CREATING A PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM

1.0 Background

1.1 Prepare, plan, practice

Risk communication is a unique kind of communication because when risk is involved, it triggers very powerful emotions, connected with our instinct for survival, and those emotions play a large role in how people behave. Risk communication must take into account those emotions, more than 'regular' communication.

Risk communication is much more important to an organization in connection with emergencies than the normal communication function. Risk communication is a key tool for the entire overall response to the emergency event. . It's part of influencing human response to events. It is a public safety tool.

This presentation is an overview of the basic steps involved in creating a public communication program within the organization, the steps to take to prepare for emergencies, and a basic process of how to develop messages and actions before, during and after an emergency.

There are three important stages to any risk communication process:

- Preparedness means getting everything in place you will need…people, facilities and equipment, assignments, operational rules, etc.
- Planning means getting ready for specific possible scenarios…preparing messages, assignments, assembling lists of contact information, etc.
- Practice means actually practicing risk communication activities, including participating in exercises, staged news conferences and media interactions, and practice delivering messages that have been prepared for specific events.

Whether you are setting up a risk communication structure and process, or doing a specific risk communication program to respond to a specific event, the first step in preparing should be to specify just what the goals are, and all your following actions should address that goal.

In setting up a program in the first place, you should write a mission statement that sets the overall goal of the program. A sample mission statement is offered.

1.2 Program setup

In non- emergency circumstances, messages prepared by a staff member usually need approval by higher authorities before they are released. In setting up a risk communication plan, you need to establish these processes so they work under the time pressure of emergency circumstances.

In preparing a risk communication infrastructure, you need to establish the office and desk space or other location needs that will be required. Emergency risk communication operations usually require more space than the normal communications operation an organization uses.

Extra equipment might be needed, like machinery to send out blast emails, or extra phones. Extra internet connections or phone lines should be installed.

Coordinating the communications coming from your organization with the information coming from others is very important. This doesn't mean all messages have to be the same, but all emergency response organizations should know what the others might be saying. Establish procedures for this coordination when you set up a risk communication infrastructure.

In establishing an emergency communication infrastructure, preparation should include compiling a list of all the contacts that will be important in the event of an emergency.

- MEDIA. In the news media this should include the general news room or assignment desk, and any particular reporters who focus on covering stories connected to nuclear technology, power medicine, public safety, or environment. Don't forget "new" media like online news sites, or key blogs that may focus on nuclear issues and emergency response.
- STAKEHOLDERS. This includes all the NGOs connected to nuclear issues, even those who are critical of nuclear technology. Any industry that might be affected by the emergency, both directly and indirectly. Draw up a list of other stakeholders that also might be keenly interested in or affected by the emergency.
- CONTACTS AT OTHER AGENCIES THAT WILL BE PART OF THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE. This is important for coordination. Don't forget international nuclear, health and environmental agencies. Even if there is no immediate risk to other countries, the high profile of radiation emergencies means you want to let others outside your country know what's going on.

2.0 Public communications activities

The PIO (public information officer) is responsible for keeping the media and public informed and coordinating with all sources of official information to ensure that information provided is consistent, accurate and timely.

For Member States that are using nuclear power or other significant sources of radiation, many will already have an organization responsible for public information activities. This existing organization could take on this function during a radiation emergency. For others, this function may have to be developed as part of the overall emergency response plan.

In the next few slides, we will break down the various public communications activities that may be required during an emergency and how they might be organized.

Strategic planning—a strategy to respond to communications needs and issues that will arise during the emergency. Unlike an existing plan, this strategy will consider the current public environment, identify any strategic issues that may affect how communications is undertaken, identify key messages to be used and information to be communicated and why. It will also identify the different target audiences based on the emergency situation and give their priority. The communications strategy can take different forms depending on the needs and time pressures of the specific emergency. For example, the table used in the Risk Communications

Process lecture could be used as a template to identify critical elements of the strategy. It will also be important to develop the overall approach to communications, propose tools, methods and information products to be developed. Once approved by the IC, these will then be implemented by the PIO and revised as needed to reflect developments as the emergency unfolds.

