made with other data such as proximity to the exposure site and ventilation systems. Even so, reasonable people who had heard about the nasal swabs and were incorrectly told they help in a medical diagnosis would be expected to clamor for the same kind of care.

So, by putting energy into getting the right message out first means that later incorrect messages will have to bounce up against the right message. That's better than having not only to get out the right message, but also having to spend considerable effort discounting the incorrect first message.

3. Express Empathy Early

If a leader takes only one concept from this book, this may be the most important and, for some,

the most challenging. Your peers who have experienced a leader's role in a public safety crisis and academic experts from around the country agree on this point: A sincere expression of empathy is as essential to your ability to lead the public in a crisis as the right key is to opening a lock. You can stick other keys or bent paper clips or tiny screwdrivers into the lock, but it won't open until you insert the key with the right grooves and edges. So it is with your message: The public won't be open to you until you express empathy.

So what's empathy? Empathy is the ability to understand what another human being is feeling. Empathy does not require you to feel what that person is feeling. Empathy does not require you to agree that what the person is feeling is appropriate. Empathy is the ability to at the very least describe your understanding of what they are feeling. In its best form, empathy is talking from the heart and relating to fellow human beings as fellow human beings—not victims, not casualties, not evacuees, or refugees, or the public—but as people who, in a crisis, are hurting physically, perhaps, but especially emotionally.

Research shows that an expression of empathy should be given in the first 30 seconds of starting your message. To do otherwise is to waste your time because the public will be waiting to hear whether or not “you get it.” Your audience is wondering whether you understand they are frightened, anxious, confused? If you don't articulate what they are feeling in the moment, your audience's minds will be consumed with the question of “Do they get it?” and not hear a thing you are saying. A sincere expression of empathy early in your communication will allow people to settle down the noise in their minds and actually hear what you have to say.

4. Show Competence and Expertise

If you have a title and are part of the official response to a crisis, the public will assume you are competent until you prove otherwise. It's not necessary to recite your entire resume or Curriculum Vitae at the start of a crisis response. According to the research, most people believe that a person holds a professional position because he or she is experienced and competent.

5. Remain Honest and Open

If you are a government official, there is a healthy belief in your community that the government withholds information, according to research done as recently as 2003 (CDC, unpublished). So, before you even begin to communicate with the public, they already assume you are holding back information. In criminal investigations that may be true. In all cases, treat people like you would like to be treated yourself. The danger comes from assuming you are protecting people or avoiding a bigger problem by keeping information away from the public. The motives may be noble, but the outcome could be the opposite. CDC and five universities did a series of 55 focus groups. Among the findings, three points were clear themes from the participants: (1) Any information is empowering. (2) Uncertainty is more difficult to deal with than knowing a bad thing. (3) Participants are prepared to go to multiple sources for information.

Here's where the idea of holding back information as a way to "manage" the crisis breaks down. We live in the information age. It's going to get out either in an upfront way or a backdoor way. Assume that if someone other than you knows the fact, everyone knows the fact. Do you want to present the facts in context or do you want to try to clean up a mess of someone else's making?

Bad news does not get better over time. There is absolute consensus among professionals that the faster you give up bad news the better, because holding back implies guilt and arrogance.

Do we choose to withhold frightening information because we don't want people "to panic?" Do we withhold the information because we think it will cut down the number of phone calls from the public and media requests from reporters? Not knowing is worse than knowing. People can cope with bad news and the anticipation of bad things to come. During a summit at Johns Hopkins University in 2003, one participant made the following point: "Do you know what the definition of panic is from the perspective of public officials? It's when the public does anything they don't want them to do."

Without question, for very good reasons some information must be withheld. When that is the case, respectfully tell the public you are withholding

information and why. If the answer is "because we don't want you to panic," then there is no reason to withhold the information.

Sometimes the public will see on the TV what you can't officially confirm. To be honest would be to say, "I know what is being reported, but this instant I'm going to let our official channels work. I want you to know the steps we take to make sure what is officially reported is as accurate as possible. Like you, I want information as fast as possible and like you I'd prefer it also to be right. We will definitely tell you what we can confirm and will update you as we learn more. In the meantime, let me remind the community to (action step)."

Former mayor Rudolph Giuliani experienced pressure like that regarding the casualty numbers in the days following the terrorist attack in New York City. He said, "There was tremendous pressure to place a figure on the casualties. The media demanded an official estimate. I decided right away not to play the guessing games with lost lives. I told the truth: 'When we get the final number, it will be more than we can bear'" (Giuliani, 2003, p. 25). The mayor was honest and open, and did not violate the city's operational plan for release of casualty numbers in a crisis.

During a disaster, what are people feeling inside?

People are feeling a lot of different emotions. Each person may or may not feel any or all of a range of emotions. However, patterns do emerge in a crisis and a leader needs to expect these and understand that is why communicating in a crisis is different.

