Overcoming Common Communication Challenges:

Practical Advice for Technical Communicators

Contents

Introduction

Technology plays a central role in modern life, enlarging mankind's possibilities and at the same time creating new challenges. Many professionals have the training and ability to effectively analyze and solve difficult technical problems but find their information exchange efforts hampered by interpersonal dynamics and communication issues.

An effective communication program addresses the values, interests, and concerns of internal and external stakeholders. Investing time in establishing and maintaining effective interactions can prevent misunderstandings, conflicts, project delays, and media disasters.

This booklet is designed to help technical communicators in government agencies and other organizations overcome common communication challenges. It describes real-world situations, presents valuable insights based on research and practice, and provides specific and practical advice. The information in this booklet comes from the experiences of specialists who have worked at local, state, and federal levels to communicate about key issues in the fields of health, safety, and the environment. It also draws on research conducted in the areas of communication, risk communication, conflict resolution, and public participation.

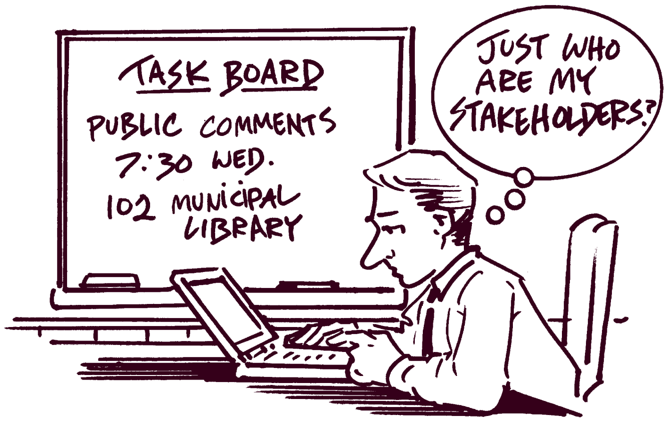
1 Understanding Your Stakeholders

Stakeholders are affected by—and therefore have both an interest and a "stake" in—your activities. Identifying and understanding your stakeholders and their values and issues is crucial to effective communication. Stakeholders can be internal to your organization or external, and can have an endless variety of interests and concerns. Taking the time to identify who is affected, who is interested, and who wants to be involved enables you to design successful processes that meet stakeholder needs and create opportunities for ongoing communication.

Who are your stakeholders?

It takes effort to develop a working understanding of the people and issues involved. Think about who could be affected by the situation, who might be concerned and why, and who needs to be involved or informed. Stakeholders fall into several groups:

- **internally affected** (within your organization);
- **organizationally affected**, such as related government officials at the local, state, and federal level, regulators and the regulated;
- **external groups who are directly affected**, such as land owners, nearby communities, and businesses; and
- **external groups who are generally interested** but may not be personally affected.



Include the media as a stakeholder. The media have a unique way of filtering information, so consider how the information you provide will be heard and used by a reporter. See Chapter 4 for more information.

Gary's New Position

Gary was assigned to a new position that required him to oversee a wetlands restoration project for the Corps of Engineers. One of his challenges was to hold a public meeting and public comment period where stakeholders could voice their opinions on the project. Gary needed to make sure all his stakeholders understood the restoration plans and were satisfied with the process recommended by the Corps. But he had just been given the task, and he was not certain who his stakeholders were or how he was going to identify them.

How do you find your stakeholders?

Identifying stakeholders requires some basic groundwork. Your co-workers, newspapers, and the Internet are useful tools. You can learn a great deal without leaving your desk.

Talk to other people in your organization to find out whom they see as stakeholders. Talk to offices for external communications, such as public or congressional affairs. Ask who has worked with stakeholders before, and find out what their experience has been. By reaching out internally, you will gather important resources and insights and avoid duplication of effort.

- A public affairs office may have news clippings, lists of media contacts, and previously used mailing lists of stakeholders.
- Public meeting minutes and sign-in sheets from previous activities will help you identify concerned individuals and begin to understand their concerns.
- Regional offices often have information repositories that contain records of community involvement. You can learn what questions the community has raised before, what the concerns have been, and who the active community members are.

Read local newspapers on the Internet. You will gain general insights about the make-up of the community as well as specifics about your project and how it is being perceived. Also look for names of local citizens and advocacy groups that may represent or influence community opinions.

Utilize Internet resources. Many community relations tools are maintained on-line by various government agencies.

- Enter the zip code of your project area at www.congress.org to identify elected officials at congressional, state, county, and local levels. Visit the state or county Web site to locate contacts for regulatory agencies and the local school system, as appropriate. Visit www.epa.gov to identify your local EPA representative.

- To learn more about local land use and environmental impacts, visit the EPA's "Search Your Community" Web site, http://www.epa.gov/epahome/commsearch.htm, and enter your project's zip code.
- To identify local business owners, visit the local Chamber of Commerce Web site. In small rural areas, talking with local store owners or even referring to the yellow pages can be helpful. In some cases, local mailing lists by zip code can be purchased to build a stakeholder database.
- The U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov) is a good source for information on
  - income and education levels;
  - employment demographics;
  - ethnic background, racial diversity, and languages spoken;
  - vital statistics on birth, disease, and death rates; and
  - sensitive populations, such as elderly people, women of childbearing age, and children.

Gary developed a list that included managers, affected employees, public affairs, other technical offices, local officials, regulator groups including state departments of environment and health, local citizens and organizations such as the Lions Club and Kiwanis, and advocacy groups like the Sierra Club. But he still did not feel he fully understood his stakeholders. Gary did not have the funds to travel to the site until his first public meeting. To get more information, he turned to the Internet. Gary researched local news organizations and newspapers on the Internet, conducting searches on the project site, reading articles, and finding out what people were concerned about.

What are my stakeholders' concerns?

A good communication program addresses stakeholders' values, interests and concerns. ***Investing time in understanding stakeholders' concerns can prevent conflicts, project delays, misunderstandings, and media disasters.*** If your stakeholders have advance knowledge of your plans and process, they can raise concerns and participate in the decision-making process.

Local stakeholders' concerns are usually focused on personal impacts: Am I safe? What effect will this have on me and my family? How will my community and I be affected economically? Numerous factors can influence the public's perceptions about the risks associated with government programs and projects:

- proximity of area residences, schools, or parks to the site;
- presence of livestock, crops, or other vegetation near the site;
- population density;
- economic impacts;
- activities of local interest groups;
- media coverage;
- past experience with government officials;
- recent or past controversies; and
- current national and international events.

The best way to find out what stakeholder concerns are is to ask them. Talk to local interest groups, local officials, and local community leaders. Opinion leaders can help give you a sense of the community and help disseminate information. Opinion leaders often hold political positions and can also be found in clubs, churches, community groups, and school organizations. Provide opinion leaders with detailed project data that addresses stakeholder interests.

> The point is to know the audience. Communicators need to know that in Utah, Monday night is family night. Public meetings scheduled on Monday nights send a clear message that the "public" is not really needed. The same goes for Wednesday in the South. Wednesday is prayer meeting night.
>
> *—Stakeholder*

Conduct interviews in informal settings such as homes and offices in the community. Consider the following types of questions:

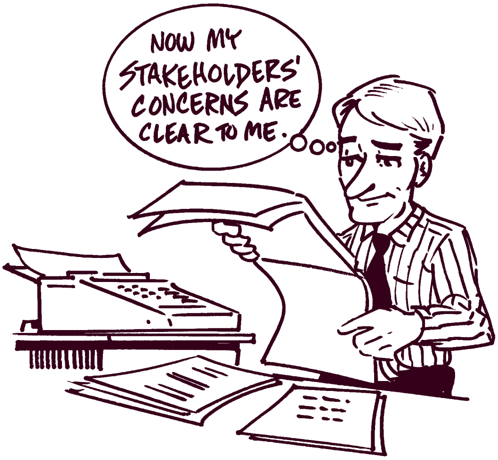
- What are your current concerns about this organization/facility/project? What is your understanding of the history?
- What kind of information do you need? In what format? How often? Has the information you've received in the past been useful? Why or why not?
- What contacts have you had with our organization?
- Have those interactions been responsive to your concerns? What can we do better?
- What kinds of interactions would be best for you and your community?
- Whom else should we talk to?

