Emergency Communications

1.0 BACKGROUND

Emergency communications is a unique form of risk communication, sometimes called crisis communications.

The objectives of emergency communications are to manage public response and establish the organization as the main source of information.

Communications in an emergency has several unique characteristics.

- The role of communication in managing human behavior is a much more important component of overall emergency management.

- The need for constant communication is much higher.

- The need to monitor other communication channels is much higher.

The early messages and actions of an emergency response will have a lot of impact on how people respond, and the feelings they form about the event and the public's attitude about the emergency response organization. These foundational moments are critical to the overall emergency response and its ability to manage public behavior. Communication is a key tool at this stage.

People will be hungry for information, and various sources will be providing it constantly. You want to be the main source of information at this stage so communicating frequently, even with updates that say there's nothing new, keeps you in front as the main voice people will turn to.

At this stage, many other communicators will also be talking about the emergency. It is important to monitor these channels during this critical period. Other communicators are both a benefit and a risk. They may be reporting pieces of information that help your organization: how people are behaving, for example. All other communicators communicating on various channels can serve as information gatherers for you. Some will probably also be spreading incomplete or inaccurate information and rumors which could impact public behavior.

When people first hear of an emergency and there is high uncertainty, concern and stress are high. Under stress, people think less clearly (because stress interferes with certain memory processes in the brain). This means that the emotional factors of UNCERTAINTY and CONTROL play even higher role in how people feel, so information should be direct and clear and should almost always include something people can DO, even if it is just to stay tuned for more information.

2.0 Unique Circumstances

It is essential to plan for emergency communications in advance. Ensure you have a pre-established public communications plan that has been tested and exercised, so it is ready to be activated in an emergency.

Emergency communications are unique for several reasons.

- Perhaps most importantly, in the beginning stages of an emergency, uncertainty is higher. Fewer facts are available. Uncertainty is a powerful psychological factor that contributes to fear.

- Things happen very fast. There is little time for planning, for building relationships, little time to find out what's going on, little time to think carefully about what to do next. But the need to act, and to communicate quickly and often.

- Because of these factors, it is particularly important in emergency communications to give people something they can do, to shelter-in-place, or where they can go to pick up their children, or where they can get more information. It is very important to tell people why you are making those recommendations, and why they will help.

- Also, in emergency situations, particularly at the outset, the public has a higher need for the basic facts; what happened, what risk might there be, where, what do people need to know? This desires for basic information changes several facets of how you communicate during the beginning stages of an emergency.

- It is also very important at the beginning of the emergency to frame the situation for people; to paint the first picture in their minds about the event. Framing means setting the initial way people hear the event described. This will be their frame of reference for all subsequent information. Key phrases and names for the event are set at this stage, as the initial frame of thinking about it is established. These frames are critical for how people think about things, and respond, subsequently.

- It is important at the earliest part of an emergency to establish that you are the agency to turn to for information. To influence public behavior, you want people turning to your agency constantly for information, so at the beginning you have to establish your credibility and importance as a source of information.

- Emotions are higher when people are under stress, and stress is higher at the beginning of emergencies when there is more uncertainty. So it is vital that in all communications, the communicator shows respect for people's concerns and feelings. Do not tell them to calm down or tell them what to feel. Tell them you respect their feelings and are offering information to help them.

- Communicators should help the public keep their fear in perspective.

- If you tell people to calm down, and not be afraid, that is disrespectful and you will have a harder time influencing their behaviors.

3.0 Timing

Things move very quickly at the beginning stages of an emergency. Planning is essential.

You need to know who will be doing what jobs. You need to have contact lists established. You need to have equipment and space allocated. You need procedures in place to get messages approved for release, and to coordinate communication with other key agencies involved in the emergency. You need to have mechanisms in place for sending out information, like special sites on your web page, or equipment that can send one message to many newsrooms at the same time, or equipment to host a news conference when the news media come.

You need to have messages ready to go, written and rehearsed for scenarios like this one, adjusted for the specifics of the actual event.

You need to communicate constantly, every few minutes if necessary. This establishes your agency as the main source people will turn to for their information, and gives you more influence on public behavior.

