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BEST PRACTICES IN RISK AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION
Advice for Food Scientists and Technologists

Defending the food chain while protecting public health and fostering international trade is a difficult task, at best. Unintentional contamination of food supplies continues to threaten people's physical, emotional, and economic well being. The possibility of intentional contamination further adds to the problem when trade is slowed by increased scrutiny of products at ports-of-entry, or when the public experiences increased fear when potential threats are identified. Highly skilled food scientists and technicians contribute to risk assessments by identifying possible hazards and analyzing the efficacy of mitigation strategies. These people often underestimate the role they play in the third aspect of risk assessment: risk communication. Humans understand reality through a social process of recognition, deliberation, and justification, or more succinctly, through communication. In other words, people understand the world not only through first-hand experiences, but also through information that is shared by others. When food scientists provide information, make recommendations, and state opinions, they are engaged in risk communication.

To better understand the role communication plays in the comprehension and response to risks and crises, The National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD), a US Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence, has from its inception included a risk and crisis communication team. This team's mission is to conduct communication research to support food protection and defense and to develop and deliver training and educational materials that either directly improve communication or enhance future training efforts. This team also works closely with other Centers of Excellence, domestic government and non-government agencies, and international organizations. The communication team benefits the NCFPD's efforts by identifying effective strategies for disseminating risk and crisis messages to various publics, providing curriculum and educational resources for communication training, and responding rapidly during food-related crisis events to aid communication efforts.

Food production and agriculture are increasingly focused internationally. Many nations' food supplies are becoming more dependent on trade agreements and partnerships. Because many countries' food systems are interconnected, a single terrorist attack on food could hurt trade, threaten economies, and jeopardize lives. Unfortunately, as former Secretary Tommy Thompson revealed, the food chain may be relatively simple to attack successfully (Branigin, Allen & Mintz 2004).

Although risk and crisis communication as a field of study has matured, people who are charged with communicating with various publics can still make consistent, predictable mistakes. People representing the affected organization who make these mistakes often do so because they are ill prepared. Some believe that communication is a natural human activity, wrongly assuming that if they successfully talk to people every day then they are equipped to handle the complexity of communicating during periods of high stress. Others incorrectly think that because they have no formal responsibility to talk to the news media, they have no communication role. Still others mistakenly trust their intuition and presume that risk and crisis communication is common sense, when in reality, best practices are sometimes counter-intuitive.

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In an effort to help overcome these common misconceptions, the communication team developed ten best practices for risk and crisis communication (Seeger 2006, Venette 2006). This list of best practices is not necessarily comprehensive, but provides recommendations that have gained consensus agreement from scholars and subject matter experts. While items on the list may not seem, at first glance, to be highly complex or surprising, the tendency during times of elevated pressure is to violate one or more of the best practices. Through preparation and practice, these consistent, predictable mistakes can be avoided. The Ten Best Practices for Risk and Crisis Communication help guide this process.

The Ten Best Practices for Risk and Crisis Communication

Plan pre-event

The first listed best practice focuses on the need to plan. Of course, planning is necessary for the establishment of policies and courses of action to respond to incidents. Unfortunately, many organizations fail to develop procedures for dealing with risks or crises. Even fewer structure crisis communication plans.

Effective plans have several common characteristics. They allow for the identification and monitoring of risk areas and provide strategies for their mitigation. They establish decision-making structures and clarify responsibilities. They identify how information will be communicated to internal and external audiences. Effective plans are efficient and succinct; it seems as though the longer the plan is, the less likely it will be used. Finally, plans should be sufficiently flexible to address unexpected and dynamic events.

Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources

A network of credible information sources must be established prior to a crisis event. Advice and assistance from subject matter experts can prove invaluable during times of elevated tension. However, during a crisis, time and resources are focused on addressing the problem, not on identifying potential credible partners. Thus, these relationships must be fostered before an event occurs.