Identify any special needs your community may have. A large Spanish-speaking population may need translated materials. The local community may not have easy access to the Internet. They may already have special-interest group meetings you could attend. Stakeholders are not a static group. They will have a range of opinions that can change over time, with different projects and issues, and in response to national and international events.

Through personal conversations with stakeholders and local interest groups, research on the Internet, and reviewing local news coverage, Gary learned that stakeholders were not strongly interested in his project's environmental impacts. Their main concerns were its effects on jobs and the local economy and the possibility that industries might have to curtail operations or area roads might be closed.

Building long-term relationships—Go early, stay after

Nothing can take the place of one-to-one interaction. Stakeholder interaction should be designed to allow as much time as necessary for discussion of the issues. Stakeholder groups have a right to be involved in government processes and decisions that affect their lives. A personal investment of your time is often necessary to provide this involvement and interaction.



Treat stakeholders with genuine courtesy, patience, honesty, and fairness. Relax and make yourself available after formal events or meetings—that is when many meaningful conversations take place. Tell stakeholders what you plan to do with their input. Acknowledge frustrations, and answer questions and concerns. Discuss and think about other informal ways to interact with stakeholders. Start small—work on building relationships one person or group at a time.

When the time came for the first public meeting, Gary traveled to the site a day early. He took time to drive around and observe the area to better understand the community his project would affect. Gary also arrived early for the public meeting to meet and have casual conversations with attendees. He stayed after the meeting, too—showing that he was not in a rush and was willing to take time to speak to everyone, Gary demonstrated to the community members his dedication to learning about their concerns. He knew the names of the key stakeholders who were present. He wasn't surprised by people's concerns or views, and because he knew about them before the meeting, he was able to provide some information about jobs and economic impacts.

What does success look like?

Success is understanding who wants to be involved, what their concerns are, and their communication needs. It is also characterized by an acceptance that stakeholders—and their concerns—are variable and changeable. Ideally, a broad understanding of stakeholders means fewer—or even no—surprises or conflicts, and may even reduce litigation. When stakeholders feel they are understood and being listened to, they don't have to resort to other tactics to get your attention.

2 Building Trust and Credibility

Members of the public often tend to be suspicious of corporate and government representatives. They may feel their community has been exposed to unnecessary hazards or question whether someone from Washington, D.C. can relate to needs and concerns outside the Beltway. Effective communication, therefore, requires understanding how you are viewed by your stakeholders and taking the time to establish trust and credibility with them.

Sarah's Dilemma

Sarah took her car to the dealership because the "Check Engine" light was on. She had not noticed any change in her car's performance; however, she thought she should have it checked by a professional. After inspecting the vehicle, the mechanic told her she needed to replace a faulty temperature control sensor—at a cost of $350 plus labor. Sarah had a decision to make, and several points crossed her mind:

- The mechanic indicated the car might not be safe to drive long distances, and she was going to the beach for the weekend.
- She should probably get a second opinion, but that would take more time away from the office.
- A recent exposé on the local news had shown mechanics taking advantage of people and making repairs that were not needed.
- She had purchased the car from this dealer and had a customer relationship with the sales staff.

What factors determine trust and credibility?

People rely on several factors to determine the trustworthiness and credibility of an organization or individual spokesperson. These factors vary from person to person and may be difficult to measure individually. The top four factors are as follows:

1. **Empathy and caring**—The ability to identify with and understand another person's perspective is vital to being an effective communicator.
2. **Competence and expertise**—You have to know what you're doing. Stakeholders don't just expect to receive information from technically competent people; they demand it.
3. **Openness and honesty**—There is no substitute for telling the truth, being forthcoming with good news and bad, and taking a transparent approach to information sharing.
4. **Commitment and dedication**—Demonstrate that you are committed (to your community, your profession, the problem at hand, etc.) and dedicated to working with stakeholders to address issues over the long term.

Clearly, each factor is important. However, research has shown that the willingness and ability to demonstrate empathy and caring for people who are affected by or concerned about an issue is by far the most important. To quote Will Rogers, **"People don't care what you know until they know that you care."**

Sarah did not have the technical expertise to verify the mechanic's assessment, so her decision was influenced by her assessment of his trustworthiness and credibility. Stakeholders form their opinions in much the same way. Whom can they trust? Who do they think is credible? In the end, Sarah felt that since she had purchased her car at this dealership, its employees could be trusted because they would want her business again. In addition, she appreciated how the mechanic had taken the time to answer all of her questions, discussed options, and did not pressure her into making a quick decision.

How can you build trust and credibility?

Building trust and credibility requires time and attention. You must make the effort to listen to your stakeholders' concerns and develop an understanding of their perspective—even if you disagree.

- **Be open and honest**—Communicate early and often. You must be willing to admit mistakes, deliver bad news, and share information.
- **Encourage questions in any areas where there may be concerns or interest**—Sometimes people need to be encouraged to speak out.
- **Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources**—These third parties should have credibility equal to or better than yours. Examples

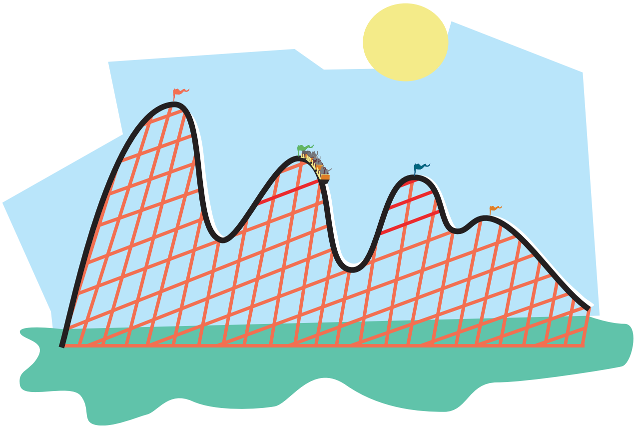
of third parties are university professors and members of environmental or neighborhood groups.

- **Be organized and prepared**—Make sure you have planned carefully and are ready before interacting with stakeholders. Good preparation demonstrates respect for your audience and that you care about the issue.
- **Use language, terms, and concepts that make sense to your stakeholders, even if you are more comfortable using technical jargon**—Stakeholders can interpret highly technical presentations as an attempt to obfuscate information and issues.
- **Acknowledge that you have heard what stakeholders are saying**—Do this regardless of whether or not you agree with them.
- **Be aware of your nonverbal communication**—People listen with their eyes as well as their ears. In a high-stress situation nonverbal communication may contribute up to 90% of the overall message.
- **Ask for input from stakeholders on what communication processes or techniques they prefer and use those as much as possible**—Use techniques that are accepted as fair by all parties.
- **Follow through on commitments**—Deliver what you promise. If you say you'll get back to someone with an answer, do it.

