

CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

1.0 Background

1.1 Stress: When people first hear of an event and there is high uncertainty, stress is high. One of the physical consequences of stress is that people think less clearly (because stress interferes with certain memory processes in the brain).

Information needs to be direct and clear. Keep messages brief and direct. Keep your language simple. Repeat messages and instructions.

Particularly under conditions of stress, people remember more what they hear first, and last. So stress the important part of your message at the beginning and then repeat it at the end before going on to another point.

2.0 Factors influencing behavior

Things can and will go wrong during any emergency communications campaign. Events are moving rapidly and public perceptions will be changing rapidly with them. Thus, a flexible approach and set of responses is required to adequately meet audience needs for solid information.

Multiple factors determine how people respond to an emergency event. Because of the sudden surge of information, some people may not respond immediately and thoroughly to calls for emergency response. Early messages during an event may be misunderstood or not fully accepted as fact. This aspect of human behaviour needs to be constantly integrated into emergency communications so that messages are better understood and incorporated into emergency responses.

3.0 Rumours

A rumour is a statement that is not based on fact and cannot be verified. Rumours are quite natural response to people's need for some explanation of an event or situation. People will seek and accept rumours as fact because they want to have a rational description of what is happening, even if the rumour is not factual. Rumours become even more dangerous when they are invented and spread with malicious intentions.

Rumours appear when a group tries to make sense of an ambiguous, uncertain or chaotic situation. Rumours may spread through mass media, internet, oral communication and individuals may transmit them to a number of persons. Rumours will spread depending on their attractiveness, the uncertainty of the situation, lack of information, and the existence of a cohesive social group. With certain strategies the start of a rumour can be prevented, with others a rumour's credibility can be lowered or its spreading avoided. Providing clear and transparent information to the public is crucial.

3.1 Rumour control

- Continue to provide frequent and complete information to the public
- If necessary, organize a rumour control centre, for detecting, following, and responding to rumours
- PIOs (public information officers) should be trained to cope with rumours. Take into account what kind of rumours would be the most devastating for your organization. Study similar rumours
- Build strong and positive relationships with the public so that rumours may be doubted if not rejected
- Ensure good internal communication within your organization, so that it does not itself become a fertile ground for rumour growth
- Reiterate facts through official information dissemination
- Even acknowledging a rumour may add to its spread
- Begin rumour control as soon as possible
- Neglect a rumour only if it is harmless or will fade by itself

Rumour management requires a concerted and ongoing effort for effective control. A specific group may be designated with responsibility for rumour management. PIOs may require training in how to handle rumour in their public outreach. Always counter the rumour with specific facts.

It is essential to deal with a rumour quickly before public perception of the rumour becomes a reality.

3.2 Rumour stages

Start: Rumours will spread depending on their attractiveness, the uncertainty of the situation, lack of information, and the existence of a cohesive social group. If we understand that rumours appeared because of the need to achieve clarity about an unclear situation during a crisis, it is also clear how to fight against them. Uncertainty needs to be reduced both through conventional and new communication channels.

Assessment: Once a rumour has started, it needs to be refuted with facts. The refutation will only be as effective as the information source is credible. Every element of the rumour should be rejected with facts, while general rejection is not effective. In rejecting the rumour, the rumour as such should not be repeated. If a rumour is already spreading, it needs to be analysed to detect its source and possible further elaboration or evolution.

Spread: The longer that rumours are spreading, the harder they are to control. Spreading rumours often develop convincing variants that can be harder to reject. And the more people hear the rumour, the more they believe it. A rumour can only be ignored if it is judged to be harmless, or can be safely assumed to die by itself.

End: A rumour will die or lose relevance once the real facts of a situation emerge and gain popularity and credibility. Refuting a rumour requires repeated actions to counter the spread of misinformation.

4.0 False alarms

A false alarm – a situation when warning about a certain danger is issued when nothing has really happened – can present a significant problem in risk communication. It can cause unnecessary fear, bring resources to a place where they are not needed and potentially divert emergency responders away from legitimate emergencies. Over time, repeated false alarms in a certain area may cause people to start to ignore all alarms, knowing that each time it will likely be a fake. Simply stated, the more false alarms, less people will trust risk organizations and their communications. The consequences can be serious for radiation issues since the consideration of warnings is of tremendous importance for survival.

False alarms occur for different reasons: rumours, mistakes and errors of different kinds (e.g. lapses, misunderstandings or wrong estimations), changes in an emergency's development and overly sensitive monitoring equipment.

To prevent serious consequences from false alarms they must be recognized as soon as possible and response should immediately follow, including information about the real situation and reasons for the unnecessary alarm.

5.0 Managing hostile situations

Public reaction to any emergency – especially a radiation emergency with health and environmental consequences-- is likely to be emotional and, in many cases, hostile toward the organizations and representative directly involved. Anger must be met with patience and understanding, not more hostility. Adequate and factual explanations will build public trust and credibility.

5.1 Tips for managing hostile situations

- Acknowledge hostility
- Control apprehension
- Listen carefully
- Be prepared
- Communicate empathy and care
- Track messages
- Timely, factual communications secure trust and counteract hostility