

A Primer on Health Risk Communication Principles and Practices

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Public Health Service
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Division of Health Education
Atlanta, Georgia

Get the receiver involved up front.

- Barry Johnson, Ph.D., Assistant Surgeon General, Assistant Administrator
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
(1987)

*If we have not gotten our message across, then we ought to assume
that the fault is not with our receivers.*

- Baruch Fischhoff, Ph.D., Professor of Social and Decision Sciences and Engineering
and Public Policy
Carnegie Mellon University
(1985)

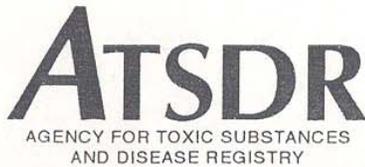
The ATSDR Mission

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), created by the U.S. Congress in 1980, is a federal Public Health Service agency and part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The mission of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry is to prevent exposure and adverse human health effects and diminished quality of life associated with exposure to hazardous substances from waste sites, unplanned releases, and other sources of pollution present in the environment.

The Role and Importance of Community Involvement in ATSDR Health Risk Communication

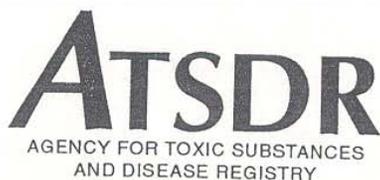
Health risk communication is an emerging area of emphasis and importance at ATSDR and in parts of the broader public health community. Over the past decade, health risk communication has played an integral part in ATSDR's comprehensive efforts to prevent or mitigate adverse human health outcomes related to hazardous substance exposure.

It is ATSDR's responsibility to ensure that decisions are made using the best available information. Community residents, site personnel, citizen groups, health professionals, and state and local government representatives are all unique sources of information needed by ATSDR to effectively communicate about the public health risks of exposure to hazardous substances. They can provide information concerning site background, community health concerns, demographics, land and natural resource use, environmental contamination, environmental pathways, and health outcomes. Information is needed from the community at several points in the health risk communication process. Involving the community in the information-gathering process makes ATSDR communications more credible and sets the stage for community participation in helping to resolve problems. Communities need and want to be actively involved in identifying, characterizing, and solving problems that affect their lives.



A Primer on Health Risk Communication Principles and Practices

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Preface

The public contributes significant information in determining the public health impact of exposure to toxic substances at hazardous waste sites. The public health professional must understand the needs of the community and be able to facilitate dialogue concerning the technical issues of public health risk and the psychological, political, social, and economic needs of the community.

The purpose of this Primer is to provide a framework of principles and approaches for the communication of health risk information to diverse audiences. It is intended for ATSDR staff and personnel from other government agencies and private organizations who must respond to public concerns about exposure to hazardous substances in the environment.

The Primer begins with brief descriptive material about the mission of ATSDR and the importance of local community involvement in the health risk communication process. The remainder of the Primer is devoted to a discussion of issues and guiding principles for communicating health risk accompanied by specific suggestions for presenting information to the public and for interacting effectively with the media.

Although the Primer attempts to identify principles relevant to and consistent with effective health risk communication practice, it is not intended to suggest that a standard of health risk communication effectiveness is measured solely on the number of principles that are employed. Rather, the manner in which the guidance should be applied will vary from case to case, based on needs, priorities, and other considerations.

ATSDR gratefully acknowledges the assistance given by the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) in the development of this document.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles for Health Risk Communication

Merely disseminating information without regard for communicating the complexities and uncertainties of risk does not necessarily ensure effective risk communication. Well-managed efforts will help ensure that your messages are constructively formulated, transmitted, and received and that they result in meaningful actions. Consider how the process works and some general principles for improving effectiveness.

Risk Communication: Myths and Actions

(Chess et al. 1988)

Belief in some common myths often interferes with development of an effective risk communication program. Consider the myths and actions you can take.

Myth

We don't have enough time and resources to have a risk communication program.