Ted's Loss of Faith in Government Employees

Ted was frustrated by the lack of response he had gotten from the local military installation's Public Affairs Office. He is a neighboring landowner, and the contaminant perchlorate had been found in his groundwater during a recent well test. Ted notified the Public Affairs Office and even attended a Restoration Advisory Board meeting. At the meeting there was an opportunity for him to voice his concern; however, no one was obligated to respond. He was told that his issue was noted and would be a part of the meeting transcript just as the other public concerns had been. Several weeks later the Public Affairs Office told him that he should not worry because he was on the city water system and did not rely on the well for drinking water. Ted was not satisfied with this answer because he farms his land and uses the well water for his corn crop and livestock. He felt helpless and did not know whom to turn to for answers. Did the installation just not care? Why did the people there feel it wasn't their problem? Are his corn and cattle edible?

Trust is difficult to gain but easy to lose. Your credibility can be affected by your own actions as well as factors you have no control over.



Over time your relationship with the public can feel like a roller coaster ride of ups and downs.

Here are some actions that can harm your credibility:

- ignoring the public,
- disregarding suggestions and concerns by stakeholders,
- being defensive,
- hiding information, and
- not fulfilling commitments.

Even when you or your organization's relationship with the public has suffered, there are ways to reestablish trust and credibility. In addition to employing all the ways to build credibility mentioned above, including acknowledging past mistakes, you can also

- take responsibility for actions and inactions,
- apologize if appropriate,
- show evidence of past safety performance and future commitment,
- refrain from making promises you can't keep, and
- talk to stakeholders about their expectations, explain your capabilities and limitations, and come to a compromise.

Ted was increasingly upset with the neighboring installation. The staff could not give him a straight answer about the effects of perchlorate to his groundwater, crops, or livestock or whether they were going to clean it up. The installation needed to work on regaining trust with Ted and neighboring landowners. They did this, in part, by sending a technical representative to Ted's farm to hear his concerns firsthand. The representative then explained possible effects that perchlorate could have on his crops and livestock but also was honest about uncertainties in the analysis. The representative explained that the installation was working on the issue and would keep Ted and the Restoration Advisory Board up to date on progress.

What does success look like?

Good relationships are often a by-product of increasing trust and credibility. Open, frequent communication and regular, sometimes informal exchanges about questions and suggestions are characteristics of good relationships. Another sign of increasing trust and credibility is the willingness of stakeholders to move beyond outrage and anger to engage in conversations about technical challenges and solutions. When your credibility is very high, others are willing to defend you to those who challenge your intentions.

Rewards in communication are progress toward trust. Listen to what people say when they are angry. Ask "What have I learned?" Are people angry six months later? Go through the evaluation process with the community: "Tell me what you still don't like." It is a different way to look at "progress."

—Public health official

3 Involving Stakeholders in the Decision-Making Process

Involving stakeholders in the decision-making process is required by several federal laws and is considered by many to be the "right thing to do." Members of the public have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, but finding effective ways to involve stakeholders is challenging. It can force you into uncomfortable situations with people you don't know well. It can bring up strong feelings and conflicts, and it takes resources and time. But working with stakeholders can enhance your organization's ability to achieve its mission.

Not in My Child's School!

A recently completed risk assessment showed that asbestos removal at Lincoln Elementary School in the inner city was more hazardous than leaving the material in place and that lead paint posed a greater and more immediate health hazard. The school's budget was very limited, and cleanup costs would divert funds from other planned academic and recreational improvements, such as a library expansion and a new playground. Local government and school administrators invited citizens to a public meeting to share information about how they planned to prioritize projects. The meeting was poorly attended, having been scheduled at 4 p.m. in the gym. For those who did attend, the discussion deteriorated into a shouting match, and citizens left concerned about sending their kids to school and wondering about the competency of their representatives.

Involve your stakeholders

Public outreach is often limited to merely providing information. ***Truly involving stakeholders includes taking information in as well as giving it out, and working through options together.*** Involvement can take place throughout a project's life cycle:

- Identifying and framing issues
- Gathering information
- Providing input to technical processes

- Giving feedback on documents
- Developing options
- Serving as an advisor
- Participating directly in decision making

Local government and school administrators knew they needed to involve parents in the dilemma facing Lincoln Elementary, but they didn't plan the meeting time to accommodate working parents and didn't provide any information before the meeting. They attempted to tell stakeholders about priorities without asking for input. The parents felt blindsided by the issues and had no clear idea what role they had in decision making.

Set objectives

When and how to involve stakeholders depends on many factors. Investing time at the beginning to analyze the situation and determine appropriate objectives for stakeholder involvement is the key to an effective program. Is the objective to simply inform or get input, or are stakeholders being asked to help make and select recommendations to reach a decision? Consider:

- How much controversy exists?
- What are stakeholder expectations about involvement?
- What role can stakeholders effectively have in the decision-making process?
- What influence might any stakeholder have on the outcome?
- What restrictions are there on involvement (e.g., classified information, limited time)?

Use the objectives to plan timing and format

Now, with knowledge and understanding of your stakeholders (Chapter 1) and one or more objectives defined, you can plan when and how to fit stakeholders into the decision-making process.

Remember, you can involve stakeholders throughout a project. There is no set time when involvement should occur, as long as it happens at the point(s) relevant to the project and the stakeholders. The table on the next page discusses several approaches, including the advantages and challenges of each.

Types of Interaction	Advantages	Challenges
Focus groups	Small scale, usually have definite purpose and short time frame, so are less intimidating to some	Require limited scale and time; designed to collect one-way input rather than encourage dialogue; can be expensive
Public meeting (with or without a facilitator)	Provides the organization a chance to communicate technical information to stakeholders and the stakeholders a chance to vent concerns; provides a structured forum for interaction and dialogue	Can be too technical, too much information at once; can deteriorate into conflict
Press conference	Can allow an organization to get a few key messages to the media and public, if handled skillfully	Can result in wrong message being conveyed if spokesperson isn't well coached
Intergovernmental coordination	Can help make a decision more relevant if related organizations are involved	Can further complicate interaction simply by adding more people, perspectives, and information
Participation in community groups, activities, meetings (Kiwanis, Junior League, etc.)	Can help organization representatives build relationships among stakeholders in the community and establish community membership	Can be seen negatively as "infiltration" by some stakeholders if there is a lot of polarization in a community
E-mail lists, Web sites	A fast way to communicate with a lot of people all at once, consistently	Not all stakeholders have e-mail; can take a lot of time to craft messages; there isn't always fresh news to report
Informal phone conversations (with community leaders, local officials, etc.)	Can establish rapport; can get correct information out; can help establish credibility and trust	Can backfire if seen as politicking or lobbying
Information center at local library (or other central location)	Provides central location for stakeholders without access to the Internet to review relevant documents	Documents can be highly technical; can be difficult to keep paper copies up to date

Make technical information accessible

> I'm a scientist trying to communicate about what we do here—I found out that even other scientists who love getting a very high level of material/detail don't understand what we're doing.
>
> *—Government technical staff*

Every profession, hobby, and life activity has developed specific acronyms and jargon. Talking to someone from outside your area of expertise nearly always requires some translation. ***When involving the public in decisions, it is incumbent upon you to make technical information related to upcoming decisions understandable to everyone.*** Include both the technical material itself and the process used for developing it. The more complex the issue and more technical the information, the more important it is to speak clearly and directly to your audience's concerns.

When presenting a topic you are an expert in, it's important to set the right tone.

- Speak as though you are addressing a close friend new to the topic.
- Use language that is recognizable and familiar.
- Try to relate your topic to everyday things that everyone experiences.
- Avoid the urge to jump right into the details. Always start with the big picture: What problem are you addressing? What process did you use to reach your conclusions?
- Give examples to illustrate what technical terms mean and what the limits of a technical concept are. If you are asked a highly technical question in a public forum, rephrase the question in simple terms and provide some context so that you don't lose the audience. After providing a brief answer, you can also direct people to documents that provide more details.
- Use simple visuals as backups ("Another way of looking at this is displayed on this chart….")