Accept uncertainty and ambiguity

Risks and crises are marked by high levels of uncertainty. Predictions about the likelihood of a negative event and its potential consequences are estimates often based on incomplete information. At times, risk analyses appear to be well-informed guesses. A defining characteristic of crises is that they are unpredicted and non-routine events that create high levels of uncertainty (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer 1998).

Risk and crisis communicators often feel compelled to speak with authority to build credibility and reassure their audiences. These goals are subverted when a statement presented definitely is later found to be incorrect or when the spokesperson's explanation of events runs counter to newly discovered information. Consequently, communicators must accept and acknowledge the inherent ambiguity of the situation by modifying their language to reflect this uncertainty. Instead of saying "The situation is under control," for example, the spokesperson might say "According to the information available to us right now, the situation appears to be under control, but we will update you as soon as possible if conditions change."

Form partnerships with the public

Accepting members of lay communities as equal partners is difficult but important. The public should be seen as a resource rather than a liability. For instance, cultural agents and community leaders can provide a means of accessing populations that might not be reached through traditional communication efforts. Overall, withholding information from the public is not only unethical, but it also reduces the likelihood that audience members will follow recommended courses of action.

Listen to public concerns and understand the audience

Interaction with the public is key to establishing credibility and goodwill. This interaction cannot be unidirectional however. Risk and crisis communication should be viewed as a context where those who are exposed to a hazard should have some control over its management. A dialogue should be established that favors neither a "here are the facts; you can't argue with the facts" nor a "we don't care about the facts; we make decisions based on our experiences" communication environment. Both of those perspectives result in one-sided communication that excludes others from the deliberation. Policy formation is inherently a political process, and value must be placed on considering various, even conflicting, viewpoints.

Be open and honest

Simply stated, honesty and candor are important in all contexts. Credibility and trust are lost when information surfaces that suggests that an organization has been less than forthright in their communication. Open and honest risk communication allows informed decisions to be made about how to manage the risk. During a crisis, people will want information about the event. If the organization experiencing the crisis is not sharing information, people will turn to others sources of information. These alternate sources are often speculating when making comments, and thus the potential for miscommunication is high.

While honesty seems to be common sense, risk and crisis events often present challenges to candid sharing of information. Lawyers try to minimize exposure to lawsuits and view open discussion as threatening to potential defense strategies, especially when guilt is stated or implied. While these lawyers are attempting to protect the organization, recent evidence suggests that corporations lose more in court when its communication has not been honest or open. Juries appear to punish these organizations by awarding punitive damages that are far greater than fines and penalties would have been had the company been more transparent.

Additionally, a common belief is that if the truth is threatening or scary, the public will panic. Panic is a fear response that, in reality, rarely occurs (Clarke 2002). Even when the most horrific information is shared, people do not display a tendency to abandon expected, reasonable responses by reacting in a manner that threatens their or others' well-being. Conversely, fear appears to be highest when provided information is insufficient or inaccurate.

One example of the danger of being less than forthright when communicating about a risk can be found in the British government's response to BSE. As Robertson (2006) noted:

> The UK government did the worst thing possible during the crisis: withheld information and denied that it was possible to develop Creutzfeld-Jakob (CJD) disease from infected beef. When it became known that government researchers were examining the relationship between BSE and CJD, consumers renounced their faith in the government. The government assumed that consumers were not capable of dealing with uncertainty and would become hysterical at the idea that there was a risk that they may become ill. This was a misconception. Consumers are perfectly capable of dealing with concepts like chance and uncertainty, but what they cannot deal with is being lied to. (p. 367)

This example demonstrates that distorting or withholding information can have an effect opposite to what was intended. Instead of avoiding fear, outrage, or distrust, the government's response fostered these negative responses.

Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible

The mass media is the primary source of risk and crisis information for most people. Treating the media as an enemy not only is inviting a battle that cannot be won, but is also eliminating the main connection that the public and other stakeholders have to the affected organization. If the organization remains accessible, then it is unlikely that the press will rely on "retired generals'" (people who may be credible but lack first-hand knowledge about the situation) speculations to fill the information void. The media can be the greatest ally or worst enemy during high intensity periods. This best practice suggests that it is better to make friends by forming relationships prior to potential negative events and by meeting the media's needs.

Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy

Spokespeople are unlikely to be trusted if they do not display a reasonable emotional response to a grave situation. Some speakers believe that they must remain calm and collected when communicating about a risk or crisis. Unfortunately, they equate lack of emotion with being collected. Credibility can be lost if people perceive the spokesperson to be cold or uncaring. Sincerity is enhanced, however, when appropriate emotion is shared with the audience. While the spokesperson does not need to have a public emotional breakdown to gain credibility, the speaker should directly or indirectly communicate that she is emotionally connected and deeply concerned about the unfolding events.

Provide messages of self-efficacy

One of the primary information needs when faced with negative events is understanding what can be

done to minimize exposure to harm. Messages of self-efficacy explain what can be done to protect one's self and loved ones. Providing something to do helps to reduce a perceived lack of control and may help mitigate harm, but recommended actions are only effective insofar as they address the issue at hand. People were unlikely to have duct tape and plastic sheets to seal their windows, even though having those supplies was a recommendation after the 9/11 attacks. Few appear to have followed that call to action simply because it was not perceived as a reasonable response to a chemical or biological attack. Houses leak air through more than just windows, and sealing windows does not seem to provide any real reduction in threat.

On the other hand, messages of self-efficacy can be highly effective if they provide specific recommendations that directly relate to the harm. "Stop, Drop and Roll" is effective because it is easy to understand, provides practical advice, and can be practiced so that one knows what to do, almost instinctively, in the event that someone is on fire. Symbolic action can also be effective. Flying a flag at half-staff or leaving flowers at the site of a tragedy may not reduce exposure to harm, but rather provides a response that helps manage grief through the process of memorializing.

Continuously evaluate and update plans
Communication is not just a means of informing people about existing policies and plans. Communication experts need to be actively involved in the planning process. Effective risk and crisis information exchange strategies minimize exposure to harm, and may ultimately save lives. If communication is viewed as something that takes place after decisions have already been made, then the likelihood that mistakes will be made increases. The process of sharing thoughts and feelings is central to successful planning.

Not only do communication experts need to be integrated into the planning process, but they also need to be involved in the plan's assessment. Plans that are written and placed on a shelf quickly become dilapidated. Infrastructure and personnel are just two of the dynamic dimensions of an organization. Crisis response plans must be continually evaluated and updated to deal with emergent weaknesses or gaps. Additionally, specific messages can also be evaluated for their effectiveness with different communities.

Discussion
Information about the National Center for Food Protection and Defense's efforts is provided at its website (http://www.ncfpd.umn.edu/). Additional information that may prove useful for understanding risk and crisis communication can be found at the Risk + Crisis Communication Project website (http://risk-crisis.ndsu.nodak.edu/). Dr. Peter Sandman offers helpful advice on his website (http://www.psandman.com/). Also, training material created by the NCFPD risk and crisis communication core group are available from the International Food Information Council website (http://www.ific.org/riskcommunication/index.cfm).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) were correct when they explained that people's construction of reality can only be understood by exploring the means of its creation. Reality is understood through a process of information exchange. Communication shapes individuals' responses to different contexts. Reactions to risks and crises are particularly influenced by information sharing because uncertainty and threat are high. Failure to plan leads to consistent, predictable mistakes. These errors may lead to increased exposure to harm and can even jeopardize lives.

The NCFPD and its risk and crisis communication team have contributed to the understanding of how effective information exchange can reduce harm during catastrophic events, including a terrorist attack on the food system. This body of knowledge has been advanced through both pure and applied research. One outcome of these efforts was the creation of the Ten Best Practices for Risk and Crisis Communication. These general principles help guide food scientists' decision-making and communication during periods of intense pressure. Through effective planning and practice, communication errors that threaten high-priority goals, such as public health and international trade, can be avoided.

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