

CRISIS + EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION

by Leaders for Leaders



BE FIRST. BE RIGHT. BE CREDIBLE.



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On April 19, 1995, an explosion ripped through the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City killing 168. Former Oklahoma Governor, Frank Keating (pictured above), helped the city overcome the tragedy through quick response and by emphasizing open and honest dialogue with the public. His ability to express empathy following the horrific incident not only allowed the community to get back on its feet, but also allowed Keating to connect with the families whose lives had been shattered.

Keating, along with six other leaders detail key emergency risk communication principles during an event in the face of a major public safety emergency in this book: CERC: by Leaders for Leaders.

(photos courtesy of David J. Phillips - AP and Paul Whyte - USA Today)

Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication: *By Leaders For Leaders*

Introduction:

This book gives leaders the tools to navigate the harsh realities of speaking to the public, media, partners and stakeholders during an intense public-safety emergency, including terrorism. 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. A leader must anticipate what mental stresses the population will be experiencing and apply appropriate communication strategies to attempt to manage these stresses in the population.

Nowhere in this book 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, this book does offer the promise that an organization can compound its problems during an emergency if it has neglected sound crisis and emergency risk communication planning. Readers should expect to gain the following understanding:

The Psychology of Communicating in a Crisis

- 5 communication failures that kill operational success
- 5 communication steps that boost operational success
- How to reduce public fear and anxiety, and come to terms with “panic”
- Why people need things to do
- 5 key elements to build and maintain public trust in a crisis

Your Role as a Spokesperson

- New research on the public’s perception of government
- Applying the STARCC principle in your communication
- Questions the public and media always ask first
- 5 mistakes that destroy stakeholder cooperation
- How to deal with angry people

Working with Media during a Crisis

- Your interview rights with the media
- Countering media interview techniques that can hurt you
- 2 things that guarantee your press conference will fail
- 3 things to say early in the crisis when the media are beating on your door

Public Health and Media Law

- The media’s right of publication
- Employee access to media
- Legal definitions of detention, isolation and quarantine

Included in this book are excerpts from interviews so that you can hear directly from leaders—governors, mayors, health officials, and fire chiefs—who stepped up to the microphone during crises and faced their community and the world. Learn how they made tough decisions about how to inform, console and motivate their constituents during and after the crisis.

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The need to communicate clearly was never more compelling than during the recovery from the World Trade Center attacks. People were desperate for information. The information had to be correct, but there were delicate questions of taste and sensitivity as well.

-Rudolph Giuliani

We talked about the anthrax attack because two members of our community had died. That's not a scare when you actually kill someone. It's an attack, and that sort of language nuance builds a level of connection with the community so you're viewing the incident the same way they're viewing the incident.

-Ivan Walks, M.D., Health Director, Washington D.C., Anthrax, 2001

Communicating in a Crisis is Different

Crisis can assault your community in an instant or creep slowly into your midst randomly wreaking havoc until it has you firmly in its 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.

Leaders do control, however, how well their communities respond and recover from the disasters they suffer. As a leader in a crisis you can have a real, measurable affect on the wellbeing of your community through the words you say and the speed and sincerity with which you say them. Research indicates that, in natural disasters, the public perceives the success of the operational response by the amount and speed of relevant information they receive from the emergency response officials (Fisher, 1998).

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). As a leader, you need to know that the way you normally communicate with your community may not be effective during and after it suffers a crisis.

In a catastrophic event, your every word, every eye twitch and every passing emotion resonates with heightened importance to a public desperate for information to help them be safe and recover from the crisis. In several surveys, **the public was asked who they would trust most as a spokesman or reliable source of information** if a bioterrorism event occurred in their community. Respondents trusted most the local health department or a local physician or hospital. However, respondents also trusted “quite a lot” or “a great deal” their own doctor, the fire chief, the director of the health department, the police chief, the governor and a local religious leader.

What the public seeks from its leaders in a crisis

The public wants to know what you know. The leader’s challenge is to give the public what they are demanding within the fog of information overload. The public wants to accomplish the following 5 things with the information they get from their leaders:

- Gain the wanted facts needed to protect them, their families and their pets from the dangers they are facing
- Make well-informed decisions using all available information
- Have an active, participatory role in the response and recovery
- Act as a “watch-guard” over resources, both public and donated monies
- Recover or preserve well-being and normalcy, including economic security

That's a lot to expect from a leader "hell-bent" on making sure his community is going to get all it needs to make the crisis end and the community well again. Leaders who have faced a crisis in their community readily admit that in their planning for a crisis they may have invested only about one percent of the pre-crisis funding to public communication planning and then training about 10 percent of their time in drills or exercises on the public education component. They then found that when the crisis occurred they were spending about 90 percent of their time dealing with decisions about communicating to the public.