Action

Train all your staff to communicate more effectively. Plan projects to include time to involve the public.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Myth

Telling the public about a risk is more likely to unduly alarm people than keeping quiet.

Communication is less important than education. If people knew the true risks, they would accept them.

We shouldn't go to the public until we have solutions to environmental health problems.

These issues are too difficult for the public to understand.

Technical decisions should be left in the hands of technical people.

Action

Decrease potential for alarm by giving people a chance to express their concerns.

Pay as much attention to your process for dealing with people as you do to explaining the data.

Release and discuss information about risk management options and involve communities in strategies in which they have a stake.

Separate public disagreement with your policies from misunderstanding of the highly technical issues.

Provide the public with information. Listen to community concerns. Involve staff with diverse backgrounds in developing policy.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Myth

Risk communication is not my job.

If we give them an inch, they'll take a mile.

If we listen to the public, we will devote scarce resources to issues that are not a great threat to public health.

Activist groups are responsible for stirring up unwarranted concerns.

Action

As a public servant, you have a responsibility to the public. Learn to integrate communication into your job and help others do the same.

If you listen to people when they are asking for inches, they are less likely to demand miles. Avoid the battleground. Involve people early and often.

Listen early to avoid controversy and the potential for disproportionate attention to lesser issues.

Activists help to focus public anger. Many environmental groups are reasonable and responsible. Work with groups rather than against them.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication

(Covello and Allen 1988)

- 1. Accept and involve the public as a partner.**
Your goal is to produce an informed public, not to defuse public concerns or replace actions.
- 2. Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.**
Different goals, audiences, and media require different actions.
- 3. Listen to the public's specific concerns.**
People often care more about trust, credibility, competence, fairness, and empathy than about statistics and details.
- 4. Be honest, frank, and open.**
Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain; once lost, they are almost impossible to regain.
- 5. Work with other credible sources.**
Conflicts and disagreements among organizations make communication with the public much more difficult.
- 6. Meet the needs of the media.**
The media are usually more interested in politics than risk, simplicity than complexity, danger than safety.
- 7. Speak clearly and with compassion.**
Never let your efforts prevent your acknowledging the tragedy of an illness, injury, or death. People can understand risk information, but they may still not agree with you; some people will not be satisfied.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Knowing Your Publics

The likelihood of achieving a successful risk communication program increases with your knowledge of those with whom you are communicating. Early in the process, know who your publics are, what their concerns are, how they perceive risk, and whom they trust.

Identification

Co-workers	Media
Area residents	Regulatory agencies
Elected officials	Environmental activists
Civic organizations	Contractors
Health care providers	Other _____

Characteristics

Concerns	Levels of knowledge
Attitudes	Opinions
Levels of interest	Reasons for interest
Levels of involvement	Types of involvement
Histories	

Are they potential supporters or potential adversaries?

Categories of Public Concern

To be effective, your program should address the underlying concerns of each of your publics. The following are common public concerns:

Health	Economics	Process
Safety	Aesthetics	Legalities
Environment	Fairness	

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Factors Influencing Risk Perception

(Fischhoff et al. 1981)

People's perceptions of the magnitude of risk are influenced by factors other than numerical data.

<i>Risks perceived to . . .</i>	<i>are more accepted than</i>	<i>Risks perceived to . . .</i>
Be voluntary		Be imposed
Be under an individual's control		Be controlled by others
Have clear benefits		Have little or no benefit
Be fairly distributed		Be unfairly distributed
Be natural		Be manmade
Be statistical		Be catastrophic
Be generated by a trusted source		Be generated by an untrusted source
Be familiar		Be exotic
Affect adults		Affect children

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Interacting with the Community

(Chess et al. 1988)

Recognize the importance of community input. Citizen involvement is important because (a) people are entitled to make decisions about issues that directly affect their lives; (b) input from the community can help the agency make better decisions; (c) involvement in the process leads to greater understanding of—and more appropriate reaction to—a particular risk; (d) those who are affected by a problem bring different variables to the problem-solving equation; and (e) cooperation increases credibility. Finally, battles that erode public confidence and agency resources are more likely when community input isn't sought or considered.

