

Crisis Communication I:

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

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(Traducción en Español – <http://www.psandman.com/handouts/sand12aS.pdf>)

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 de-emphasize 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.

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.

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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
- Pandemic Influenza Risk Communication: The Teachable Moment (Dec 2004) – www.psandman.com/col/pandemic.htm
- “Speak with One Voice” – Why I Disagree (July 2006) – www.psandman.com/col/onevoice.htm

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