

# Risky Business: The Principles of Risk Communication

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FAMILY PHYSICIANS

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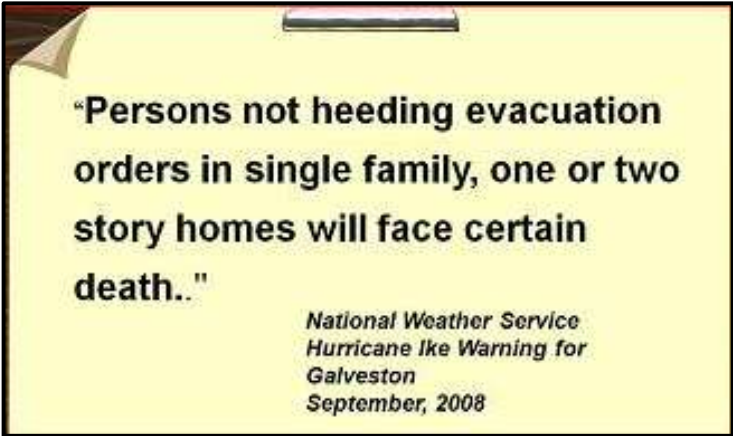
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# Learning Objectives

- Shared examples from the media
- Defined: Risk vs Risk Communication vs Crisis Communication
- Reviewed principles of Risk Communication
- Highlighted principles of Effective Communication
- Practiced a Risk Communication Strategy





**"Persons not heeding evacuation orders in single family, one or two story homes will face certain death.."**

*National Weather Service  
Hurricane Ike Warning for  
Galveston  
September, 2008*

## Definitions

- Risk
- Risk Communication
- Crisis Communication

# Risk

- Oxford Dictionary: ‘a situation involving exposure to danger’
- Merriam-Webster: ‘someone or something that creates or suggests a hazard’

**“Risk surrounds us. Indeed, to a large degree, it defines us as human beings.”—Joseph Koletar, Rethinking Risk**

# Risk Communication

Communicator hopes to provide the receiver with information about the expected type and magnitude of an outcome from a behavior or exposure

CDC Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Basic Quick Guide, 2008

# Crisis Communication

“Describes an organization facing a crisis and the need to communicate about that crisis to stakeholders and the public”

CDC Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Basic Quick Guide, 2008

## Activity #1

Review each case

Which are risk communication or crisis communication?

# Principles of Risk Communication

- Risk Perception Theory
- Trust Determination Theory
- Mental Noise
- Negative Dominance

# Risk Perception Theory

- Trust
- Control
- Benefits
- Fairness
- Potential for catastrophe
- Effect on future generation
- Affect on children
- Media attention
- Human vs. Act of God

Their perception is our reality

# Trust Determination Theory

- Need to establish trust
- Show caring in first 30 seconds
- Difficult to overcome later
- Body language can enhance
- Don't underestimate non-verbals
  - Tone of voice & touching face
  - Folding arms
  - Clenching hands
  - Hand & body movements
- To enhance credibility:
  - Humble introduction
  - Appropriate facts
  - Avoid technical words
  - Highly organized
  - Be assertive
  - Dedication to the activity
  - Honesty and openness
  - Empathy and caring

People need to know you care before they care about what you know

# Mental Noise & Negative Dominance

- The mind gets in the way
  - Hearing is distorted
  - Short attention spans
  - Interference blocks new information assimilation
- Repeat 3 times
  - Three short messages
  - Keep is simple & brief
- People think negatively
  - Three times more influence
  - Gravitate to negative
- Counteract through positive messaging
  - 4 positive statements
  - Avoid repeating negative statements

Fundamental limitations to the human brain under stress

## Activity #2

Small groups brainstorm:

- List stakeholders and their concerns
- Identify which stakeholders you would engage first regarding the risk of mumps
- List of anticipated questions for an initial engagement

### Number at Risk of Getting Mumps

12%



Vaccinated with MMR

100%



Not vaccinated

“Because some people do not get lasting protection from the vaccine and mumps spreads easily from person to person, outbreaks can still occur in vaccinated populations. But, if unvaccinated, many, many, more people would become ill.”