4.0 Control

- Give people a sense of control
- A feeling of control helps people keep their fears in perspective and allows them to make better choices
- This can be as simple as telling them where to go for more information or when you will communicate updated information

It is vital at times of high uncertainty and stress to give people something they can do, some sense of control. This can include many things, from sheltering-in-place to evacuation to where they can get more information and stay up to date on the latest details.

The reason for this is that a sense of control reduces the stress of a situation, and that lets people think more clearly and make better decisions.

5.0 Emergency communications

At the outset of an emergency there will be many sources of information

- The news media

- Friends talking to friends on mobile phones or on social media

- Various agencies and politicians will be communicating

If your organization's role is as the lead emergency response organization, at this critical stage you want to establish your organization as the one supplying the first facts of what's going on and what people should do. Communicate as early as possible. Do not wait for all the facts to come in to start communicating with the public.

You need to communicate constantly. Do not leave an 'information vacuum.'

Monitor other sources that are communicating. These sources can provide you important information about what's going on in various places. They are a good source of intelligence. They might be reporting misinformation or rumors that you want to correct. And if the media ask you about things they've reported that you don't know about, you will look uninformed and that will hurt your credibility. This is especially important in the early phases of an emergency.

6.0 Changing circumstances

In the early phase of an emergency, circumstances change very quickly. Each time there is a change in circumstances, fill out a new version of the chart, and put those circumstances in the first column. You don't have to do a completely new chart with each significant update…just put the updated circumstances on each new page. You can end up doing this every few minutes at the beginning of an emergency, when the situation changes so fast.

Keep a notebook with all the pages of charts you have used. Note time and date on each new page.

Don't forget to start with setting your goals. With each new update, identify the goals that you want to aim for as you fill in the rest of the page.

7.0 Risk perception characteristics

Emergency conditions will call some psychological risk perception characteristics into play more than others. The emotional characteristics of uncertainty and control play an even higher role in how people feel at times like this. It will be very important to people's responses whether they trust the organizations, including yours, that are supposed to protect them. The more trust they have, the more thoughtfully they will respond to your information and suggestions.

Because emergency situations are generally more frightening because of these four factors, you have to be particularly respectful of people's emotions. You have to be empathetic, especially about these four factors.

The nature of a nuclear or radiological threat that has been caused purposefully by a terrorist or criminal is emotionally very different than the same radiological event if it is not caused on purpose. In such circumstances, additional empathy is needed to establish trust.

8.0 Audiences

There are a wide range of specific audiences to think about in the event of an emergency. Especially during emergencies, these unique audiences have unique concerns so they require unique messages and actions.

8.1 Public directly at risk

Concerns: Personal safety, family safety, animal safety, stigmatization, property protection, need for immediate specific safety recommendations.

8.2 Public immediately outside circle of disaster or emergency

Concerns: Personal safety, family safety, animal safety, interruption of normal life activities

8.3 Public at large

Concerns: Personal and family safety, affect on normal life activities

8.4 Public health and medical professionals involved in the emergency response

Concerns: Resources adequate to respond, personal safety, family safety,

8.5 Health care professionals outside the response effort

Concerns: ability to respond to patients with appropriate information, access to treatment supplies if needed/wanted

8.6 Civic leaders, local, state, and national

Concerns: Response and recovery resources, liability, costs, leadership, quality of response and recovery planning and implementation, blame, trade and international diplomatic relations

8.7 Trade and industry

Concerns: Business issues (loss of revenue, liability, business interruption) and protection of employees

8.8 International neighbors

Concerns: trans-boundary release, readiness efforts started

8.9 13. Stakeholders and partners specific to the emergency (discussed in a separate module)

Concerns: Safety or economic interest.

9.0 Channels

In emergency circumstances, some channels will matter more than others. Some will be used by certain audiences more than others. Mobile phones and social networks will play an active part in how people communicate with each other, and how they learn.

Attention to the mainstream media will be much higher, particularly radio and TV and online sources that will be constantly updating information.

