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Risk Communication in Public Health Emergencies

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Monday Morning Quarterbacking

- What communication breakdowns were highlighted by Katrina?
- What would you have done differently before, during and after the crisis?
- What role did the media play?

Risk Perception

Of evacuees surveyed in the Astrodome,

- 73% said that they had heard that an evacuation order had been given;
- 66% thought the information was clear;
- 29% did not evacuate because they didn’t think the storm would be as bad as it was;
- 10% did not evacuate because they didn’t want to leave.

Introduction to Risk Communication Theory

Resources

- WHO Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies
  - Hyer and Covello
  - July 2005
Resources

- CDC Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication by Leaders for Leaders

Who will need to communicate with the public in a crisis?

- Public Information Officers
- Official spokespersons
- Administrators, Directors, Managers
- AND
- Everybody else
Risk Perception

- People are more likely to believe information that is consistent with what they already think.

- Beliefs change SLOWLY and PERSIST in the face of contrary evidence.

- 1 negative = 3 positives

Risk Perception

- Controllable
- Known
- Equitable
- Voluntary
- Old risk
- Uncontrollable
- Unknown
- Inequitable
- Involuntary
- New risk

**Low Stress vs. High Stress Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOW STRESS</th>
<th>HIGH STRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 messages</td>
<td>3 messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average grade level</td>
<td>Avg. grade minus 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First, Second, Third...</td>
<td>First, Last</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust = knowledge</td>
<td>Trust = compassion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fear and Communication**

- “Anthrax is not contagious but fear is!”
- Communication is an intervention
- Look at fear and distress as a contagious disease and information and communication as an antibiotic
What should risk communication do?

- Enhance knowledge and understanding
- Build trust and credibility
- Encourage people to engage in constructive dialogue
- Produce appropriate levels of concern
- Produce behavior and actions
The Three Be’s

- Be first.
- Be right.
- Be credible.

This is hard on a good day.

It will be challenging in a crisis.

You MUST prepare BEFORE the crisis to achieve the Three Be’s.

Pre-event Message Development

- Allows time to gather thoughts and useful information
- Able to vet statements beforehand
- Saves time to ensure that you’re first out of the gate in the event of a crisis
- Thinking much more clearly today than the day a crisis occurs
The First Message

- Express empathy
- Confirmed facts and action steps
- What you don’t know
- What’s being done
- Statement of commitment
- What people can do
- Where people can get more information

Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC):
Crisis Leader—First Message

1. Expression of empathy ________________________________

2. Clarifying facts (Fill in only VERIFIED facts, skip if not certain):
   Who__________________________________________________
   What (Action)_________________________________________
   Where________________________________________________
   When________________________________________________
   Why_________________________________________________
   How_________________________________________________

3. What we don’t know:__________________________________

4. Process to get answers:_______________________________

5. Statement of commitment:_____________________________

6. Referrals
   For more information__________________________________
   Next scheduled update______________________________
More pre-event messages

- Identify the stakeholders
- Identify their concerns
- Develop 3 key messages that address their concerns
  - 3 seconds or 9 words each
  - 9 seconds or 27 words total
- Gather supporting facts
- Test the messages
- Deliver messages through appropriate channels

Vincent Covello, Center for Risk Communication, NY

27/9/3

- 27 words
- 9 seconds
- 3 messages

- We do not normally speak in 27/9/3!
- Importance of pre-event message development
## Know, Do, Go

- Good three message outline
- **KNOW:** Tell them something you want them to know
- **DO:** Tell them something that they can do
- **GO:** Tell them where they can find more information
- Each message should be about 9 words

## Practice: Know, Do, Go

Take a moment to write a simple communication with a Know, a Do and a Go component. Make sure you follow the 27/9/3 rule.

**Scenario:** After a disaster, the drinking water quality in Americaville deteriorates and is no longer potable.
Message Mapping

- 3 key messages
- 9 words each
- 3 supporting facts per message

Practice: Message Mapping

Use your Message Mapping worksheet to create a message map for your Know, Do, Go statement.