Let people know you're there to learn as well as to convey information. Remember that even if you're successful in getting the public to understand your technical information, they may still find your preferred option unacceptable.

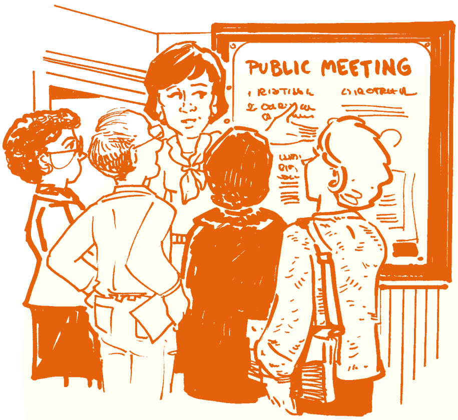
Show respect

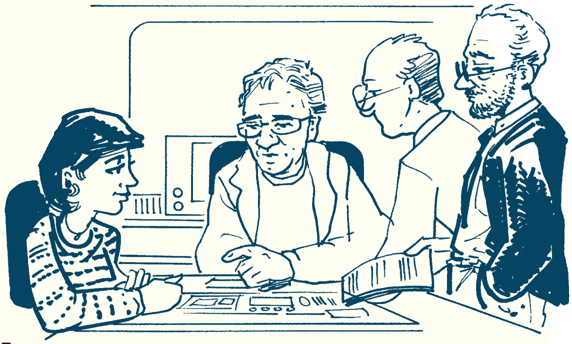
To build a foundation of trust with the public, communicators must be empathetic with the public's opinions, viewpoints, and concerns. Treat the public with genuine courtesy, patience, honesty, and fairness. Ongoing interactions with the public are crucial. Stakeholders may be skeptical of your efforts. ***Show stakeholders respect with actions as well as words that demonstrate you value their input.*** This can include choosing a location and time convenient for them, using a facilitator they get to choose, or creating an advisory committee.

Once a woman said, "I hear what you're saying, but I don't believe you." That was like getting punched in the stomach. We meant well, but meaning well isn't enough.

—Government program manager

After the first disastrous meeting, officials regrouped and worked with the president of the PTA to put together a more effective approach that included an information packet to send home with the kids that laid out the issues but didn't offer any conclusions about what should be done. Another meeting at a more convenient time was scheduled to answer questions and discuss next steps. School administrators proposed having a committee that included parent representatives to examine the issues and develop several alternatives to present to the school community. After some discussion, this proposal was accepted by the parents. In addition, several people offered to organize fund-raising activities so the school could make some much needed improvements even in the face of the environmental issues.





Allowing all views to be expressed helps build public acceptance.

What does success look like?

A robust stakeholder process can result in preferences, conflicts, new information, and social complexities being revealed before implementation. Effective communication doesn't necessarily mean, however, that everyone agrees on the technical basis for a decision or with the decision itself. Allowing many different perspectives to be heard increases credibility and trust. Successful involvement enables all parties to move beyond initial conflict feelings and strong emotions, such as anger, distrust, and fear, to engage more deeply about values, address underlying issues, and evaluate options. Success is characterized by an open, ongoing dialogue with stakeholders based on mutual respect.

4 Working with the Media

Media coverage has become more widespread and competitive. The public uses news organizations as its primary source of information and guide for how to view health, safety, and environmental risks. As competition among media outlets increases and story deadlines and news cycles become more compressed, the need to build a productive relationship with the media becomes more vital. Understanding how the media work, learning how they can be used to your benefit, and striving for a consistent long-term relationship are all keys to meeting this challenge.

"News at 11 about Your Site"

An investigative reporter calls a military installation manager looking for information about asbestos found in the soil. A group of families who live in the area are concerned about exposure to their kids, decreasing property values, and a perceived lack of interest from site representatives. The reporter has spoken with local environmental groups, learned about historical problems at the site, and encountered a general mistrust with the installation's operations. The reporter explains he is on deadline but wants to understand better whether there is cause for concern and, if so, how much. Most importantly, the reporter wants to know if there are plans to deal with the public's fears about the contamination. Following protocol, the manager refers the request to the Public Affairs Officer (PAO). Two days later, the story leads the local news broadcast and is picked up the next morning on the front page of the local paper. Both stories focus heavily on the concerned families and include only one quote from the PAO, denying any real problem at the installation.

How do the media operate?

Stakeholders often regard the media as "an objective third party." Government programs and corporations have a tendency to view the media as overly negative and "out to get" their organization.

The definition of "objective" is "free from personal feelings or prejudice, unbiased." The assumption that the media are objective neglects the fact that the media do, in fact, have an agenda and vested interests. Reporters are trained to deliver compelling stories to their readers. Additionally, reporters routinely compete with one another for the "lead story" or for increased air time. Given these factors, reporters can be subjective storytellers; they provide accounts of events from varying perspectives. As one said, "I don't choose sides or root for a particular interest. I root for the best story." The "best story" is often determined by

- drama,
- controversy,
- the underdog,
- conflict, and
- the unusual.

> Technically, we're on the right track, but we are terrible with public communication, and we hurt our interests in so many ways. I can't tell you how often we could have come out winners if we'd only done better with the press.
>
> *—Government risk assessor*

The media are often accused of being overly negative and placing too much emphasis on the bad news while ignoring the good. However, it is the responsibility of a reporter to question and to be skeptical. ***For reporters to perform their job, they need access to information, access to multiple sources for the record, and, above all, responsiveness.***

Typically, a reporter

- does not know your program,
- has a large "beat" and may not have the time to commit a lot of attention to your story,
- has a limited scientific or technical background,

- wants to be accurate, but needs your help,
- needs short, clear language ("sound bites"), and
- due to deadlines, will file with or without your input.

As news coverage becomes more and more competitive, the need to have a clear media strategy becomes more important.

> I can't handle it when I get someone condescending. Media relations people know how to deal with the press. But "tech talker science guys," drive me nuts. They don't understand I may have to ask a few more questions in order to get it.
>
> *—Environmental reporter*

Manage expectations

For a successful media strategy, it's important to manage expectations, especially when dealing with a media crisis. A reporter is going to lead with the elements that make it a "good story," which often capture stakeholder concerns and negative impressions of the program. If these negative countermessages are included in a story, it does not suggest a failed media strategy. It's the journalist's job to collect all viewpoints and not just the facts your program presents.

Success with media coverage is based on relaying your messages and, in turn, balancing facts versus fears. If concerned stakeholders capture the headlines, make sure your program's objectives are strong enough, clear enough, and repeated often enough to make it into the top of the story. ***If your messages are relayed in a story, that is a success.*** Messages that acknowledge stakeholder concern and then reinforce program objectives are much more likely to get included and thereby balance media coverage.

In the asbestos scenario, the installation manager was correct to refer the reporter to public affairs but should have taken the additional step of coordinating with the PAO to make sure he had current information to provide relevant answers. Together they could have avoided a defensive stance and developed messages that

- acknowledged there are real concerns by the public,
- made clear that the site is committed to working with the public to address the concerns, and
- reinforced that the program is committed to ensuring public health and a safe environment based on sound scientific data.

Build strong working relationships between the PAO and the project staff

Organizations with the most effective media and outreach programs work hard to coordinate between program staff and public affairs. Public affairs officers are experienced at working with the media but have to rely on others within the organization to provide technical and program information. If this information is not provided in a timely or understandable fashion, public affairs will be limited to responding to media inquiries with generalities. Here are some tips for achieving a thorough and consistent media strategy:

- Make sure your program has clear messages.
- Reinforce your messages both internally with staff and externally with the media.
- Internally, include your PAO or media relations team as early and often as possible.
- Create a clear and efficient flow of information for media requests.
- Know who should and should not be speaking publicly for the program.
- Train the necessary staff on media relations and schedule refresher courses.
- Initiate frequent interactions with the media outside of crisis mode.
- When responding to the media, stick to your messages, repeat your messages, end with your messages.
- When responding to questions, stay positive and avoid defensive language.
- Conduct periodic media content analyses to determine overall patterns for how your messages are portrayed through the media.

