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Developing Risk Communication Skills: More Than Damage Management

Deanne Wright
Kansas State University

Risk communication provides a methodology that enables an organization to respond effectively to issues or situations of a controversial nature. It is one important aspect of risk management.

Important Concepts

The concept of risk management, risk communication and risk assessment are related and overlapping.

Risk Management: The process of deciding what to do where risk has been determined to exist. It involves figuring out how to reduce risk in light of values-political, social, economic, philosophical and psychological. It may also mean planning for the negative consequences of any decision, process or action. (Often referred to as "structured commons sense.")

Risk Assessment: A quantitative process to estimate the probability of some harm coming to an individual or population as a result of exposure to a substance or situation. It is a process whereby decisions are made in risk management in the face of uncertainty.

Risk Communication: Risk communication is what is conveyed to the public about the existence, nature, severity or acceptability of risks. In a proactive, democratic mode, risk communication is a means for facilitating informed voice. Risk communication is most effective as

as interaction among government agencies, industry, mass media practitioners and lay citizens.

Dealing With Controversy

When you work with the public, you are likely to encounter s controversy of some issue. A variety of options for dealing with controversial situations are open to you.

One is to bury your head in the sand and hope controversy passes you by. Of course, when you are in that position, a certain part of your anatomy is extremely vulnerable to shack—and you may never know what kicked you.

Another option is to charge into the fray, intimidating the opposition. The main problem with that tactic, however, is that you are likely to get shout out of the saddle as a "Lone Ranger."

We often handle highly charged conflict by discounting the credibility of others and *thinking in* terms of black and white: "mad-dog" media, "redneck" producers, "crazy" consumers.

This is a human reaction to controversy and most of us soon get a grip on ourselves and look for more effective approaches to dealing with a problem.

Risk Business

When an organization is swept into a controversial situation, an incredible amount of time and energy suddenly has to be focused on "damage control."

Attempts to limit the scope of damage that can occur *to* an organization's reputation and effectiveness usually focus on media management. It is critical, however, for decision-makers to understand the difference between media management and risk communication.

Leaders especially need to understand that it doesn't pay to manipulate the media. The fact is, the days of controlling the release of damaging information probably are gone. Horror stories about from situations where supposedly "controlled" information was leaked out of an organization.

Risk Communication Model

What today's public relations environment demands is an interactive process of communication which can be planned from a risk communication model.

Risk communication is not a panacea for resolving controversial issues, but in its most effective application, it is an opportunity for an organization to attain increased respect from the public. Even an *organization under duress* can retain respect it has earned through the years if it deals with it multiple publics forthrightly.

More Than Crisis Management

Many workshops about risk communication focus solely on managing

a crisis situation. Certainly it is important *to* know the guidelines for dealing with a crisis. Those guidelines are available in the EPA publication, "The Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication."

More Than Media Management

If however, you know your organization is likely to have to deal with controversial situations, then it is important to do more than be trained in "managing the media."

A Comprehensive Communication Plan
It is important *to* develop a communication plan for your organization which creates and supports an attitudinal shift among administrators and employees. The crux of a risk communication plan is this: Involve early-on all groups that have a stake in the outcome of a risk or controversial situation.

This process often seems too time consuming and too messy, but in the long run you invariably save time and energy, and you usually enhance your credibility. Nothing costs more than a lengthy cleanup of public outrage.

Barriers to Attitudinal Shift

There are many natural barriers which prevent administrators and employees, however, from dealing proactively with all its public. Publics may include lay citizens, other governmental agencies, industry representatives, and mass media practitioners. One of the biggest barriers to attitudinal change is this: "How do you listen to stakeholders when you can't stand to hear what they're saying?"

In her presentation on risk communication, Deanne Wright merges principles of mass communication and interpersonal communication and analyzes the intersecting point where risk communication occurs.