To the extent possible, involve the community in the decision-making process

- Involve the community at the earliest stage possible.
- Clarify the public's role from the outset.
- Acknowledge situations where the agency can give the community only limited power in decision making.
- Find out from the communities what type of involvement they prefer.

Identify and respond to the needs of different audiences

- Try to identify the various interests in a situation at the beginning and meet with representatives of each informally.
- Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of citizen advisory groups.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

- Deal with everybody equally and fairly.

When appropriate, develop alternatives to public hearings. In particular, hold smaller, more informal meetings

- If you cannot avoid a large public meeting, the logistics should enable both the agency and the community to be treated fairly.
- Consider breaking larger groups into smaller ones.
- Be clear about the goals for the meeting. If you cannot adequately fulfill a citizen's request for a meeting, propose alternatives.
- In certain situations, one-to-one communication may work best.

Recognize that people's values and feelings are a legitimate aspect of environmental health issues and that such concerns may convey valuable information

- Provide a forum for people to air their feelings.
- Listen to people when they express their values and feelings.
- Acknowledge people's feelings about an issue.
- When people are speaking emotionally, respond to their emotions. Do not merely follow with data.
- Show respect by developing a system to respond promptly to calls from community residents.
- Recognize and be honest about the values incorporated in agency decisions.
- Be aware of your own values and feelings about an issue and how they affect you.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Selecting Channels for Communication

Achieving effective communication with your publics depends on selecting methods of communication that will reach them. Consider your messages and your target audiences in selecting the most appropriate communication media. Here are a few suggestions.

<i>Public</i>	<i>Channel</i>
Co-workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• News releases and fact sheets• Site tours• Meetings to address questions and concerns• Hotlines• Unit newspaper articles
Area residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community meetings• Newspaper articles and ads• Radio and TV talk shows• Fliers• Films, videos, and other materials at libraries• Direct mailings
Elected officials, opinion leaders, and environmental activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequent telephone calls• Fact sheets• Personal visits• Invitations to community meetings• News releases• Advance notices
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• News releases that focus on your message• Clear, informative fact sheets• Site visits• News conferences

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Earning Trust and Building Credibility

(Covello 1992; Covello 1993)

Your ability to establish constructive communication will be determined, in large part, by whether your audiences perceive you to be trustworthy and believable. Consider how they form their judgments and perceptions.

Factors in Assessing Trust and Credibility

Research conducted by Dr. Vincent Covello at Columbia University's Center for Risk Communication shows that public assessment of how much we can be trusted and believed is based upon four factors:

- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty and openness
- Dedication and commitment

Trust and credibility are difficult to achieve; if lost, they are even more difficult to regain.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Avoiding Pitfalls

	<i>Do . . .</i>	<i>Don't . . .</i>
<i>JARGON</i>	Define all technical terms and acronyms.	Use language that may not be understood by even a portion of your audience.
<i>HUMOR</i>	If used, direct it at yourself.	Use it in relation to safety, health, or environmental issues.
<i>NEGATIVE ALLEGATIONS</i>	Refute the allegation without repeating it.	Repeat or refer to them.
<i>NEGATIVE WORDS AND PHRASES</i>	Use positive or neutral terms.	Refer to national problems, i.e., "This is not Love Canal."
<i>RELIANCE ON WORDS</i>	Use visuals to emphasize key points.	Rely entirely on words.
<i>TEMPER</i>	Remain calm. Use a question or allegation as a springboard to say something positive.	Let your feelings interfere with your ability to communicate positively.
<i>CLARITY</i>	Ask whether you have made yourself clear.	Assume you have been understood.
<i>ABSTRACTIONS</i>	Use examples, stories, and analogies to establish a common understanding.	

