Risk Communication Primer

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Risk communication, simply put, is the exchange of information about risks. What are risks? In common parlance, risk means “(exposure to) the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance; a chance or situation involving such a possibility.”¹ Risk refers to the uncertainty of danger, hazard, or exposure to peril that we face every day.² Helping people understand risks and ramp up or tone down their reaction to risk is often the goal of risk communicators.³ At its best, risk communication is “An open, two-way exchange of information and opinion about risk leading to better understanding and better risk management decisions.”⁴ Extension professionals, familiar with the culture and needs of their audiences, are uniquely positioned, once relationships of trust have been established, to practice risk communication.

Risk communication is a dialog. Having recognized the weaknesses of one-way risk communication, the National Research Council (NRC) in 1989 published a ground-breaking book, Improving Risk Communication. As defined in this book, risk communication involves understanding the reaction to risk messages and to how risk management is structured in addition to communicating about the risk itself.

Risk communication is an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reaction to risk messages or to legal or institutional arrangements for risk management.⁵

Risk communication as defined by the NRC inherently involves multiple messages. There may be several parties making competing claims about a risk. In this situation risk messages are addressing both uncertainty—by sharing and assessing available evidence—and ambiguity—by promoting a particular interpretation of the evidence. Competing interests will naturally lead to competing risk messages and confusion among laypersons. The solution is more communication, not less.

The terms “risk” and “crisis communication” are often used interchangeably. However, the point of risk communication is to avoid crises. Risk communication is forward-looking in that it identifies, in advance, situations where decision-making is required in the face of uncertainty. Ideally, the application of effective risk communication will prevent crises because stakeholders have already developed an understanding of the best way to respond in such situations. Crisis or emergency risk communication comes into play in the face of a disaster and its aftermath. Crisis communication also may encompass some aspect of reputation management (whether of a government agency or private company), whereas, emergency risk communication is practiced by impartial credible organizations (which can also be government agencies or private companies).

Risk and emergency risk communication are integrated in the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model⁶ developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The phases and their objectives are described in the following table.

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<th>Phase</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<td>I. Pre-Crisis</td>
<td>Convey Risk Messages and Warnings, Make Preparations</td>
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<td>II. Initial Incident</td>
<td>Reassure, Reduce Uncertainty, Promote Self-Efficacy</td>
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<td>III. Maintenance</td>
<td>Continue as in II Incorporating Feedback</td>
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<td>IV. Resolution</td>
<td>Provide Recovery Updates, Discuss Causes and Future Risk Management</td>
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<td>V. Evaluation</td>
<td>Discuss Adequacy of Response, Communicate and Act on Lessons Learned</td>
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Both risk and emergency risk communication involve an ongoing process of audience identification, selecting methods for communicating with the audience, creating and disseminating messages, then receiving and adapting to feedback. Extension professionals, recognized as trustworthy sources of information, can tailor messages based on the culture and needs of their audiences. Emergency risk communication receives a lot of attention in emergency response exercises; however, the process begins well in advance of an emergency situation or disaster.

To practice effective risk communication one must first have a clear understanding of who the stakeholders are for a given risk. Stakeholders in this context are best viewed as anyone or any group of persons whose lives could be affected by a given risk. Involving stakeholders in a dialog is the second key element of effective risk communication. Patience and skill in relationship building, consensus-building, and conflict resolution are necessary qualities of effective risk communicators. Risk communication involves awareness of and consideration for the differences between “expert” views and “layperson” concerns.

In evaluating risks, people make sense of the situation in a number of ways. They may evaluate the content of a claim systematically (“objectively”) or more superficially based on the source or other feature that is not part of the content of the message. People will make an estimate of the probability and potential severity of a risk which then factors into their risk perception. People also account for their own ability to reduce the consequences of the risk to themselves personally. This assessment of self-efficacy will affect one’s perception of the relevance of a risk message. The importance of perceived trust in and credibility of organizations generating risk messages cannot be overstated. This is a major determinant of what sources people will seek out and listen to about particular risks.

Extension professionals serving as risk communicators should be guided by the following principles:

- Know the audience. What does the audience know about the issue? What are their concerns and opinions? What is their level of education and native language? What do you know about their culture and worldview? If you listen, you will better understand your audience.
- Involve scientific experts. They can explain what is known and not known about a particular issue and explain uncertainties in the risk assessment process.
- Establish expertise in communication. Risk communication messages must be understandable and usable. This is best achieved by delivering key messages tailored to the audience. (Message mapping may be a helpful technique.)
- Be a credible source of information. Strive to provide the best information. Be trustworthy, fair, and un-biased.
- Differentiate between science and value judgment. Facts must be separated from values when considering risk management options. Defining an acceptable level of risk is a value judgment.
- Place the risk in perspective. Compare the risks and benefits and the probabilities of each for the issue at hand. Risks can be compared with other familiar risks, but comparisons among risks must be done transparently or may be seen as manipulative.

Extension professionals routinely follow many if not all of these principles in their communications with clientele. Other principles of risk communication—sharing responsibility and assuring transparency—are more applicable to policy makers and regulatory agencies.

If uncertainty is a feature of a situation affecting your stakeholders, consider taking a risk communication approach to facilitate decision-making.

References