Media Relations—to provide information to the media, organize news conference and technical briefings, to issue news releases, to correct rumors, coach the spokesperson and negotiate media interviews.

Media Monitoring—to monitor traditional print and electronic media as well as new social media sources for accuracy of information. Social media can be a powerful driver of misinformation to the media and public.

New Media Communications—to keep emergency specific website up-to-date, provide responses to website enquiries and develop information products and visuals for Internet and new social media sources.

Liaison and Coordination — to coordinate information/messages and release of all information with other organizations, other levels of government, international agencies, and other relevant organizations.

Public Relations—to provide information to the public through information products, information centres, telephone hot lines, email, and public meetings.

Internal Communications—to keep employees informed about the emergency and what the organization is saying to media and public about the response. (Due to high demands from media/public, this may have to be delivered by another group - such as human resources/personnel).

2.1 Program setup

- Reaching various audiences before, during, and after an emergency will require using different channels. For example, you might want to reach the news media by issuing a news release, and you might want to send it by mail, and online. To reach younger audiences you might want to use social media, or cell phones. Become familiar with these channels. For example, practice and establish pre-written press release templates and know how to submit them to the news media. This will facilitate their dissemination in case of an emergency. In addition to having a list of these channels, and being familiar with how to use them, you want to establish the actual channels themselves, or tools for using them, in advance.
- Establish a special Emergency section for your organization’s home page.
- Develop a standard format for a press release.
- Establish the equipment needed to hold a news conference.

- Set up a channel for alerting the public with emergency radio or cell phone messaging.
- To reach a younger or more mobile audience, establish pages on social media web sites, or channels by which you could reach people on their mobile phones.

Other channels include email blast list serves that can quickly send the same message to many recipients, fax machines that can send the same news release to many sources at once, or printed brochures and other physical materials that can be distributed by mail or by hand or provided to people who call in wanting certain information. There will be a session on Communication Channels later in the course.

3.0 Organization and planning

In addition to organizing the staff assigned to the PIO into a logical working structure, the PIO will also have to have liaison officers to attend key meetings and discussions in the planning and operation sections. Although it is possible for briefings to be provided to PIO staff, it will be much easier for staff attuned to public information to pick up issues and identify information needs first hand.

To be effective, the PIO must also be supported by appropriate experts who can provide technical advice in the development of all media and public information materials.

The spokesperson(s), usually technical experts who are both credible and good communicators, will also need to be designated. The spokesperson should report to the Lead PIO. To maintain consistency, the number of spokespeople should be kept as small as possible, depending on the workload. During an emergency, demands from media, local, national and international will be intense and it may not be feasible for one person to take on this role on a 24/7 basis. Where multiple spokespersons are used, it will be vital to ensure that information provided is consistent. Any inconsistencies may be picked up by media and could undermine the credibility of the emergency response.

4.0 Phases of Emergency Management

There are three basic phases of emergency management: preparedness, immediate response, and longer term recovery.

After setting up your infrastructure, the first step is to identify all the possible emergencies you would want to be ready for. Make a public communications plan for each one of these, for each phase.

In the phase of immediate and early stage response to an emergency, a unique set of communication needs and approaches sometimes called crisis or emergency communications will be involved. Details about the unique nature of emergency communication will be given in a later lecture during this course.

4.1 Basic steps

- Plan for all potential emergencies for which you need to be prepared. These include the full range of nuclear and radiological events that could happen depending on how nuclear technology is used in your country (e.g. nuclear power plants, hospitals, research reactor, transportation, industrial sites...). This list should also include any emergencies that could happen in neighboring countries. Include emergencies that could happen in countries far away that might involve release of radioactive material into the atmosphere. Include emergencies that may cause public concern, even if they don't involve any threat to public or environmental safety. Many events on the INES scale involve no actual danger but could still provoke public concern.
- For each emergency, write down your goal for how communication can help your agency manage behavior in case of actual emergencies. For example, you may want to get people to shelter in place or you may just want to establish that you are aware of something going on in another country in order to tell the public you are looking out for them and establish public confidence in your organization. The goals will vary depending on the emergency, but the rest of the planning process rests on setting goals at the start.
- Once your goals for each emergency are established, create a notebook or file for that emergency that should contain the basic facts you will need to know should it occur (e.g. facts about radiation, why sheltering in place works, about monitoring systems, about evacuation routes, about which other organizations would be involved in such an event…).