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Avoiding Pitfalls

	<i>Do . . .</i>	<i>Don't . . .</i>
<i>NONVERBAL MESSAGES</i>	Be sensitive to nonverbal messages you are communicating. Make them consistent with what you are saying.	Allow your body language, your position in the room, or your dress to be inconsistent with your message.
<i>ATTACKS</i>	Attack the issue.	Attack the person or organization.
<i>PROMISES</i>	Promise only what you can deliver. Set and follow strict deadlines.	Make promises you can't keep or fail to follow up.
<i>GUARANTEES</i>	Emphasize achievements made and ongoing efforts.	Say there are no guarantees.
<i>SPECULATION</i>	Provide information on what is being done.	Speculate about worst cases.
<i>MONEY</i>	Refer to the importance you attach to health, safety, and environmental issues; your moral obligation to public health outweighs financial considerations.	Refer to the amount of money spent as a representation of your concern.
<i>ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY</i>	Use personal pronouns ("I", "we").	Take on the identity of a large organization.
<i>BLAME</i>	Take responsibility for your share of the problem.	Try to shift blame or responsibility to others.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Avoiding Pitfalls

	<i>Do . . .</i>	<i>Don't . . .</i>
<i>"OFF THE RECORD"</i>	Assume everything you say and do is part of the public record.	Make side comments or "confidential" remarks.
<i>RISK/BENEFIT/COST COMPARISONS</i>	Discuss risks and benefits in separate communications.	Discuss your costs along with risk levels.
<i>RISK COMPARISON</i>	Use them to help put risks in perspective.	Compare unrelated risks.
<i>HEALTH RISK NUMBERS</i>	Stress that true risk is between zero and the worst-case estimate. Base actions on federal and state standards rather than risk numbers.	State absolutes or expect the lay public to understand risk numbers.
<i>NUMBERS</i>	Emphasize performance, trends, and achievements.	Mention or repeat large negative numbers.
<i>TECHNICAL DETAILS AND DEBATES</i>	Focus your remarks on empathy, competence, honesty, and dedication.	Provide too much detail or take part in protracted technical debates.
<i>LENGTH OF PRESENTATIONS</i>	Limit presentations to 15 minutes.	Ramble or fail to plan the time well.

Overview of Issues and Guiding Principles

Assessing Your Effectiveness

In designing your communication program, establish measurable objectives. For each component, determine what went well, what could have gone better, and why.

For each portion of the program, ask the following questions:

Were the objectives met?

Were the changes the result of your program?

What went well? Why?

What could have gone better? Why?

How can the program be improved?

What lessons are there to be learned?

With whom should they be shared?

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

What you do and how you do it will affect your audiences' perceptions of you, your organization, and the information you are providing. Prepare and present effectively.

Before the Meeting

Know Your Audience(s)

Anticipate interests, concerns, and questions.
Consider them in preparation.

Prepare Your Presentation

Develop a strong introduction.
Develop a maximum of three key messages.
Assemble your supporting data.
Prepare audiovisual aids.
Practice.

Prepare for Answering Questions

Anticipate what questions will arise and prepare answers to them.
Practice questioning and responding.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

The Opening Presentation

A strong opening presentation sets a tone for the meeting and is crucial in attempting to establish trust and build credibility. Its elements include the following:

I. Introduction

- A statement of personal concern
- A statement of organizational commitment and intent
- A statement of purpose and a plan for the meeting

II. Key Messages

- A maximum of three take-home points
- Information to support the key messages

III. Conclusion

- A summarizing statement

I. Introduction

Remember that perceived empathy is a vital factor in establishing trust and building credibility, and it is assessed by your audience in the first 30 seconds. Include the following in your introduction:

Statement of personal concern

e.g., "I can see by the number of people here tonight that you are as concerned about this issue as I am."

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Statement of organizational intent

e.g., "I am committed to protecting the environment and the public. We of the _____ have been involved with this community for a long time and want to work with the community on this issue."

Statement of purpose and plan for the meeting (Do not use the same statement at each meeting.)

e.g., "Tonight, we would like to share with you the findings of the report for approximately 15 minutes, then we would like to open the floor for discussion, questions, and concerns. We will be available after the meeting for anyone who wishes additional information or to continue the discussion."