Effective Messages

- Using more than just a few messages weakens the overall thrust of your communication and may overwhelm the audience.
- Messages should be brief, accurate, straightforward, easy to understand, and consistent.
- Back messages with two to four supporting facts that are stated in plain language and demonstrate a response to stakeholder concerns you have heard.

Build a strong long-term relationship

Every encounter with the media is a chance to convey a program's message. Obviously, this is more difficult to accomplish if a program works with the media only during crisis situations. Developing a strong long-term relationship with the media increases the chance of experiencing media interactions that promote balanced reporting.

Learning from and Using the Media

The Department of Defense (DoD) launched an unprecedented program to vaccinate all military personnel, including civilians and contractors, against the disease anthrax. This program faced public controversy from its very beginnings. Although over a million vaccinations were safely administered, some personnel refused to be vaccinated, and there were reports of rare, but serious adverse side effects for a small number of personnel. Several media outlets—including "60 Minutes"—picked up these stories, and opposition to the program grew.

By making first contact with the media, your program has a good chance of shaping the story. Staying in contact even when there is no news to report is helpful.

- Set up periodic meetings with key reporters.
- Take the time to learn about a reporter's needs: deadlines, production schedules, and story interests.
- Schedule annual meetings with editorial boards to discuss program objectives.
- Simply spend time in your building's press room getting to know the media in their setting.
- When you anticipate a fair amount of news coverage from a particular news outlet, meet with the editorial board to provide background and context for your program and learn more about their reporting philosophy and procedures.

> What goes around comes around. I want relationships with my contacts. If they help me on deadline or with a big story, then I'll be more inclined to help them when they call with a smaller item I may not otherwise cover.
>
> *—Washington, D.C. environmental reporter*

The more familiar reporters are with an organization, the more accurate and balanced they will be when covering the next crisis situation.

A few years later, DoD announced another military-wide vaccination, this time addressing smallpox. The Military Vaccine (MILVAX) Agency had learned from the experiences with anthrax. MILVAX engaged key stakeholder groups and asked them to voice concerns and provide input on the process. Additionally, military service members, family members, and health officials were formally surveyed to better understand specific fears and concerns about the vaccination efforts. To avoid the same adverse media coverage as before, MILVAX developed a relationship with the media before the vaccinations began and maintained contact during the vaccination process. Spokespersons and health care providers were trained on how the media cover risk-related issues and were prepared to respond to questions and concerns. When controversy did occur, MILVAX seized the opportunity to demonstrate openness and transparency during the investigative process, and touted its advance work before the vaccination.

What does success look like?

Successful interactions with the media start with an infrastructure that is prepared to respond to issues as they arise. Internally, this means technical staff and public affairs staff regularly converse with one another, and talk in even greater detail when a media inquiry comes in. Press releases are readily available, are technically accurate, and convey the messages and options agreed to with stakeholders. Public affairs officers are comfortable calling technical staff for clarification.

Staff at a variety of levels have media training that enables them to understand clearly their role in media relationships, regardless of where they work in an organization. Externally, this means several people have solid relationships with reporters and proactively engage in conversations with them regularly. When reporters have a question, hear about an issue, or are otherwise engaged in pursuing a story, they call for information and to verify technical accuracy. Success can also be measured by how much of your message is accurately conveyed in media coverage. Success is not about the number of stories; it's about how accurate the stories are.

Advantages of a Strong Media Relationship

- Ability to shape the story
- Better knowledge of your program = Better translation of messages
- Early identification of stakeholder concerns and controversies
- More opportunities for "good" stories

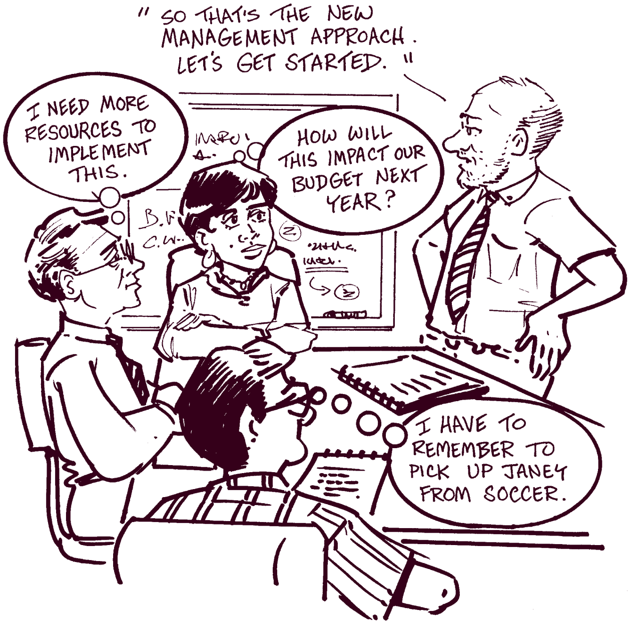
5 Communication among Staff and Decision Makers within Your Organization

Understanding and involving stakeholders is as important internally as it is externally. While internal communication may appear calm or polite (i.e., "professional"), undercurrents caused by tensions between decision making and implementation can kill productivity and harm relationships. Communication among staff and decision makers can be especially challenging in large, national organizations with a headquarters base and multiple regional offices or field sites. Speed of change, political demands, budget constraints, and frequently changing senior management can all negatively affect internal communication. Many organizational problems could be prevented or minimized through better coordination and communication.

Enough Questions—Just Do It

All the regional offices have received a memo from headquarters directing them to implement program changes and develop a communication plan to get the word out to local stakeholders. In Chicago, Laura is uncomfortable with the new direction and believes it will negatively affect productivity and upset a lot of people. Nevertheless, she directs her staff to hold brainstorming meetings to develop ways to implement the changes. Meanwhile, in Denver, Tim holds a meeting to explain the new direction. He answers questions as best he can, sometimes filling in the blanks (making things up) since he doesn't have much information. Ultimately, he tells his staff, "Enough questions—just do it." As drafts of the communication plans are circulated, internal and external stakeholders at both cities express substantial concern about the new approach and insist on clearer direction. It soon becomes obvious that there was no shared understanding of the effort to begin with.

Devote time and resources to internal communication



Internal communication should get at least as much attention as external communication. Staff and management need opportunities for information sharing, identifying potential problems, and generating solutions. Without this internal coordination, communication with external stakeholders suffers from inconsistent messages, and the organization loses credibility. It's vital for headquarters staff to spend time listening to regional/field office staff, and vice versa.

Regional/field offices are often the face of an organization—the people communicating with stakeholders. They have information about stakeholders no one else has. This information can have a huge impact on how an organization is perceived, as well as what decisions are ultimately pursued. Whenever there is a major change in direction, think through a communications plan that addresses the following needs.

- Develop guidelines that explain the change in policy, provide the reason for the change, and describe the expected outcome.
- Point out weaknesses and problems up front so they can be addressed.
- Involve regional/field offices in the development of new policies and procedures. This can be done through soliciting comments, including regional/field representatives on

> Internal engagement is a challenge. It was difficult at the beginning to get people involved. We made a mistake as a field office. We sent something to headquarters thinking it would satisfy a requirement, that it wasn't a big deal; maybe nobody would read it. It blew up on us. Headquarters is an important stakeholder.
>
> *—Regional manager, federal government agency*

working groups, and holding workshops where headquarters and regional staff work through implementation issues together.

