

Crisis Communication IV:

Errors, Misimpressions, and Half-Truths (Page 1)

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(Traducción en Español – <http://www.psandman.com/handouts/sand12dS.pdf>)

19. Acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.

People are more critical of authorities who don't talk about the things that have gone wrong than they are of authorities who acknowledge those things. It takes something like saintliness to acknowledge negatives that the public will never know unless you tell. At least acknowledge those that the public does know, or is likely to find out. Make these acknowledgments early, before the crisis is over and the recriminations begin.

20. Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.

Forgiveness requires more than acknowledgment; it requires apology, even frequent apology. "Wallowing" in your contrition about what went wrong is (paradoxically) a good way to persuade the rest of us to move on. Even if there is a case to be made that it wasn't really your fault (the tanker captain had been drinking, some madman put cyanide in the Tylenol), you still need to be apologetic.

21. Be explicit about "anchoring frames."

People have trouble learning information that conflicts with their prior knowledge, experience, or intuition. The pre-existing beliefs and feelings provide an "anchoring frame" that impedes acquisition of the new information. It helps to be explicit about the discrepancy – first justify their starting position (why it was right, or seemed right; why it is widespread), then explain your alternative (what changed; what was learned; why their starting position turns out, surprisingly, to be mistaken).

22. Be explicit about changes in official opinion, prediction, and policy.

In emerging crises, authorities are likely to learn things that justify changes in official opinions, predictions, or policies. With a new disease, for example, there are bound to be changes in the recommended precautions and the treatment protocol. Announcing the new doctrine without reminding the public that it deviates from the old, though tempting, slows learning and fosters confusion or even suspicion.

23. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths.

It doesn't require an out-and-out lie to devastate the credibility of crisis managers, and thus their ability to manage the crisis. A carefully crafted misleading half-truth can do the same harm, and so can a cover-up of information people later feel they should have been told. Such strategies may work for a while, at least for those who aren't paying close attention. But in a serious crisis many people are paying close attention. They may smell a less-than-candid official line long before they can specify the half-truths and omissions. And the price is high.

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24. Aim for total candor and transparency.

There are always good reasons to withhold some information in a crisis – from fear of provoking panic to fear of turning out wrong. These valid rationales easily become excuses ... and too much gets withheld, rarely too little. People are at their best when collectively facing a difficult situation straight-on. Things get much more unstable when we begin to feel “handled,” misled, not leveled with. Even so, you probably shouldn’t achieve total candor and transparency, but you can safely aim for it.

25. Be careful with risk comparisons.

Why are some risks more upsetting than others? The statistical seriousness of the risk is certainly relevant, but so are “outrage factors” like trust, dread, familiarity, and control. In addition, a risk that threatens health care systems, economies, and social stability is likely to be seen as threatening individual health as well, even when it does not. Efforts to reassure people by comparing improbable but upsetting risks to more probable but less upsetting ones feel patronizing and tend to backfire.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Saying You’re Sorry (May 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/sorry.htm
- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- Yellow Flags: The Acid Test of Transparency (Apr 2002) – www.psandman.com/col/yellow.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
- Misleading toward the Truth: The U.S. Department of Agriculture Mishandles Mad Cow Risk Communication (March 2004) – www.psandman.com/col/madcow.htm

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