A number of psychological barriers that could interfere with the cooperation and response from the public. Many of them can be mitigated through the work of a leader with an empathetic and honest communication style.

Fear, Anxiety, Confusion, and Dread

In a crisis, you can expect people in your community are feeling fear, anxiety, confusion, and, possibly, dread. Your job as a leader is not to make these feelings go away. If that's the goal, failure is a certainty. Instead, these are the emotions that you

should acknowledge in a statement of empathy. “We’ve never faced anything like this before in our community and it can be frightening.” You may be an expert and not be feeling fear. That’s OK. But the worst thing you can do is to tell a frightened person he or she has no reason to be frightened. **Never utter the words “There’s no reason to be afraid.”** Instead, acknowledge the fear. Make no statement about wanting it to go away. Simply tell them what you know that makes you less afraid. “I understand that anything related to radiation can seem frightening. Let me tell you what I know....” Give people one good fact to “chew” on and then tell them where to get more information.

Hopelessness and Helplessness

Looking for a communication goal in a crisis? Here’s the number one objective. If the community, its families, or individuals let their feelings of fear, anxiety, confusion, and dread grow unchecked during a crisis, psychologists can predict they will begin to feel hopeless or helpless. What leader needs a community of hopeless and helpless victims?

So, a reasonable amount of fear is OK. Instead of striving to “stop the panic” and eliminate the fears, help the community manage their fears and set them on a course of action. Action helps overcome feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

Give people things to do. People want things to do. As much as possible, give them relevant things to do: Things that are constructive and relate to the crisis they’re facing. Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control. The actions may be symbolic (e.g., put up the flag) or preparatory (e.g., donate blood or create a family check-in plan). Some actions need to be put into context. Be careful about telling people things they should do without telling them when to do it. Phrase these preparatory actions in an “if–then” format. For example, “Go buy duct tape and plastic sheeting to have on hand, and if (fill in the blank) occurs, then seal up one interior space in your house as a shelter place.”

The public must feel empowered and in control of at least some parts of their lives if you want to reduce fear and victimization. Plan ahead the things you can ask people to do, even if it’s as simple as “checking on an elderly neighbor.”

What about panic?

Contrary to what one may see in the movies, people seldom act completely irrationally or panic during a crisis. We do know that people have run into burning buildings, have refused to get out of a car stuck on the tracks with a train speeding close, and have gone into shock and become paralyzed to the point of helplessness. However, the overwhelming majority of people can and do act reasonably during an emergency. How people absorb or act on information they receive during an emergency may be different from nonemergency situations. Research provides some clues about the receiver of information during an emergency. It has shown that in a dire emergency, people or groups may exaggerate their responses as they revert to more rudimentary or instinctual “flight or fight” reasoning, caused in part by the increase of adrenaline and cortisol in the blood system (Solso, 2001).

In other words, that primitive part of our brains that we can credit for the survival of the human species kicks in. One can not predict whether someone will choose fight or flight. However, everyone will fall at some point on the continuum. “Fighters” may resist taking actions to keep them safe. “Fleers” may overreact and take additional steps to make them extra safe. Those extremes are what most of us see reflected back in the media. However, the overwhelming majority of people do not engage in extreme behavior. It just feels like they do when you’re the one responsible for getting a recommended response from the community.

During the 2001 anthrax incident, media reported local shortages of the antibiotic known as “cipro” because people began to seek out prescriptions anticipating the threat of anthrax. Question: If I want a prescription of cipro in my back pocket even though I live on the other side of the country, is that a panic behavior? No, it’s my survival instinct kicking into overdrive. If I hear my community leader saying “don’t panic,” I think that doesn’t apply to me. While I’m chasing down a cipro prescription, I think I’m rationally taking steps to ensure my survival, and someone else must be panicking. If you describe individual survival behaviors as “panic,” you’ve lost the very people you want to talk to. Acknowledge their desire to take steps and redirect

them to an action they can take and explain why the unwanted behavior is not good for them or for the community. You can call on people's sense of community to help them resist individual grabs for protection.

When people are swamping your emergency hotline with calls, they are not panicking. They want the information they believe they need and you have. As long as people are seeking information, they may be fearful but they are not acting helpless, nor are they panicking.

Physical and mental preparation will relieve anxiety despite the expectation of potential injury or death. An "action message" can provide people with the feeling that they can take steps to improve a situation and not become passive victims of the threat. Action messages should not be an afterthought. Reduce the level of extreme reactions by reaching out early with a message of empathy and action.

Uncertainty

Have you ever had to wait over the weekend for the results of a life-or-death medical test? The not knowing quickly seems worse than dealing with a bad result. People hate uncertainty. We all spend a great deal of our time working to reduce uncertainty in our lives. The uncertainty that is inherent in most crises, especially early in the event, will challenge even the greatest communicator. Early in a crisis, typically there are more questions than answers. The full magnitude of the problem is unknown. Perhaps the cause of the disaster is unknown. Even what people can do to protect themselves may be unclear.