- Make time to communicate. If you don't, you'll spend more time later trying to clean up confusion, messes, or other problems.
- Create a Q&A document and distribute it widely. Encourage additional questions.
- Encourage discussion in face-to-face and electronic settings. Set up weekly meetings or an e-mail list.
- Create an information/resource center devoted to the new concept and update it regularly.

Both Laura and Tim directed their staffs to start implementing without completely understanding the new direction. Headquarters didn't spend adequate time educating the regional offices about the "what" or "why" or anticipated benefits of the change and didn't develop Q&As or key messages describing the new direction. There was no planning for addressing potential questions from internal stakeholders, and no time was allowed for their involvement in developing the new direction. As a result, different interpretations of the new direction were used across the organization. Laura and Tim were unable to provide clear answers to legitimate questions from their staffs. The lack of coordination and varying messages were communicated to external stakeholders, causing concern and skepticism.

Address face-saving and psychological needs

The need to save face is as important in our culture as in the famously sensitive Japanese and Chinese cultures. Everyone needs to feel appreciated, respected, and listened to. In the work setting, managers want to be respected and obeyed; staff want to be included, respected, and not imposed upon. Both groups can use face-saving behavior to preserve and/or improve the relationships, leading to increased productivity.

Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss

At a federal agency, Joe was promoted and assigned to a technical division to implement a new budget-estimating policy from the Secretary's office. At his first staff meeting, Joe told his staff to stop all previous work and begin implementing the new approach immediately. He provided a technical, detailed description of the new method and distributed several new policy documents. In the middle of a question from one staff member, Joe's cell phone rang, and he excused himself, saying, "Get to it." Several weeks went by with Joe attending many meetings with senior managers across the organization. Some of his technical staff scheduled meetings with Joe but were frustrated by lack of discussion time and Joe's focus on "getting to the point." By the time they were through with preliminary topics and ready to discuss implementation challenges, Joe had to move on to the next meeting. At staff meetings, Joe demanded that his staff improve their performance, reminding them that this was a Secretary-level initiative.

Demonstrate respect for staff perspectives and experience

Say things like this:

- I know this is a big change. I'd like to hear your concerns about it.
- I need your help to implement this change.
- You're the experts—what do you recommend?
- I'm sorry that….

Demonstrate respect for manager/decision-maker perspectives and experience

Say things like this:

- I know you're in a tough position—what can we do to help?
- This is only one opinion, but….
- What's your goal for this project?
- I'm sorry that….

We need to build trust and credibility from the inside out. As long as there is discomfort inside, it will propagate outside.

—Federal agency staff

Give each other your full attention

- Notice body language. Nod. Maintain eye contact. Say "uh-huh." Ask relevant questions.
- Don't take that call on your cell phone, or take it only to explain you're in a meeting and will call back soon.
- Speak up if you notice tension in group meetings. Ask for time to address or resolve it.
- Place new ideas, policies, processes, etc. in context. Make them relevant to ongoing activities or explain why old ways of doing things are being discarded.
- Bring in a neutral facilitator if conflict has drawn productivity to a halt.

Addressing psychological needs yields more consistent outcomes in behavior and productivity and develops better relationships. Successful communication among staff and decision makers is not the absence of conflict. It's the presence of extensive dialogue and interaction (which may, at times, be heated). Invest time to do better with listening, talking, and understanding.

Joe didn't address his staff's need to feel respected and heard. He didn't spend time with them, and he didn't draw connections between the old approach and the current work plan. He provided a technical description without explanation. His staff resisted change, didn't appreciate Joe's demanding schedule, and didn't communicate with him efficiently.

Communicate at the right level—Tips for communicating with decision makers and staff

The type of information decision makers need depends on the nature of the decision to be made. Leaders often don't have time to become deeply involved in technical topics. They usually prefer short narrative descriptions of technical problems with little jargon, accompanied by specific recommendations. Technical and nontechnical staff usually need more data to feel comfortable since they are at the implementation level. They are also much more likely to be aware of the potential negative and positive impacts of change, and they may be more cynical about changes, having seen policies come and go in the past.

Decision makers want:	Staff want:
The bottom line up front	Supporting details that lead to the bottom line
Brief, summary-level information about a topic	Deep, highly detailed information about a topic
Contextual information such as why an analysis is needed/was done, how it fits into the larger picture	Information on how changes will affect imminent milestones and local needs and goals related to implementation
Summary graphical presentation of information	To see the data, supplemented by graphics
Information they can use to defend status/ideas at the next level(s) of management	To focus on the local level of management and stakeholders
Information relevant to the decision type	Information related to the technical problem/situation
Schedule updates, to know if the job is getting done on time	To discuss implementation issues related to schedule; less concern about milestones

What does success look like?

Success is a culture of open communication that allows questions, discussion, and extensive information sharing. When staff and decision makers have a similar understanding of a policy or project and an approach that is consistent across the organization, communication with the public and other stakeholders is more effective and there is less conflict. While developing and delivering key messages is important, it's essential to allow for discussion and questions among internal staff at regional and field offices too. This step enhances everyone's understanding, raises issues that can be resolved early, and often improves implementation or outcomes. The key is to create opportunities for two-way communication of values, needs, and issues.

6 Communicating about Risks and Benefits

Many daily decisions involve weighing the risks and benefits of different alternatives: what to eat, what to do for fun, what to do with personal finances. In addition, many organizations are increasingly using formal risk analyses to assist in decision making about public health, safety, and the environment.

Good Neighbor Grows Old

A nuclear power plant has been operating just outside of Springfield for 30 years. Green Mountain Power is attempting to renew its license to operate for another 20 years. If the plant were shut down, the community would lose jobs and would most likely face tax rate increases. On the other hand, citizens of Springfield are concerned about the safety of the facility and the risks they are being exposed to. Some people are worried about terrorist threats, and there has been controversy over whether the emergency management plan is adequate. In addition, people want to know how safety will be maintained as the plant continues to age.

Low-probability, high-consequence situations

Many risk analysts have difficulty communicating with the public about situations, such as terrorist attacks, where there is a low probability of occurrence but the consequences of such an event would be devastating. Stakeholders are concerned that responsible parties are using the low probability to avoid taking the necessary steps to protect public safety. Effective communication about low-probability, high-consequence situations should focus on the following areas:

- Validate concerns and the complexity of the issues before attempting to discuss benefits.

> We still lack sensitivity about the fact that consequences are very important to people. When we are communicating about risk, we should pay attention to the possible consequences.
>
> —*Factory manager*

- Communicate about the steps that are being taken to understand, prevent, and mitigate the consequences of a catastrophic event.
- Demonstrate that your organization is not complacent in the face of a changing environment, that you share the community's concerns and are taking concrete steps to adjust to emerging threats and issues.

Although the town of Springfield realizes direct economic benefits from the power plant, the residents react negatively to a Green Mountain Power executive who comes to a public meeting with a presentation that focuses on what the community will gain when the plant is relicensed. "What good will a few jobs be to us if we all have cancer from radiation exposure from a terrorist attack or other accident?"

Explain the built-in safety margins

Provide the context to help the public evaluate a risk in terms of the big picture. In discussing the results of a specific safety assessment or risk analysis, government analysts often neglect to provide the public with information about the overall context of what systems are in place to protect public safety. This might include describing the existence of redundant safety systems, constant monitoring, or containment. Without this information about how the risks of specific problems are mitigated, the public is incapable of appreciating how safety is incorporated into the overall system.