Flesh out the message map for follow-up information with 3 supporting facts for each statement.
Failures and Successes

How to Fail

http://mmb.music.umich.edu/sections/trombone/links.html
Five Failures

- **MIXED MESSAGES**
  - Damages credibility
  - Cumulative, consistent messages
  - Identify unofficial experts in communities and give them early access to information

Five Failures

- **LATE INFORMATION**
  - Media and others will fill information gap
  - Don’t look like you have something to hide
  - Pre-event message development can help you avoid this
Five Failures

- PATERNALISM
  - Never say “Don’t worry”
  - Never tell people that there is no reason to be afraid
  - Help the public come to the same conclusion by empowering them with information

Five Failures

- IGNORING RUMORS
  - Fight fire with facts
  - No rumor is too silly to gain traction
  - In crisis, the improbable seems more possible
Five Failures

- PUBLIC POWER STRUGGLES
  - Get on the same page before you address the public
  - Turf wars must end the minute a crisis begins
  - Credibility depends on a united front
  - You will be asked, “Who’s in charge?”
    - Make sure you really know the answer

How to Succeed

[Image: Some people dream of success, while other people live to crush those dreams. www.depair.com]
Five Keys to Success

- SOLID COMMUNICATION PLAN
  - Develop this BEFORE an event

Five Keys to Success

- BE FIRST
  - Speed of information is an indicator of preparedness
  - The first message received carries the most weight and is the basis for all judgments thereafter
Five Keys to Success

- EXPRESS EMPATHY EARLY
  - The MOST important point
  - Within the first 30 seconds of starting your message
  - Don’t paternalize
  - Be human
  - People want to know that you care before they care what you know

Five Keys to Success

- SHOW COMPETENCE AND EXPERTISE
  - But DON’T be an intellectual snob
  - When people are nervous, they are likely to fill communication gaps with jargon
  - AVOID JARGON
  - Your title speaks for you
  - Be able to give details and answer predictable questions with facts
Five Keys to Success

BE HONEST AND OPEN
- People already distrust government
- We live in the information age
- The truth will come out
- People can sniff out lies
- Treat people like you would want to be treated
- People understand that you may not be able to divulge all information at once
  - If you have to withhold something, tell them why and when they will be able to know
  - Follow that up with something you can tell them

BE HONEST AND OPEN (con’t)
- Do not withhold information if the only reason is because you don’t want people to panic
  - Uncertainty, NOT INFORMATION, causes panic
- Bad news does NOT get better over time
  - Do not withhold information just because it’s bad news
  - Of course there’s bad news – it wouldn’t be a crisis if there weren’t bad news
  - Delivering bad news will gain trust
Risk Communication and the Media

Media
- Friend or foe?
- Asset or liability?
The role of media in disaster communications

- THE MAIN source of health info for the public in a non-disaster setting
- THE ONLY source of ANY info in a disaster setting

77 Questions

- WHO Handbook, Box 1.1, pp. 2-3
- Can you be more specific?
- How certain are you?
- What is your personal opinion?
- Who is in charge?
- How much will this cost?
- How many people are dead/harmed?
Challenge Questions

- Sometimes questions will be impossible to answer
- Attack the problem, not the interviewer
- Guarantee
- False allegation
- What if...

Guarantee

"Can you guarantee that no one else will be harmed from this disaster?"

- Indicate that the question is about the future
- Indicate that the past/present best predict the future
- Bridge to known facts
- Do not say “There are no guarantees in life”
False Allegation

- “Are you a crook?”
  - Do not say “I am not a crook”
  - Repeat the question with the opposite value
  - Indicate the importance of the value/issue
  - Indicate what you are doing to uphold this value/issue

What If...

- What will happen if a terrorist attack occurs during a major natural disaster? Is the city prepared to fight a war on two fronts?
  - Acknowledge that this is a What If? Question
  - Bridge to What Is
  - State what you know factually
I Don’t Know

- Better to say “I Don’t Know” than “No Comment”
- “I don’t know” builds trust
- ALWAYS tell the truth
- Cite the source that does know, or describe follow-up action
- Bridge to what you do know

Bridging Statements

- WHO Handbook, Box 6.1, p.68
- However, it is more important to look at...
- The real issue here is...
- If we look at the big picture...
Final Thoughts on the Media

- Never say “No comment”
- You are never “Off the record”
- Don’t repeat false allegations
- Sit forward, uncross your arms and make eye contact with interviewer
- Remember that your audience is the public, not the media

Resources

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