II. Key Messages and Supporting Data

The key messages are points you want your public to have in mind after the meeting. They should address central issues, and be short and concise.

e.g., "We have extensively tested wells in the area and found that the water meets all standards for safe drinking."

To develop your key messages:

- Brainstorm

Think freely and jot down all pieces of information you wish to communicate.

- Select key messages

Identify the most important ideas. Repeat the process until your list is down to three items.

- Identify supporting data

Other information you listed probably provides support to your key messages; organize it to reflect this.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

III. Conclusion

- Restate verbatim your key messages.
- Add a future action statement: What is your organization going to do on this project in the short term? Long term?

Presentation Aids

Audiovisual aids can make your messages easier to understand. People are more likely to remember a point if they have a visual association with the words. More guidance in preparing quality presentations can be found in the book *Effective Business and Technical Presentation* (Morrissey and Secret 1987).

Some Aids to Understanding

Charts	35 mm slides
Illustrations	Site visits
Diagrams	Posters
Glossaries	Photographs
Maps	Examples
Video/motion pictures	Handouts

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Planning and Preparation

Factors: Room size Visual obstacles
Audience size Lighting
Seating arrangement Electrical outlets

To do: Set up, focus, test, and arrange equipment beforehand.
Designate someone to help with lights.
Leave equipment intact until audience leaves.

Tool kit: Spare bulbs Blank transparencies
3-pronged adaptor Slide tray
Extension cord Transparencies
Duct tape Markers/chalk
Staff phone numbers Back-up notes

Design Guidelines

Effective visual aids . . .

- Are able to stand alone.
- Illustrate a key concept.
- Support only one major idea.
- Use pictures or graphics rather than words whenever possible.
- Conform to six words per line maximum, ten lines per visual maximum.
- Feature short phrases or key words.
- Highlight important points with color or contrast.
- Represent facts accurately.
- Are carefully made – neat, clear, and uncluttered.
- Have impact.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Presentation Reminders

When planning, practicing, and conducting a presentation, consider these facets of verbal and nonverbal communication.

Volume

The intensity of your voice reflects your confidence, competence, and openness. Watch your audience for feedback. Adjust to your surroundings.

Enunciation/Pronunciation

Speak distinctly and correctly. Be careful with unfamiliar words. Spell and define terms as appropriate.

Pace/Rhythm/Pitch

Vary your tempo. Speak slowly to emphasize key messages, pause for emphasis, vary your voice pattern and length of phrases. Avoid repeating such words as “ok,” “like,” “not,” and “uh.”

Facial Expressions/Eye Contact

Eye contact is most crucial. Your mouth, eyes, forehead, and eyebrows also communicate.

Posture

Posture communicates attitude. Try to have a straight stance with legs slightly apart.

Gestures

Gestures can enhance or detract from your communication. Be aware of yours and make sure they are appropriate.

Dress/Grooming

Dress as your audience would expect you to at your place of work or perhaps slightly less formally.

Distractions

Avoid repetitive gestures such as constant throat-clearing, checking your watch, jingling keys or change, and pacing.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Using Risk Comparisons

(Covello et al. 1988; Covello 1989)

In explaining risk data, you may wish to compare a risk number to another number. Remember:

- Comparisons can help put risk in perspective.
- Benefits should not be used to justify risks.
- Irrelevant or misleading comparisons can harm trust and credibility.

Guidelines for Risk Comparisons

First-rank (most acceptable)

- of the same risk at two different times
- with a standard
- with different estimates of the same risk

Second-rank (less desirable)

- of the risk of doing something versus not doing it
- of alternative solutions to the same problem
- with the same risk experienced in other places

Third-rank (even less desirable)

- of average risk with peak risk at a particular time or location
- of the risk from one source of an adverse effect with the risk from all sources of the same effect

Fourth-rank (marginally acceptable)

- with cost; or one cost/risk ratio with another
- of risk with benefit
- of occupational risk with environmental risk
- with other risks from the same source
- with other specific causes of the same disease, illness, or injury

Fifth-rank (rarely acceptable — Use with extreme caution!)