Leaders lead with goals in mind

A leader who wants to do the following will need to have a community on board to help them accomplish these goals:

- Decrease illness, injury and deaths
- Execute response and recovery plans with minimal resistance
- Avoid misallocation of limited resources
- Avoid wasting resources

The fact is, in a crisis, good communication to the public is a necessity, not a luxury. The public needs information from its leaders and leaders need support and cooperation from the public.

Leaders will make the following communication decisions

The following are the decisions a leader will be expected to make during a crisis about communicating to the public:

- What to release
- When to release it
- How to release it
- Where to release it
- Whom to release it to
- Why release it

A well-prepared leader 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 we can predict 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.

This [fireman] was on the verge of emotional exhaustion. I mean he had seen a horror, he didn't know what to do. There was no living person in that building that he was able to save. So I knew that my function had to be one of reassurance to those who were risking their lives to help us.

-Frank Keating, Governor, Oklahoma City, Bombing, 1995

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.'

-Rudolph Giuliani, Mayor, New York City, 2001, from his book Leadership

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, 2002, 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.

Reality Check: 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 they have 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.

I will say that - not anyone by name, but I was told by a lot of people in this community when certain individuals went on camera, the [public] clued out. They didn't have any interest in hearing what they had to say because early on in the event they were not telling anything. They were being very superficial.

-Jeff Bowman, Fire Chief, San Diego, California Fires, 2003

basis for comparison. People are justifiably more angry and frightened about terrorist anthrax attacks than about natural outbreaks, even if the number of people attacked is low.

First message 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 credibility of experts. Your first official message as a leader in a crisis to the public, either through the media or directly, should contain the following six elements in the following order (See CERC Tools):

- 1. An expression of empathy.**
- 2. Confirmed facts and action steps**, (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 website. Again, tell them when you will be back in touch with them.

Audience judgments about your message

Expect your audiences to immediately judge the content of your message in the following ways:

Speed of communication

The speed with which you respond to the public is an indicator to the public of how prepared you are to respond to the emergency, that there is a system in place, and that needed action is being taken. If the public is not aware that you're responding to the problem, then you're not! The public may then lose confidence in the organization's ability to respond, and you will be attempting to catch up in convincing the public that the system for response is working.

Trust and credibility of the message

Research shows that there are five basic elements to establishing trust and credibility through communication. You can't fake these. They must be

truly present in the message. All messages, written or spoken, can incorporate these elements and should, especially when attempting to communicate during an emergency. The following are the key elements to building trust (You may note they repeat the important elements in executing a successful communication plan in an emergency described earlier):

- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty and openness
- Commitment
- Accountability

Empathy and caring

Empathy and caring should be expressed within the first 30 seconds. According to research, being perceived as empathetic and caring provides greater opportunity for your message to be received and acted upon. Acknowledge fear, pain, suffering, and uncertainty.

Competence and expertise

Obviously, education, position title, or organizational roles and missions are quick ways to indicate expertise. Previous experience and demonstrated abilities in the current situation enhance the perception of competence.

Another useful means is to have established a relationship with your audiences in advance of the emergency. If that is not possible, have a third party, who has the confidence of the audience, express his or her confidence in you or your organization.

Honesty and openness

This does not mean releasing information prematurely, but it does mean facing the realities of the situation and responding accordingly. It means not being paternalistic in your communication but, instead, participatory—giving people choices and enough information to make appropriate decisions. Be realistic about your communication systems and procedures and, if they do not permit you to comment on something or reveal information, don't pretend you don't have the information; tell the public why the information isn't available for release at the time (e.g., verifying information, notifying partner organizations, not your information to release, etc.). It means allowing the public to observe the process while reminding them that this process is what drives the quality of the emergency response.

☑ Reality check: The farther in distance you are from the people who are suffering the more difficult it may be to express empathy initially because it seems a little abstract. However, during recent terrorism exercises, where leaders were getting fictional reports about tragic events across the country, the strain began to show. These fictional reports, coming through phone calls, were taking a toll. We need to have a certain detachment to be able to make tough decisions in a crisis response. But we don't have to give up our humanity.

Well, first I would say I wouldn't wish it on anybody. Secondly though, if you are in a government leadership position, you just need to prepare yourself. Do not wait until the event.