5.0 Risk communication planning

To assist in planning, using a chart such as this is helpful is assessing the array of potential risks and the best response mechanisms. Using IAEA Threat Categories (in IAEA document EPR-Method), determine the highest level of threat in your area of responsibility and work to plan for the various potential incidents and emergencies that could occur.

A chart such as this is helpful in the planning stages, but can also be used in an emergency situation to keep track of changing circumstances and communication needs, as described in the previous lecture.

Particularly when an emergency is first developing, the risk communication planning process can be a helpful tool for organizing your thinking. But under emergency circumstances, there are unique issues within each column, so you would use the process in unique ways.

5.1 Column 1: Circumstances, context

In column one, enter all the facts that are relevant to the emergency: what happened, where, what kind of radiation is involved, how much, what is being done to bring things under control, what kind of monitoring is being done...? Write down a full description of the basic facts of the emergency.

In the pre-event stage, there is time to think through the important basic facts regarding different types of emergencies. For example, in preparing for a transportation emergency in which radioactive material falls off a truck, you might want to have an explanation for why radioactive

material is sometimes transported on local roads. Gather some basic facts about radiation, and dose, and penetrating power of different particles (these will be explained in a later lecture).

In Column one, also include the context that would be important should this particular type of emergency occur. Have similar incidents occurred in the past? When? How did they turn out? What are public attitudes towards nuclear power? What are the political realities in the local communities? What is the state of current relationships with key stakeholders?

5.2 Column 2: Risk Perception Characteristics

In Column Two, enter which particular psychological risk perception characteristics (those discussed in the Lecture on Risk Perception) might be involved based on input in Column one. Many of the factors will be involved in almost any radiation emergency. The idea of writing them down here is that, by the time you get to the end of the process and start considering messages, you will have these factors spelled out so you can base your messages not just on what's going on – the facts – but also some of the key emotional components of the situation. Think about how people feel!

5.3 Column 3: Audiences

In this column write down who you want to reach. There is no one audience for most emergencies. There is the general public nationally, the local public closer to the emergency site, even the neighborhood closest to the emergency. These people all feel differently and need different information. There might be other audiences too such as government officials, mothers of young children, the elderly…

Once you have listed a specific audience, think about how that audience feels about the event. There may be special risk perception factors, that go in Column Two, that are stronger for some audiences than others. Look at your list of audiences and go back to Column Two and make sure the risk perception factors particular to that audience are included.

5.4 Column 4: Channels

For each audience, there will be particular ways that work best to reach them, given the circumstances in Column 1. For example, to reach the general public you might want to consider various media channels; radio, TV, internet, or newspapers (many newspapers now have websites which provides a real-time channel). To reach the local neighborhood near the emergency site, other channels might be better, including sending announcement trucks driving through the neighborhood, or public safety alert systems that allow officials to place alert phone calls to homes in a specific area. For certain audiences, and immediate information dissemination, social media sites like Twitter or Facebook should also be considered.

Based on the perception factors in Column Two, think of certain particular channels. For example, if trust is an important issue, identify channels like meeting with people in their own homes or in their neighborhoods, which shows respect and builds trust.

Again, the chart works in both directions. As you fill in each column go back and look at what is in the other ones.

5.5 Column 5: Spokesperson

An effective spokesperson must be trusted by his or her audience(s). Trust can come from many things: competence and expertise, authority, honesty (e.g. admitting you don't know everything, and warm personal style.

Plain language should always be used when communicating with the public, regardless of the level of technical expertise of the communicator.

5.6 Column 6: Actions, Messages

It is very important at this stage to remember that you are trying to impact public behavior regarding an emergency, often under crisis conditions. In order to do that more effectively, this column asks you to think about not only what you would say, but what you DO that would also send a message that would impact public behavior. For example, if you listed the risk perception factor of uncertainty in column two, you might want to post extra background information about radiation on your web site and tell people that background information is there so they can learn more. In a high stress emergency situation, offering updated information more frequently will help establish trust and reduce uncertainty. It is an action, not just words.