- of unrelated risks (e.g., smoking, driving a car, lightning)

Remember the factors that people use in their perception of risk; the more a comparison disregards these factors, the more ineffective the comparison.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

A Presentation Planner

PROJECT: _____ DATE: _____

TIME: _____ PLACE: _____

PUBLICS

Names: _____

Concerns: _____

INTRODUCTION

Statement of personal concern: _____

Statement of organizational commitment: _____

Purpose and plan for the meeting: _____

KEY MESSAGES

Content: _____

Supporting data: _____

CONCLUSION

Summary statement: _____

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Anticipated questions: _____

Responses: _____

PRESENTATION MATERIALS

Audiovisuals: _____

Handouts: _____

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Ten Deadly Sins of Communication

1. **Appearing unprepared.**
2. **Handling questions improperly.**
3. **Apologizing for yourself or the organization.**
4. **Not knowing knowable information.**
5. **Unprofessional use of audiovisual aids.**
6. **Seeming to be off schedule.**
7. **Not involving participants.**
8. **Not establishing rapport.**
9. **Appearing disorganized.**
10. **Providing the wrong content.**

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Answering Questions

As with presentations, your responses to individual's questions and concerns will affect your success. Prepare and practice. Consider how to answer questions in general and how to respond to specific inquiries.

Guidelines

Be Prepared.

If you know your subject and know your audience, most questions can be anticipated. Develop and practice responses.

Track Your Key Messages.

Use your responses as opportunities to reemphasize your key messages.

Keep Your Answers Short and Focused.

Your answer should be less than 2 minutes long.

Practice Self-Management.

Listen. Be confident and factual. Control your emotions.

Speak and Act with Integrity.

Tell the truth. If you don't know, say so. Follow up as promised.

If you are unsure of a question, repeat or paraphrase it to be certain of its meaning.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Sample Questions

The following sample questions illustrate what you are likely to encounter, along with suggested key messages and tips for responding to them. For a discussion of different types of tough questions, consult *Communicate with Power: Encountering the Media*, Barry McLoughlin Associates, Inc., 1990.

You are here as a representative of _____. Why doesn't the _____ have a program to investigate hazardous waste sites?

Key Message: We do have a policy to investigate hazardous waste sites. In fact, we...

- State in a positive manner that you do not agree with the questioner's statement. Do not try to ignore it.
- Be polite but firm.
- Take the opportunity to restate your position or message.

* * * * *

Your boss said that he was confident that there would be no problems found at this location. Doesn't he know that dumping 1,000 gallons of oil, paint thinner, and solvent near the vehicle shop can cause serious public health problems? Or he is trying to sway the results of the study?

Key Message: Evaluating the safe disposal of these products is part of the overall investigation that we are conducting to ensure the continued safety of the public.

- Do not repeat the negative words. Refute without repeating allegations.
- Return to your message.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

You've told us about the agency's position on water quality. But would you drink the water?

Key Message: I'm also concerned about the quality of the drinking water — not only as an agency representative but also as a fellow citizen. Given all I know about the issue and given the type of person I am, yes, I would drink the water.

- Be prepared for personal questions.
- If you do not agree with the agency's position, you should not act as a spokesperson.

* * * * *

Does EPA agree with what you are doing here?

Key Message: We follow EPA guidelines and send EPA copies of all our studies.

- Refer questions to the appropriate person or organization.
- Speak only to what you know and on behalf of the organization you represent.

* * * * *

Do you know the exact figure on how much money has been spent to date on this problem?

Key Message: I don't know the exact figure. But if you will give me your name and number, I will get that information for you by . . .