Realizing that a different approach is needed, regulators and the plant manager work with the Springfield mayor's office to set up a series of open houses and discussion forums for community members to express their concerns and ask questions directly of the government inspectors and plant operators. At the first several meetings the main focus of discussion is the steps that are being taken to identify and replace aging parts and systems, as well as new and existing safeguards that protect the plant against terrorist threats. Eventually a dialogue begins that also addresses issues about what the plant has to offer the community and its history of being a good neighbor over the past 20 years.

What role does fairness play in discussion of risk and benefits?

Who bears the risk? Who reaps the benefits? Analysts and regulators are becoming increasingly aware that these are key questions that need to be addressed.

Historically, certain communities across the United States have borne a disproportionate share of the burden of hosting live industrial facilities, contaminated sites, waste transfer stations, landfills, and the related problems that arise from their proximity. Since 1994, federal agencies have developed environmental justice (EJ) strategies to address findings that enforcement inspections and environmental risk were higher in racial minority and low-income populations across the nation. EJ activities

- provide training in the regulatory process, so that stakeholders can understand their rights and where they can most effectively influence decision making;
- train regulators and other responsible parties about diversity and EJ issues as well as communication and community problem solving; and
- award federal grants to provide training and other assistance to empower communities to achieve meaningful participation in issues that affect them.

> Risk communication in isolation from concrete actions to minimize risk doesn't amount to much. It isn't just a PR job. If one person says, "There isn't a problem," and another says, "We have a problem, and here's what we'd like to do to fix it," the second person has more credibility.
>
> *—Public involvement specialist*

Owners of sites, both private and government, that pose risks to the surrounding community have also successfully gained community support through working with local stakeholders to identify priorities and concerns that can be addressed to compensate the community or demonstrate a good faith commitment to being a good neighbor. This process might include providing funding to upgrade the local fire department to ensure it is adequately equipped for emergency response or giving grants to strengthen the school system.

Be "up-front" about uncertainty

When communicating with the public about the results of risk assessments, be honest about the inherent uncertainties. ***Being open about weaknesses in data or other uncertainties has been shown to actually enhance credibility, because stakeholders feel communicators are being honest with them.*** When discussing risk analyses, include the uncertainties that went into the risk assessment. Address the following questions:

- What are the weaknesses of available data?
- What are the assumptions on which the estimates are based?

- How sensitive are the estimates to changes in assumptions?
- How sensitive is the decision to changes in the estimates?

When appropriate, you should also address what steps are being taken to decrease the amount of uncertainty. In situations where new information and analytical tools provide more realistic answers, you should explain how and why the results have changed.

A Fish Tale

Margaret has just learned she is pregnant with her first child. Although she has never paid much attention to her diet, she now thinks carefully about what she is eating. Margaret reads that there are new warnings for pregnant women about the risks of eating fish due to the presence of mercury and other heavy metals. Fish has always been a staple of her diet as a source of protein and the good fatty acids. Margaret does some preliminary research on her own, but ends up with more questions. Are all fish bad? What are the risks? Do different types of fish have different risks and health benefits? Is it really necessary to stop eating all fish while she is pregnant, just to be on the safe side?

Understand the pros and cons of using risk comparisons

Risk comparisons may help your stakeholders understand more clearly how an unfamiliar risk compares to a risk that is more familiar. However, using this type of risk comparison can backfire. While some members of the public may appreciate your efforts to clarify risks, others may feel that you are trivializing risks important to them. Comparing the risks of living near a nuclear power plant to lifestyle choices, such as smoking, or to other risks the public voluntarily assumes, like driving, may suggest to the public that you are being manipulative and trying to co-opt their decisions about what risks are acceptable. Risk communication practitioners have learned the hard way that relying on risk comparisons to overcome fears of certain hazards can actually damage credibility.

Risk comparisons work best when you're explaining risks to people with whom you've built some level of trust and understanding. Believing that your motives are well-intended, this audience is willing to accept your risk comparisons in good faith.

Margaret needed information that would help her understand the magnitude of different risks and that placed risks in context of other risks. Her doctor provided her with an article that summarized the health benefits of different types of fish in conjunction with the average levels of mercury and how those levels affect the risks. Based on this information, Margaret limited her intake of certain types of fish but felt comfortable with several servings per week of others.

Acknowledge the public's right to make risk decisions

Deciding on acceptable risk is a value or emotional comfort question, not a technical question. People will make their own determinations based on personal values, sense of risk, or stake in the outcome.

Another Fish Tale

Heather works on a state health department task force to advise local tribal governments about fish consumption. Risk assessments have been based on and targeted to the U.S. population in general. The task force needs to adjust the consumption rates because fish is the staple of the native diet. Heather and the task force also need to explore issues such as what will happen to the community if there is an increased reliance on store-bought, processed food that has less nutritional value.

Let people know that you're there to listen as well as to convey information. Remember that even if you're successful in getting the public to understand your organization's statistical approach to assessing potential health and safety consequences, your stakeholders may still find the risk unacceptable. In addition, your stakeholders might be concerned with risks that are outside of the scope of your risk assessment process. For example, your metrics might be based on exposure to humans and dose response, but fail to deal with land contamination.

If the native community reduces reliance on fish, what will they eat? What other impacts will there be to their culture and way of life? How do you balance these risks? What can be done to mitigate them? The only effective way for Heather and the task force to answer these questions is to work with community representatives to generate alternatives that will be acceptable to them while protecting the elements of their way of life that are most important.

What does success look like?

It is recognized that both the risks and benefits that a community or individual finds most relevant will likely fall outside any one agency's regulatory mandate. Conflict and frustration are reduced because there is no attempt to limit dialogue to the narrow scope of a specific regulation or scientific methodology. Communication efforts honestly and openly address risks and uncertainties, so stakeholders don't view discussions of benefits as attempts to sugarcoat. Decision making about risks and benefits is recognized as inherently about values and not viewed as about only technical data. Analysts and regulators learn a lot that assists in both risk analyses and policy considerations because stakeholders are engaged in identifying potential interests and conditions as well as solutions to difficult problems.

Often technical staff see risk communication as a way to talk about the number. Our job is to make them understand that it is more than just a number. It is also about participation.

—*Risk communication trainer*

7 Communicating about Dreaded Topics

Nuclear energy. Terrorism. Cancer. Some topics elicit more intense reactions from stakeholders than others. These topics pose a unique challenge because public fear often transcends the probability of the risk, as determined by formal analysis. These issues are often characterized by a greater disconnect between organizations and the public. Understanding emotions and how they factor into decision making and acknowledging these emotions through proven communication techniques can help make communication about dreaded topics more productive and less frustrating for everyone involved.

Dirty Bombs and Toxic Clouds

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, government agencies were forced to address public fears over safety and security in the face of potential terrorist attacks. One major security agency teamed with a separate government technical organization to produce fact sheets and conduct workshops on such dreaded topics as radiological and chemical attacks. This proactive communication was also aimed at the media, emergency response managers, and state and local public information officers to help them better understand how to discuss difficult topics with a concerned public. The workshops were intended to provide the opportunity for groups of citizens to share concerns and hear what officials were doing to address safety and security issues. But some citizens asked questions about how to protect themselves from the toxic clouds that dirty bombs would generate and were not satisfied when government staff suggested that the likelihood of such attacks was very low.

Realize that many factors influence risk perceptions

A government or military program bases risk assessment on scientific analysis and is forced to consider program resources and compensatory measures. The assessment balances the likelihood of an occurrence against a set of consequences ranging from relatively benign to potentially catastrophic. A program's formula for risk may look like this:

Risk = Probability x Consequences

The public's view on risk, however, is defined much differently by risk communication expert Dr. Peter Sandman:

Risk = Hazard x Outrage

Put another way, the probability that something bad will happen to people, compounded by the aspects of the situation that upset people, equal the public perception of risk.