Jeff Bowman, Fire Chief, San Diego, California Fires, 2003

- Demand that an answer you've given not be used.
- State that what you are about to say is off the record or not attributable to you. (Only reporters can bestow "off the record" status to what you say - and then it's very limited)

Grief and your role as spokesperson

In a catastrophic event in the United States, communities or the nation may face what experts call "death out of time." The death of someone who is not advanced in age and sickly (e.g., the death of a child) can be much more difficult to cope with. Leaders communicating to an individual or community experiencing the extreme pain and grief that accompanies loss through death must be especially aware of how this grief is suffered. Grief is a universal emotion, but no two people experience grief in exactly the same manner.

In a catastrophic event, many people are ill, dying, or in need of treatment and it may be your job to talk with individuals about what is happening. The following are some basic thoughts about communication styles in an intimate but highly emotional emergency situation:

Empathize with the patient and family

- People indulge in serious, meaningful communication only for short spans.
- Chitchat is a treasure trove of meaningful "hints" about what a person is worried about.
- Privacy is an important requirement. Assure that information shared will be kept private.
- Allow communication free from interruptions (e.g., crying shouldn't be interrupted).
- Try not to answer questions outside your area of expertise. Get permission from the individual to refer him or her to an expert.

Listen carefully

- Place the speaker's needs above your own.
- Use open and accepting body language (e.g., no crossed arms).
- Always be honest in responding.
- Try not to interrupt to give advice.
- Accept moments of silence.
- As much as 90 percent of communication is nonverbal.

Better communication

- Use the person's name in the conversation.
- Ask a clarifying question: "Can you help me understand?"
- Allow the conversation to evolve—don't push it where you hope it will go.
- Allow time for silence.
- Be sensitive to a person's nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, and feelings.

You know we doctors are notorious for using big words. I was doing the Oprah Winfrey show with Tom Ridge and Oprah asked me about the Brentwood Mail Facility. And I said, 'Oprah, it's a big old building.' Well that's not a scientific term but everybody understands a big old building is a big old building. Not trying to impress people with how smart you are, makes a big difference."

-Ivan Walks, M.D., Health Director, Washington D.C., Anthrax, 2001

- When possible, use the words the person uses.
- Self-disclosure may help the person expand on the topic.
- When responding to someone, say “you’re crying” instead of “you’re sad;” allow the person the opportunity to express the feeling behind the action.
- How something is said is often more important than what is said.

When speaking to grieving family members:

Your presence is more important than conversation. Family members may voice feelings with such strong emotion as “I don’t know how I’m going to live without my husband,” or “Why would God allow this to happen?” Short statements of condolence, such as “I’m so sorry,” “This is a sad time,” or “You’re in my prayers,” are enough of a response. If a person tenses at your touch, withdraw.

Use “death” or “dying” not softer euphemisms. Many people feel patronized by words like “expired” or “received his heavenly reward.” Use the same words as the grieving person to respect cultural differences.

Know the needs of your stakeholders

The media are demanding stakeholders during a crisis and the danger is you may think if you focus on satisfying the media, everyone else who wants communication from you will be satisfied. That’s just not the way it works. You can’t ignore the media, for lots of obvious reasons. You must plan, however, that other stakeholder groups will want a piece of you during and after the crisis.

Stakeholders are identifiable groups of people or organizations who can be reached in ways other than through the media. They self-identify as stakeholders. You don’t get to decide whether they have something at stake in the crisis or not. They believe you are beholden to them in some way and they expect to communicate with you in some way other than through the media.

Since we haven’t perfected cloning yet, you’re going to have to make some tough decisions. The highest level of respect toward a stakeholder group is for the organization’s leader to meet face to face with them. As that leader, you need to work with your communication and policy planners to determine who, in a crisis, should be invited to meet with you, or be called by you or receive a hand written note or special email from you. You can’t do all of these things for all stakeholders. Do decide who you can delegate some of these activities to. Mayor Giuliani tried to attend as many funerals as possible for the firemen and policemen and government workers who died on September 11, 2001. He tried not to delegate that task. He chose wisely his stakeholder priorities.

Well, credibility is everything. Truth is everything. If you have an individual who is the spokesman, the representative of the government attempting to respond to a tragedy and people view that person cynically or with suspicion, if anything you're going to create more rumor mongering, you're going to create other false trails, and you're going to create the potential of chaos which is terrible. So whoever is the spokesman better be credible.

-Frank Keating, Governor, Oklahoma City, Bombing, 1995