- Say you don't know.
- Offer to get the information by a specified time.
- Don't lie or make up an answer.
- If you promise to get the information, follow up.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

We've heard that your agency and the state regulators have made a deal to clean up heavy contamination quietly and not to do a proper hazardous waste investigation because it would be embarrassing to admit this area was missed earlier. Why is your agency being insensitive by dragging its feet on this environmental issue?

Key Message: Our goal is to fully protect the safety and health of the community and to do so in compliance with all applicable federal and state laws and regulations. We have issued several news releases on the study.

- Respond with a straightforward statement or theme.

* * * * *

What do you plan to do about the lawsuit that a local business has filed against your agency claiming compensation for loss of business?

Key Message: That's a legitimate question. But while the case is in progress, I am not able to discuss this.

- Give a reason why you can't answer.

* * * * *

What are your qualifications to run this program?

Key Message: I have several years' experience in managing programs of this type, and I have a team of professionals working with me to ensure that all aspects of the program are carried out with quality.

- Don't respond with hostility or emotion.
- Remove emotional words.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Don't you know that you cannot make final decisions without providing for public comment, you idiot?

Key Message: All final decisions must take public comments very seriously.

- Restate, removing hostile or negative tone.

* * * * *

It must be really hard to deal with all of your environmental problems.

Key Message: My training and experience prepare me to deal with environmental, safety, and health problems, and I am here to do the best job I can for the community.

- Don't buy into the sympathetic approach.
You may end up agreeing and destroy your credibility.

* * * * *

In reference to groundwater contamination, why do you think your agency doesn't care about the health of its neighbors?

Key Message: We are very much concerned about the health of our neighbors.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Then why does it take over 5 years of study to come up with a solution to remediate your contamination of our groundwater?

Key Message: I want to make sure that it is clear that we take care of any situation that poses an immediate danger without delay. During our study, which for many reasons is an extensive and expensive process, we did not find an immediate health threat. If we had, we would have taken immediate action. Public health is always our top concern.

- Be polite but firm.
- Return to your message.
- Repeat your statements.
- Be careful not to repeat negative words like *contamination of the public groundwater*.

* * * * *

What is the worst-case scenario?

Key Message: I would not want to speculate. We are working hard to ensure the health and safety of this community. The study we are conducting will include testing of soil, groundwater . . .

- Don't speculate.
- If you do speculate, categorize it as such.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

We have heard a rumor that there are serious groundwater problems at this site.

Key Message: This is the first time I've heard this rumor. The data I have seen indicate that no groundwater problems exist at this site.

- Don't respond to the rumor.
- Do tell the truth.

* * * * *

Why do you want to expand? And did you send an undercover employee to a private meeting and what information did he gather?

Key Message: Let me respond to your first question. The community has legitimate concerns about. . .

- Choose the easiest to answer first.
- Don't answer them all at once.

* * * * *

What would you recommend that your boss do to address the concerns of the public on these contamination problems?

Key Message: My boss can request advice and guidance from anyone concerning safe environmental practices. When I'm asked, I provide whatever assistance I can.

- Don't give this kind of advice when talking to the public or media.

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Some DOs and DON'Ts of Listening (Atwater 1989)

Your ability to listen effectively is crucial when you are faced with people who have a wide range of agendas requiring your attention. Your ability to hear and respond well to what they are saying requires practice and experience.

Do . . .

- Become aware of your own listening habits.
- Share responsibility for the communication.
- Concentrate on what the speaker is saying.
- Listen for the total meaning, including feelings.
- Observe the speaker's nonverbal signals.
- Adopt an accepting attitude.
- Express empathic understanding.
- Listen to yourself.
- "Close the loop" of listening by taking appropriate action.

Don't . . .

- Mistake not talking for listening.
 - Fake listening.
 - Interrupt needlessly.
 - Pass judgment too quickly.
 - Make arguing an "ego-trip"; don't argue.
 - Ever tell a speaker, "I know exactly how you feel."
 - Overreact to emotional words.
 - Give advice unless it is requested.
 - Use listening as a way of hiding yourself.
-

Presenting Information at Public Meetings

Managing Hostile Situations

Issues of health and environment can arouse strong anger and hostility. Consider some things you can do to diffuse anger and re-direct hostile energy.