– Dr. Jeff Duchin, Public Health—Seattle King County

## Perception of Risk

- Voluntary
- Personally controlled
- Familiar
- Natural
- Reversible
- Statistical
- Endemic
- Fairly distributed
- Generated by trusted institution
- Adults
- Understood benefit

CDC Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Basic Quick Guide, 2008



# Forms of Risk Communication

In health fields:

1. Information & education
2. Behavior change & protective action
3. Disaster warnings & emergency info
4. Joint problem solving & conflict resolution

Ng KL, Hamby DM; Fundamentals for establishing a risk communication program

# Risk Communication Strategy

- Obtain organizational support
- Determine risk communication needs
- Develop objectives for risk communication
- Form communication teams
- Train team members
- Evaluate potential audience

Ng KL, Hamby DM; Fundamentals for establishing a risk communication program

# Risk Communication Strategy

- Evaluate media
- Design risk message
- Develop schedule
- Communicate plan with organization
- Form focus groups
- Practice
- Evaluate the program

Ng KL, Hamby DM; Fundamentals for establishing a risk communication program

# CDC Checklist

- What types of risk does your organization face?
- Who is on your communication team?
- Who are your stakeholders?
- What are your responsibilities?
- What are the perceptions?
- Who will be the primary spokesperson(s)?
- What resources do you have?
- What information do you need to provide?

# Message Development

What is the purpose

Who is the audience

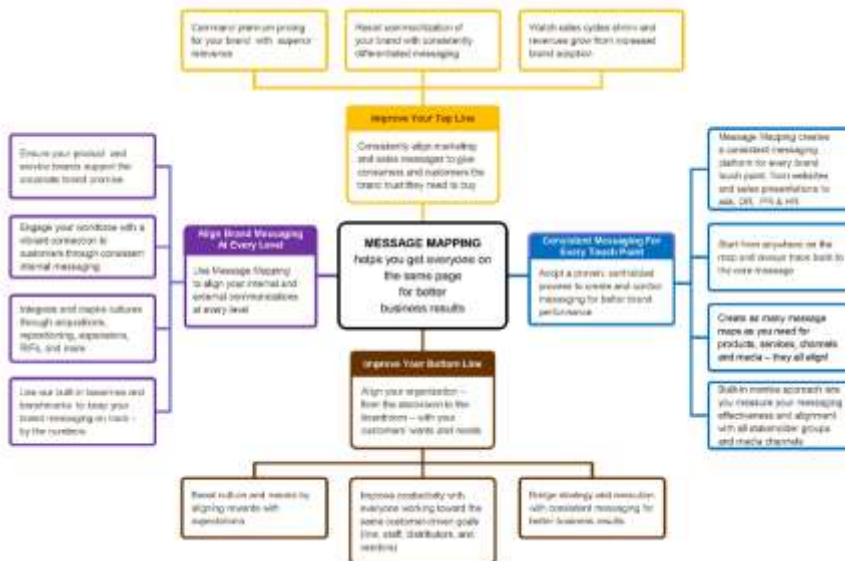
What are they concerned about

How will we respond

What areas do we need to avoid

What is our key message

Does our message support the purpose



### Message Map 5

Stakeholder: Public/  
Media

Question or Concern:  
What can people do to  
prevent West Nile  
Virus?

