

**Risk Communication –
Getting The Message Across In Situations Of High Concern**
by Dr. Andrew Powell

From time to time, we include in CS&A's newsletter, ideas and articles from international experts. In this issue, we are pleased to introduce Dr Andrew Powell, CEO Asia BioBusiness Pte. Ltd. Singapore, which also manages the Asian Centre for Risk Communication, an initiative in association with Dr Vincent Covello, Center for Risk Communication in New York.

Dr. Powell articulates the function of Risk Communication and its benefits for organizations that wish to enhance their resilience. In the current global context, the ability to communicate risk effectively is more than ever relevant.

Communication in situations of high concern, low trust, sensitivity, or controversy needs to be considerably different to the regular types of conversations you may have with colleagues, friends and family. Research has shown that people under stress typically have difficulty hearing, understanding and remembering information and, if they are listening at all, tend to focus on any negative words or phrases that you may included in your conversation. We all have been in high concern situations where we just cannot seem to get our message across. This is not uncommon.

Whilst many people e.g. politicians, managers, researchers / academic lecturers have excellent communication skills appropriate to their own specialist areas, communicating effectively in high concern or high stress situations presents very different challenges, and a different set of communication skills is essential in such situations. Players must become adept at what is now known as **Risk Communication**.

Risk communication is a science-based approach for communicating effectively in high concern, low trust, sensitive, or controversial situations. The techniques were developed over 25 years of psychological and communications research and are based on principles developed by researchers that include Dr. Peter Sandman, formerly of Rutgers University, and Dr Vincent Covello of the Center for Risk Communication in New York. Risk communication has become recognized as a necessary component in effective risk management and decision-making.

Risk communication is the two-way exchange of information in situations where there is a high level of **perceived** risk. It does not matter whether that risk is real or imaginary, the reality that must be dealt is the risk in the mind of the person you are communicating with. The goals of risk communication are to enhance knowledge and understanding, build trust and credibility, encourage dialogue, and influence attitudes, decisions and behaviors. Risk communication is not "spin-doctoring". It is about the effective delivery of **fact**.

Risk communication techniques can be used in many situations e.g. financial crises, food contamination, the Asian tsunami, health scares such as avian flu and severe acute respiratory syndrome, etc. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani used the techniques to good effect during the dark days post 9/11.

Risk Communication and Technology

Recently these techniques have been applied to situations where people have developed a concern about technology or techniques e.g., stem cells, cloning, nanotechnology, genetically modified crops and food, animal testing, vaccines, clinical trials etc.

Stakeholders around the world closely scrutinize many of the new technologies and there are widely divergent views on the level of risk associated with the adoption of the technology. In the private sector, misstated positions or misconstrued, off-the-cuff remarks can seriously jeopardize a company's freedom to operate (FTO), its potential as an investment vehicle, its governance rating and ethical positioning, its bottom line and shareholder value. These miscommunications can be rapidly disseminated globally by single-issue activists via the Internet, with serious and often costly consequences.

Similarly, the consequences of miss-communications can be just as devastating in the public sector. Credibility of government agencies, public policy agendas and national R&D budget allocations can be all severely impacted by poor delivery of the message.

Rules for Effective Risk Communication

Dr Vincent Covello has put forward seven cardinal rules for effective risk communication.

1. Accept and involve the receiver of risk information as a legitimate partner.

People have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The primary goal of risk communication is to produce an involved, informed recipient of information who is interested, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and collaborative.

2. Plan and tailor risk communication strategies.

Different goals, audiences, and communication channels require different risk communication strategies.

3. Listen to your audience.

To identify real concerns, a risk communicator must be willing to listen carefully to and understand the audience and to put themselves in the shoes of the person they are communicating with. Psychological factors, such as trust, credibility, control, voluntariness, dread, familiarity, uncertainty, ethics, responsiveness, fairness, caring, and compassion, are of more concern than the technical details of a risk.

4. Be honest, frank, and open.

Trust and credibility are among the most valuable assets of a risk communicator. They are difficult to obtain. Once lost, they are almost impossible to fully regain.

5. Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.

Communications about risks are enhanced when accompanied by referrals to credible, neutral sources of information. This is known as credibility transfer and an understanding the credibility ladder for specific issues is required. Few things hurt credibility more than conflicts and disagreements among information sources.

6. Plan for media influence.

The media plays a major role in transmitting risk information and plays a central role in setting agendas and forming mind-sets. It is critical to know what messages the media delivers and how to deliver risk messages effectively through the media.

7. Speak clearly and with compassion.

Technical language and jargon are major barriers to effective risk communication. Distant, abstract, unfeeling language often offends people. Simplicity is the key. Acknowledging emotions, such as anxiety, fear, anger, outrage, and helplessness, are typically far more effective. (Non-verbal messaging is also very important. Distracting body movements or behavior detract from the communication process).

While some of these rules appear to be common sense, the fact is that few people in high concern situations realise that changes in their mode of communication are essential to get their message across. What you say and how you deliver it must be considered. Above all a trustworthy and credible position must be developed.

Preparation through Message Mapping

Preparation is absolutely essential and identification of key messages critical. This requires thought and planning. One tool that helps with this message development is “message mapping”. This is a technique to analyze issues and ensures that you get the right message across. A central issue is identified and then three key messages on that issue are crafted and supported by three supporting facts. These can be presented in either table or diagrammatic form and can be called upon at any time.

Application of message mapping techniques helps in delivery of messages both on a personal level and in an institutional setting. It is especially useful where companies or organizations need to ensure that all staff members deliver a consistent message. The United States Department of Health and Human Services developed 65 message maps for avian flu and pandemic influenza (see www.pandemicflu.gov) as part of a large-scale risk communication planning and preparedness effort. This exercise effectively distilled complex scientific information into easily understood messages. Once this exercise has been conducted risk communication techniques will then allow the effective delivery of these messages.

Conclusion

The old saying that “Sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never harm you” may hold some truth when applied to the school playground but in the grown up world it is a different story. The wrong words at the wrong time delivered in the wrong way can kill you, in a metaphorical sense at least. An awareness of the wide differences in risk perception, and a communication platform that addresses these perceptions, will ensure that your message will be delivered in manner that is understood and your agenda, whatever it is, can be achieved.