Some communication channels may not be working, depending on the nature of the emergency. Storms, floods, fires or purposeful attacks may have knocked out certain communication links. Others may become dysfunctional because of heavy use. This needs to be accounted for at the planning stage.

10.0 Actions, messages

There are basic facts of an emergency that people need to know about, and want to know about. As much as possible, based on what is known and keeping in mind security issues, these basic facts should be addressed repeatedly in the messages:

- What happened?

- What is going on now?

- Am I safe? (Don't tell people they are or are not safe by using the word "safe". It is a subjective feeling, not a fact. Describe the facts about risk…"At such and such a location there is no exposure…"

- What is the danger? How widespread? How serious?

- What can people do?   It is very important here that you explain why those recommendations are being made. Some of these behaviors, like sheltering in place, will seem counterintuitive. People will want to evacuate, rather than stay where they are. So explain why you are recommending whatever it is that you suggest.

- How long will it last?

- What is being done to bring things under control and eliminate the risk.

- What area is affected?

- What caused it?

- Whose fault was it?

It is very important to avoid the instinct to tell people to calm down. People might be afraid. They might even be more afraid than they need to be based on the facts. But this fear is real, and natural, and inescapable. It is up to each individual to decide how to feel about the facts you give them. If they trust you, and you respect their feelings, your information will have more influence on their judgments than if you ignore their feelings and tell them you know best about how they should feel.

One important aspect of your messages and actions is to give people a sense of control. Tell them what they can do. Tell them where they can get more information. Tell them where they can go to connect with loved ones, and help facilitate this. Tell parents where they can go to pick up children evacuated from an emergency zone. Be honest about uncertainty. Admit that uncertainty exists; tell people what you are doing about it, and how you are trying to learn more. This honesty will help establish trust, which will counteract some of the fear from uncertainty. Being dishonest about uncertainty and denying it, or claiming to know more than you know, is very dangerous. Be careful about stating things with absolute certainty. If something happens that conflicts with what you've said, your certainty will be held against you and diminish your trustworthiness and effectiveness. Avoid promises. If you can't keep them, that will also hurt public trust and weaken your effectiveness. Your actions and messages during an emergency

should include constant updates. Even if there is nothing new…every few minutes you want to announce "There is nothing new but we are keeping you constantly updated."

Because stress makes it harder to think clearly, messages have to be clear, direct, and simple. Avoid jargon and scientific language. For the most important parts of the message, repetition is acceptable and encouraged. Give the most important part of the message at the beginning, and repeat it at the end.

Most people don't understand radiation, and normally they don't pay attention to information that can reduce this uncertainty. Under emergency circumstances they will be paying close attention, so this is an opportunity to explain the risks of ionizing radiation as part of influencing public response to the emergency. This must be clear, simple language. This can be done in real-time messaging, and in background material you have prepared in advance and posted on your website or in other places, that you can tell people to refer to.

In the confusing time as an emergency begins, when uncertainty is high and trust matters so much, inconsistent messages add confusion, fuel people's fears and reduce your ability to influence their behavior. So make sure your messages are coordinated with the communications of other key response agencies. The messages don't have to be the same, but you need to know what other key agencies are saying so you can avoid any glaring inconsistencies.

11.0 Conclusion

Emergency communications are unique for several reasons that change how you plan, and what you do and say.

Stress is higher. People think less clearly, inside and outside the organization. This requires more simple, direct messages, and the need to give people some sense of control

Time is condensed. Things change rapidly, which adds to stress. The risk communication process chart is a powerful tool for helping think clearly under this time constrained conditions.

The facts will not all be in. There will be confusion and uncertainty. Be honest about this. Admit it, and tell people what you are doing to learn more and reduce uncertainty. Update information often.

Focus message content on the basics of what happened, how much danger there may be, to whom, and what people can do.

It is very important to establish your organization as the main source of information for the public telling them what the risks are and what they can do to protect themselves. Communicate early and often, so you are framing how people think about the emergency more than any other communication voice.

Emotions are stronger during emergencies. This does NOT mean that people panic. Fear will be elevated and this should be respected. Do not tell people to be calm or stay calm. Tell them the facts about the risk and that you hope those facts will help people keep the risk in perspective.