Key Message 1	Key Message 2	Key Message 3
Remove standing water	Wear protective clothing	Use insect repellent
1. Remove old tires which collect water and serve as breeding grounds for mosquitoes	1. Wear long sleeved shirts	1. Repellents containing DEET are recommended
2. Empty or clean flower pots and bird baths daily	2. Wear long pants	2. Use 23% DEET
3. Empty and clean cat/dog water bowls daily	3. Especially at dawn and dusk	3. Do not use repellents that do not contain DEET

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## Activity #3

Small brainstorming groups:

- 3 key messages for an initial internal engagement
- Note future communications actions, what channels to use, any needed products

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# Effective Communication

## 3 Types:

- Aggressive
- Passive
- Assertive

## Basic communication problems:

- Mismatch between words people use and their wants
- People do not assert their needs, deny their importance, or disregard others
- People hear, but do not really listen

Caudill, Margaret MD: Managing Pain Before In Manages You, 2002, pg 138-55

# Assertiveness

## 3 Obstacles:

- Not feeling entitled to speak up
- Confusing assertiveness with passiveness or aggression
- Not knowing why you feel the way you do

Assertive communication formula:

“I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”

Caudill, Margaret MD: Managing Pain Before In Manages You, 2002, pg 138-55

# Communication Failures

- Mixed messages
- Information released late
- Paternalistic attitudes
- Not countering rumors in real time
- Public power struggles

CDC Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Basic Quick Guide, 2008

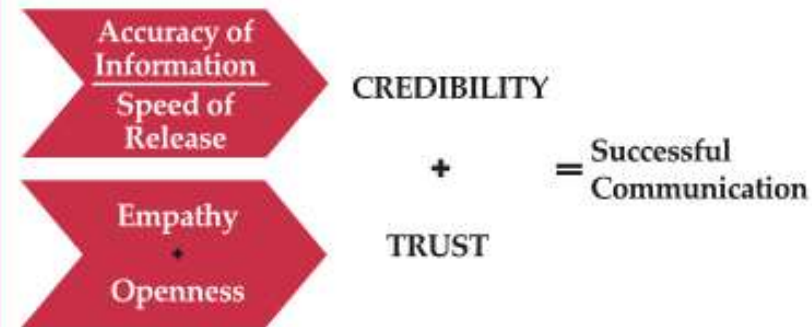
# Communication Successes

- Manage reputational risk
- Express empathy
- Show competence & expertise
- Remain honest & open
- Demonstrate accountability & commitment

CDC Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Basic Quick Guide, 2008

# Successful Communication

Figure 1–2. Elements of successful communication



CDC Crisis Emergency and Risk Communication Basic Quick Guide, 2008

## Media

- Help to communicate message
- Help reporters get the facts right
- Set reasonable expectations for new info
- Do not ignore local media over national

# Tips for Spokespersons

## Do's

- Know release of info policies
- Stay within your scope
- Tell the truth
- Be as open as possible
- Follow up on issues
- Use visuals
- Know the mic is always on

## Pitfalls

- Avoid jargon & one liners
- Use humor cautiously
- Refute negative allegations without repeating them
- Do not assume you made your point clearly
- Stay away from speculation
- Avoid no, never, but...

# Stay on Message

- “What is important to remember is...”
- “I can’t answer that question, but I can tell you...”
- “I want to tell your viewers...”
- “Allow me to put this in perspective...”

Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.



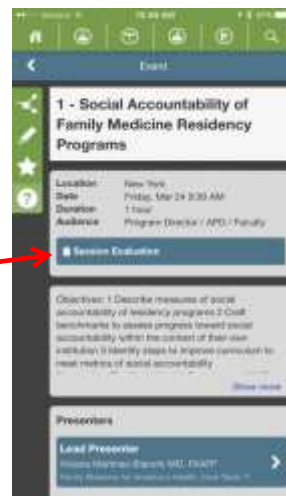
## Activity #4

- You are the Chief Medical Officer for a large community hospital
- Public Health officials have notified you there is a significant number of mumps cases in the community around your hospital
- Practice presenting talking points to your staff, some of whom are really concerned

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Please...  
Complete the  
session evaluation.  
Thank you.



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# References

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- Stone D, Patton B, Keen S; Difficult Conversations, 2010
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STRONG MEDICINE FOR AMERICA