It is important to say and do things in this column that relate to the information in the previous columns. For example, if you have listed airborne spread of radiation as a fact in Column 1, the message should include information about sheltering-in-place. If you have listed control as important in Column 2, enter in this column what you will do and say to give people a sense of control. If one of your specified audiences in Column 3 is mothers, you should include a message here for that audience.

As you fill in this column, check your messages and actions against the information in the other columns.

5.6 Risk communication planning process chart

Use it for the preparation, emergency, and recovery phases of all the events you are planning for. Each stage has different characteristics. You want to develop different messages and actions depending on the circumstances.

Make many copies of this form and use as many pages as you need. Some people like to use the chart for each audience and fill out the chart with specific information in all the columns that relate to that specific audience.

Each page asks for the time and date. Fill in a new page each time circumstances change. This can happen very quickly at the acute stage of an emergency as it's just beginning. In those circumstances, you can just write in a few notes about each new circumstance, and a few notes in the other columns about what new issues those circumstances raise.

Make a notebook with all the pages used in planning for, responding to, and recovering from an emergency. This forms a record you can refer to at any point of what you've done, and a guide to successes or failures to learn from for future events.

6.0 Prepare information materials

In the preparation phase, in addition to getting the messaging chart ready, develop certain materials you are likely to need. For example, you will need background fact sheets on basic radiation facts that you can distribute to the press, or have articles with that information already posted on the emergency area of your web page.

In preparation you can develop a list of frequently asked questions relevant to the scenario you are planning for, and post them on your website and print up copies for physical distribution.

Prepare in advance for the questions you are likely to get from the media and develop answers to those questions. Of course this will have to be adjusted to the specific circumstances of each actual emergency, but some questions are predictable that you can develop basic answers to in advance (e.g. what can people do to protect themselves? How dangerous is the radiation?)

You can also prepare video and audio clips that you can hand out quickly, showing the basics of a nuclear power plant, for example, or the spent fuel storage pool, or other aspects of a nuclear plant, in case there is an event at such a plant. You may want to have still pictures of video of radiotherapy equipment or other radiological medical devices in case one is stolen or goes missing.

7.0 Other basic steps to prepare

Here are some additional basic preparation steps that should be taken.

- Create and strengthen relationships with key partners (news media, public health authorities…)
- Develop actions and messages for each potential emergency based on the chart, keep organized and available for reference
- Research what the public wants to know and address public concerns
- Test your messages

8.0 Practice

Most emergency organizations run drills and exercises to test their readiness. Those exercises must be designed to test the full readiness of the risk communication infrastructure. Therefore, the exercise scenario should include facts and injects that require a full response from the risk communication team. The exercise should test to see if the jobs, roles and operational procedures are in place, and if they work. It should require the team to deliver messages and put actions into practice, and test the full range of activities involved in risk communication, because it is an integral part of overall emergency management.

Many organizations prepare these sorts of plans but do not exercise them regularly. The result is that when they are needed no one is familiar with them. It is vital to practice these plans. The people responsible for executing these plans should rehearse and be familiar with the specific messages, so in the high stress of an actual emergency they are confident and can use these tools effectively.

9.0 Conclusion

- Establish explicit goals and a clear sense of mission and purpose. Understand what you are trying to achieve and how risk communication fits into overall emergency management.
- Prepare in advance. Create an infrastructure, job assignments, and procedures. Establish contacts with liaisons in other organization that might be part of the response
- Make a list potential emergency, and prepare materials, equipment, contact information, and even general messages, for each phase of each event: preparation, immediate response, recovery.
- Message preparation is a process that requires careful thinking about other elements first. Don't forget to use the process suggested in the chart.
- Practice all risk communication in exercises. Rehearse delivery of messages to be able to deliver them under stressful circumstances.
- Communication in the early phase of an event has special aspects. There will be much more detail on those in the lecture on Emergency Communications.

10.0 Conclusion

Risk communication differs from regular communication because when risk is involved, emotions are much more relevant to how people behave.