A danger early in a crisis, especially if you're responsible for fixing the problem, is to promise an outcome outside your control. Never utter a promise, no matter how heartfelt, unless it's in your absolute power to deliver. We can hope for certain outcomes, but most we can't promise. Instead of offering a "knee jerk" promise, "We're going to catch the SOB who did this, promise." "We're going to throw everything we have at catching the bad guys, or stopping the spread of disease, or preventing further flood damage..."

People can manage the anxiety of the uncer-

tainty if you share with them the process you are using to get the answers. "I can't tell you today what's causing people in our town to die so suddenly, but I can tell you what we're doing to find out. Here's the first step..."

Remember, in a crisis people believe any information is empowering. Tell them what you know and most important tell them what you don't know and the process you're using to try and get some answers. Mayor Giuliani cautioned, "Promise only when you're positive. This rule sounds so obvious that I wouldn't mention it unless I saw leaders break it on a regular basis" (Giuliani, 2003, p. 165).

First Messages in a Crisis

The public will be listening for factual information, and some will be expecting to hear a recommendation for action. Get the facts right, repeat them consistently, avoid sketchy details early on, and ensure that all credible sources share the same facts. Speak with one voice. Again, preparation counts. Consistent messages are vital. Inconsistent messages will increase anxiety and will quickly torpedo the credibility of experts. Your first official message in a crisis as a leader to the public, either through the media or directly, should contain the following six elements in the following order:

1. **An expression of empathy.**
2. **Confirmed facts** (who, what, where, when, why, how). It's not necessary to know all of them to go forward with a statement.
3. **What you don't know about the situation.**
4. **What's the process.** After acknowledging there are questions unanswered, explain first steps being taken to get the answers. What help can people expect next. (That first statement may be simply "We've activated the EOC.")
5. **Statement of commitment.** (You are there for the long haul. You'll be back to talk to them in an hour.) Be careful not to promise what is outside your control.
6. **Where people can get more information.** (Give a hotline number or a web site. Again, tell them when you will be back in touch with them.)

Make the Facts in Your Message Work

Consider the following when creating your initial communication to your audiences:

- For the general public, **present a short, concise, and focused message (6th-grade level)**. It's difficult in a heightened state of anxiety or fear to take in copious amounts of information. Get the bottom line out first. In time, the public will want more information.
- **Cut to the chase—relevant information only** at this time. Don't start with a lot of background information. Don't spend a lot of time establishing yourself or your organization. One sentence should be enough.
- **Give action steps in positives**, not negatives (e.g., "In case of fire, use stairs," "Stay calm," are positive messages. Negative messages are "Do not use elevator" and "Don't panic.") Use positives, not negatives.
- **Repeat the message**—repetition reflects credibility and durability. Correct information is correct each time you repeat it. Reach and frequency, common advertising concepts, tell us that your message is more apt to be received and acted upon as the number of people exposed to the message (reach) and the number of times each person hears the message (frequency) go up.
- **Create action steps in threes or rhyme, or create an acronym**. These are ways to make basic information easier to remember, such as "stop/drop and roll" or "KISS—keep it simple, stupid." Three is not a magic number, but in an emergency you should expect someone to absorb three simple directions. Research indicates that somewhere between three and seven bits of information is the limit for people to memorize and recall. It makes sense in the stress of an emergency to ask your audience to remember fewer bits of information. (For example: Anthrax is a bacterium that is treated with antibiotics. Anthrax is not transmitted from person to person. Seek medical care if you believe you have symptoms of anthrax—fever, body aches, and breathing problems.)
- **Use personal pronouns for the organization**. "We are committed to..." or "We understand the need for..."

Avoid

- **Technical jargon** Cut the professional jargon and euphemisms; they imply insecurity and lack of honesty.
- **Condescending or judgmental phrases**—(e.g., "You would have to be an idiot and try to outrun a tornado." "Only hypochondriacs would need to walk around with a prescription for cipro.") Many of us are neither idiots nor hypochondriacs, and both ideas have crossed our minds. Don't insult your audience by word or tone. That doesn't mean condoning the behavior; instead, validate the impulse but offer a better alternative and the reasons why it's better.
- **Attacks**—Attack the problem, not the person or organization.
- **Promises/guarantees**—only what you can deliver. Otherwise, promise to remain committed throughout the emergency response.
- **Discussion of money**—In the initial phase of a crisis, discussion of the magnitude of the problem should be in the context of the health and safety of the public or environment. Loss of property is secondary. Also, a discussion of the amount of money spent is not a surrogate for the level of concern and response from your organization (What does that money provide?).
- **Humor**—Seldom is humor a good idea. People seldom "get the joke" when they are feeling desperate. Humor is a great stress-reliever behind closed doors. Anyone who has responded to emergencies knows that sometimes inappropriate humor creeps in as a coping mechanism. Be careful not to offend others responding to an emergency, even behind closed doors. Be especially sensitive when speaking to the public. One person's attempt at humor may be another's insult.