Remember

- Environmental issues can arouse strong emotions, including anger and hostility.
- Hostility is usually directed at you as a representative of an organization, not you as an individual.
- Dealing ineffectively with hostility can erode trust and credibility.

Some Things You Can Do

Acknowledge the Existence of Hostility.

- You are sending the message that you are in control.
- The worst thing you can do is pretend it's not there.

Practice Self-Management.

- Control your apprehension.
- Anxiety undercuts confidence, concentration, and momentum.
- Listen.

Be Prepared.

- Plan, prepare, and practice your presentation and anticipated questions and answers.

Communicate Empathy and Caring.

- Recognize people's frustrations.
- Use eye contact.

Assume a listening posture.

Answer questions carefully and thoughtfully.

Track Your Key Messages.

- Turn negatives into positives.
- Bridge back to your messages.

Working with the Media

Because working with the media is one of your primary opportunities for communicating with the public, your positive relationships with the media are crucial. Consider what to do before, during, and after an interview, and in a crisis.

The Media Perspective

In general, the media is interested in the following:

- Human interest stories
- Bad news more than good news
- People's perspectives
- Yes or no/safe or unsafe answers
- Front-page news stories

Preparing a Message

The media will be seeking information on:

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

To maximize your impact, prepare and practice delivering your key message.

For broadcast media: a 10- to 12-word "soundbite"

For print media: 1- to 3-line quote

Working with the Media

Before, During, and After an Interview (Donovan and Covello 1989)

BEFORE

Do . . .

- Ask who will be conducting the interview.
- Ask which subjects they want to cover.
- Caution them when you are not the correct person to interview because there are topics you cannot discuss (because lack of knowledge, etc.)
- Inquire about the format and duration.
- Ask who else will be interviewed.
- Prepare and practice.

Don't . . .

- Tell the news organization which reporter you prefer.
 - Ask for specific questions in advance.
 - Insist they do not ask about certain subjects.
 - Demand your remarks not be edited.
 - Insist an adversary not be interviewed closeup.
 - Assume it will be easy.
-

Working with the Media

Before, During, and After an Interview

(Donovan and Covello 1989)

DURING

Do . . .

- Be honest and accurate.
- Stick to your key message(s).
- State your conclusions first, then provide supporting data.
- Be forthcoming to the extent you decide beforehand.
- Offer to get information you don't have.
- Explain the subject and content.
- Stress the facts.
- Give a reason if you can't discuss a subject.
- Correct mistakes by stating you would like an opportunity to clarify.

Don't . . .

- Lie or try to cloud the truth.
 - Improvise or dwell on negative allegations.
 - Raise issues you don't want to see in the story.
 - Fail to think it through ahead of time.
 - Guess.
 - Use jargon or assume the facts speak for themselves.
 - Speculate, discuss hypothetical situations.
 - Say, "No comment."
 - Demand an answer not be used.
-

Working with the Media

Before, During, and After an Interview

(Donovan and Covello 1989)

AFTER

Do . . .

- Remember you are still on the record.
- Be helpful. Volunteer to get information. Make yourself available. Respect deadlines.
- Watch for and read the resulting report.
- Call the reporter to politely point out inaccuracies, if any.

Don't . . .

- Assume the interview is over or the equipment is off.
 - Refuse to talk further.
Ask, "How did I do?"
 - Ask to review the story before publication or broadcast.
 - Complain to the reporter's boss first.
-

Working with the Media

In a Crisis

A threat to health, safety, or the environment — actual, perceived, or potential — can pose both danger and opportunity in risk communication. Consider some DOs and DON'Ts.

Do . . .

Plan now.

Respond immediately – the first 24 hours are critical.

Respond straightforwardly.

Don't . . .

Hope a crisis never comes.

Let the issue be defined by someone else.

Think that keeping a lid on the story will prevent the public from seeking information.

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