

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications: Best Practices

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

Hello. I'm Dr. Barbara Reynolds, a crisis communication specialist at the CDC. In this podcast, I'll characterize the initial phase of the crisis communication lifecycle and briefly discuss the critical components of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication, or CERC. In addition, I'll describe the five most common mistakes made in emergency communication to the public, and how to counter them.

The current outbreak of novel Influenza Type A H1N1 offers risk communication challenges *and* opportunities. As is the case in many emerging disease outbreaks, uncertainties are expected. For this outbreak, based on the CERC framework, we're still in the initial stage of the emergency communication lifecycle. In this phase, there are typically more questions than answers.

What we've learned from previous events is that the public can withstand ambiguity *if* they're allowed to follow the process health officials are using to find answers. It's too soon to predict what will happen or how the virus might change. The key is to tell the public, from the very beginning, what we know and what we don't know. We must continue to explain that things can and do change. Humility and openness are crucial to effective communication.

People perceive threats on a very personal level. When people become aware of a new threat, they ask themselves, "What does this mean to me? What does this mean to my loved ones?". While we have their attention, we should share what we recommend and where to go if they want to know more, now or later.

Expect the public to immediately judge the content of an official emergency message in the following ways: "Was it timely?" "Can I trust this source?" and "Are they being honest?".

There are five common mistakes in crisis communication. They can quickly cause a breakdown in the honest exchange between response officials and the public.

The five common crisis communication mistakes are:

- Mixed messages from multiple experts,
- Information released late,
- Paternalistic attitudes,
- Not countering rumors and myths in real time, and
- Public power struggles and confusion

You can help avoid these mistakes by using the six CERC principles.

1. Be first. If the information is yours to provide by organizational authority, do so as soon as possible. If you can't, then explain how you are working to get it. Don't sit on factual information. If you do, it will leave a vacuum that may be filled by people who don't have the public's best interest at heart.
2. Be right. There's a natural tension between being fast in sharing information and being accurate. To avoid this tension, give facts in increments. Tell people what you know when you know it, tell them what you don't know, and then, tell them if you will know relevant

information later. Release accurate information quickly and be comfortable with the idea that people can tolerate getting reliable information in pieces.

3. Be credible; tell the truth. Don't withhold information to avoid embarrassment or the possible 'panic' that seldom happens. Uncertainty is worse than not knowing; rumors are more damaging than hard truths.
4. Express empathy, which is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and then acknowledge what they're feeling in specific words. When you acknowledge in words what people are feeling, it builds trust. For example, say, "We understand this is worrisome." Emotions can range from concern and anxiety to dread, fear, or confusion. Be confident that you can relate to people and then be relatable.
5. Promote action; give people things to do. It calms anxiety and helps restore a sense of self-control. Give people things to do that they can actually carry out. Let them master a simple task before asking them to do something more difficult. For example, in a severe pandemic, children may be dismissed from school for many weeks. Ask parents if they're prepared to care for their child if he were out of school for two weeks. Allow them to become confident that they can care for their child for two weeks before suggesting that they care for him for many weeks.
6. Show respect. Although this is the last CERC principle, it may be the most important. Treat people the way you want to be treated; the way you want your loved ones treated. Always do this, even when hard decisions must be communicated. Don't be paternalistic in your communication to the public.

Remember, an organization can compound its problems during an emergency if it has neglected sound crisis and emergency risk communication principles. In a crisis, the right message at the right time is a "resource multiplier" - it helps response officials get their job done and it *can* save lives.

If you'd like more information or free materials about this and other Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication best practices, send an email to: CERCrequest@cdc.gov or visit emergency.cdc.gov/cerc. Thank you.

For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.