The Expected Questions

No matter what the crisis, following are the questions that will always be asked and should be anticipated by you. Be prepared to address the following:

- What happened?
- 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?
- Who is in charge?
- Has this been contained?
- Are victims being helped?
- What can we expect, right now and later?
- What should we do?
- Why did this happen?
- Did you have forewarning?

The Scientist as Spokesperson

Can what you say and how you say it be the difference between life and death during a crisis? Yes. The overwhelming research shows that a credible spokesperson can influence behaviors that could be life-saving. Oh, that it would be as simple as reading a prepared statement! It's not.

For a scientist to achieve such noble aims as saving lives, reducing anxiety and fear, and helping the community recover more quickly depends in great deal on not only the words delivered but also the way the words are delivered. A scientist who becomes a spokesperson during a crisis is endowed with special responsibilities. First, if you are representing a part of the official response, such as the incident commander or head of a response agency, you are the human embodiment of that command group or agency. You take the EOC or your agency from an "it" to a "we." You're the human face. That's a hefty responsibility. Use it strategically.

The public is looking for an expression of empathy from the "powers that be." You're it. If you express in words a sincere understanding of what the members of your community are feeling, you have just made a giant leap toward gaining their trust. Remember, you do not have to personally be afraid to be able to express "I can understand this situation may be frightening. I know you are looking for answers to important questions here. We want answers too and were taking steps to get them, including..." Or, "This is a confusing time for us. It's such a horrible tragedy we face today. My greatest wish is that we would never have to put into action the plans we made for just such an event. We are in pain but we are going to work through this pain and keep helping the people we can. We will not stop until we

help every one of our neighbors. I'm going to ask you to help us too. We may be asking you to endure some hardships here. We may ask for your patience as we work to get answers. We may call on you to volunteer in some way. We're a strong community, built on a foundation of firm values and I know one of those is a willingness to help each other when we're in need. I'm counting on that help from each of you today and tomorrow."

It would be unwise to try to "can" statements of empathy in advance of a disaster. If you are a leader whose community is suffering, the words will come. Trust yourself that what you speak from your heart is what the public needs to hear. If you shut down emotionally and attempt to appear unfazed by the event, you risk your credibility. Don't shed a tear if that's not you, but simply understand that some in your community are crying, are hurting, and want to know you understand. That sincere expression of empathy will help quiet anxious minds and allow people to hear your message. **Express empathy and then give directions for action.** These two steps, in this order, will help you and your community early in the disaster.

A leader has the ability in a crisis to rally his or her community. A leader who is sharing the risk, a part of the affected community, can call on his or her community to shoulder the burden and help others. A person frightened out of his or her wits will respond positively to a call for action and perseverance from an empathetic and committed leader. Ask your neighbors to be their strongest and they will be. Interestingly, following September 11, 2001, researchers discovered that able-bodied elderly people in lower Manhattan were an asset to the recovery of that community. They helped their younger neighbors cope with the worst tragedy of their young lives by telling stories about other trying times from the past. Young people wanted to hear that their elders faced tragedy and were able to recover. Stories about World War II and the Depression helped the young. In fact, Mayor Giuliani reached back to stories about the WW II bombings of London to help him keep hope for his city. An early reminder that we must "buck up" to help each other will give people something to concentrate on besides their own fears.

Conclusion

In a crisis, the right message at the right time is a “resource multiplier”—it helps response officials get their job done. Many of the predictable, harmful, individual and community behaviors can be mitigated with effective crisis and emergency risk communication. Each crisis will carry its own psychological baggage. An agency must anticipate what mental stresses the population will be experiencing and apply appropriate communication strategies to attempt to manage these stresses in the population.

Crisis and emergency-risk communications (CERC) are fully legitimate tools of response and

recovery just like any other resource applied to the disaster. It is not an attempt at mass mental therapy. It is a reasoned and mature communication approach to the selection of message, messenger, and method of delivery. Nowhere is there an implied promise that a population or community faced with an emergency, crisis, or disaster will overcome its challenges solely through the application of the communication principles presented here. However, I will promise that an organization can compound its problems during an emergency if it has neglected sound crisis and emergency risk communication planning.

Safety Library Reference

The National Academies Press provides, free of charge, *Prudent Practices in the Laboratory: Handling and Disposal of Chemicals*, 1995, in a searchable, printable format at:

<http://www.nap.edu/openbook/0309052297/html/index.html>