In situations that deal with a dreaded topic, such as terrorist attacks, public outrage rises considerably because

- terrorist attacks can be fatal to thousands (magnitude of the hazard),
- it's difficult to predict the nature of terrorist attacks (lack of information),
- terror attacks have been successful (distrust in the institution managing the hazard), and
- once an attack is suspected, the news is filled with terror alerts (media attention).

Provide an opportunity to feel in control

One technique for dealing with dreaded topics is to give those involved suggestions for specific actions they can take to prevent or mitigate threats. For instance, information materials should focus not only on the science of a threat but also on how to respond. The steps may be as simple as "move away from the threat" or "walk to a closed room." Technical staff may see minimal benefits of the suggestions, but the public gains more confidence if they believe there is something they can do to avoid or alleviate the situation. Examples of shared control can also include the following:

- including stakeholders in the decision process (comment periods, open meetings),
- appointing stakeholders to key positions (review boards),
- soliciting assistance in preventative measures, and
- offering simple tips for dealing with emergency situations.

When discussing dreaded topics, people don't want to hear about how remote the chance is of something happening—any chance is too much. Science-based discussion can be interpreted as evasive and unfeeling. Taking action provides people with a sense of control over the uncontrollable. After the terrorism workshops, the government agencies developed and distributed fact sheets that described the science behind scary terms like "dirty bombs" and "toxic clouds." The fact sheets did not minimize threats or attempt to determine probability, and they provided a list of specific actions citizens could take in a prominent section titled "What Should People Do to Protect Themselves?" The fact sheets focused on clear explanations of the risks and what to do if that type of attack should occur.

Demonstrate that you and your organization are committed to security

Security concerns are different from and in a way more complex than concerns about safety. First, terrorist threats offer more unknowns. Second, safety systems are usually designed as protection from accidents. In contrast, security systems are designed to prevent intentional incidents. The public understands this distinction and is concerned that terrorists will be successful in breaching security systems.

Another factor in communicating about security is that not all information can be shared with the public. ***When information is withheld, the public is forced to give up some control.*** A program can reassure stakeholders when information is withheld by proactively addressing the following stakeholder questions:

- **Can I trust you?**
  Without compromising classified information, demonstrate proven past performance on security issues. Communicate mistakes and talk about lessons learned.
- **Are you committed to security?**
  One tactic is to discuss long-standing security measures, as well as recent security changes. Be clear about what measures are in place to prevent incidents.
- **Do you care about me and my family?**
  Understand and value the public's concerns by articulating their concerns about threats as well or better than they can.

High Emotion

A major newspaper published an article discussing a government proposal to have waste with small amounts of "radioactive material" previously stored in "nuclear facilities" buried in "ordinary landfills." The government agency behind the proposal was calling for public comment and claimed, "No decisions have been made," and, "The process has just begun." The article included angry responses from every major environmental activist group. Comments voiced concern that this is the "first step" in loosening overall environmental safeguards and that the next steps will include the burial of "spent nuclear fuel" and "high-level radioactive waste." One stakeholder was described as outraged and claimed the proposal "totally deregulates nuclear waste." Another said the proposal "presumed we are dumb enough to accept unfit landfills."

Recognize that emotions influence decisions

It is unproductive to ask a stakeholder to remove emotions from the decision-making process. In fact, emotion has been proven to be integral to the decision-making process. For instance, Dr. Daniel Goleman discusses in *Emotional Intelligence* the relationship between the prefrontal lobe of the brain (where we store "working memory," such as the facts to solve problems) and the circuits of the limbic brain (where we deal with emotions such as anger and anxiety). If provoked, "neural static" can sabotage "working memory"—it's what makes angry people say, "I just can't think straight right now!" The emotion doesn't make people any less intelligent but does influence their ability to process information and make decisions. Anxiety can be caused by

- perceived threats to self,
- fear,
- powerlessness,
- loss of control,
- hurt, and
- being devalued or disrespected.

Tips for Dealing with Anger

- Understand your position
- Listen
- Identify the anger
- Create a safe place
- Consider the source
- Set boundaries

Validate emotions

To address dreaded topics, you must be willing and able to communicate calmly and empathetically with people who have perceptions and questions that differ radically from a scientific or management perspective. Start with an acknowledgement of audience concerns, not with a technical message that attempts to refute or discount the real fear people feel. ***Validation is a critical first step in communicating about dreaded topics.*** If someone is afraid, a technical explanation will not make the fear go away, no matter how logical it may seem to you.

When fear is triggered, the body experiences a rush of adrenaline, and a "fight or flight" response is activated. This causes the person to react either combatively or fearfully. The best way to address this reaction is to listen to the concern, provide acknowledgement, and after the emotion is calmed, ask whether the stakeholder would like to hear some technical information.

Choose the right spokesperson

While communication tips can be followed and skills can always be improved, not everyone is a good spokesperson for highly controversial or dreaded topics. Qualities of good spokespersons for dreaded topics include the following:

- perceived by stakeholders as trustworthy and sincere
- understand the science or technology, but able to talk about the topic in layperson language
- can communicate through analogies and stories, not just facts and figures
- can demonstrate empathy for feelings of fear
- understand how to manage conflict
- able to answer questions or find answers and get back to the audience

Another way to understand dreaded topics is to consider whether this is a risk people have learned to live with. Most of the time, stakeholders determine dreaded topics by a gut reaction. A new threat is not something the public is comfortable discussing calmly. The gut reaction is fear; emotion then becomes a central factor in any communication.

Even before the open comment period for the radioactive material disposal plan, public opinion was spinning against the government and becoming based on materials outside the original scope of the proposal. The outraged stakeholders jumped from the actual proposal to a larger sense of powerlessness ("totally deregulates nuclear waste") and complained about being disrespected ("presumes we are dumb enough"). The government agency may not have provoked these responses through any specific action, but the topic of radioactive waste sparked a strong feeling that influenced the stakeholders' responses.

What does success look like?

The key in risk communication of dreaded topics is to strike the right balance between motivating people to take action and not increasing fear. An effective spokesperson acknowledges the underlying concerns and understands them well enough to articulate them better than the general public. Information materials focus less on technical explanations than on what steps can be taken to respond to the threat. Stakeholders are involved in response planning and, as much as possible, are part of any decision-making process. This approach leads to increased readiness and helps reduce panic if and when a dreaded event actually occurs.

Conclusion

The years ahead will bring many new technical concepts and communication channels, often accompanied by new problems and stakeholder concerns. Technical communicators who learn to adapt their practices and who understand the key ideas and principles outlined in this booklet will be better prepared to face these challenges.

Effective communication and stakeholder involvement means

- developing processes accepted as fair by all parties;
- creating opportunities for two-way communication of values, needs, and issues;
- addressing emotional and underlying issues;
- ensuring early and constant participation; and
- establishing clear linkages between the involvement process and decision making.

WPI would like to acknowledge the contributions of our clients—technical experts and communication specialists in government agencies and other organizations—for many of the examples, ideas, and concepts presented here. This booklet was developed in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management, which dedicates resources to projects designed to communicate with stakeholders about new environmental cleanup technologies.

For more information and advice for conducting research on, planning, implementing, and evaluating a wide variety of communication activities, please visit WPI's Research in Communication and Public Involvement Web site at **www.wpi.biz/rcpi**.

Produced by WPI
Suite 2200 • 2020 Kraft Drive • Blacksburg, VA 24060 • www.wpi.biz

Supported by the U.S. Department of Energy through Cooperative Agreement No. DE-FC02-96CH10849. This support does not constitute an endorsement by DOE of the views expressed in this document.

www.wpi.biz

WPI[SM]

Solutions for Government and Industry