

Appendix C—The 3 Arenas of Risk Communication (Perceptions, Agendas & Emotions)

Risk Communication dialogue can typically be separated into 3 Arenas:

- 1) Perceptions
- 2) Agendas
- 3) Emotions

Although these Arenas are related, they do require different risk communication skills and emphasis.

Perceptions Arena

This Arena involves the discussion of science, data and facts. It includes discussions of relative risk, risk comparisons and numbers. By definition, it assumes that emotions aren't driving the conversation. Instead the conversation is a two-way exchange of information and opinion between your organization about risk and opinions and reaction about risk.

When operating in this arena, you need the skills to explain science, data and facts to stakeholders with potentially little or no scientific background. You will need communication skills that enable you to avoid jargon, acronyms and technical terms and translate technical information in a manner that can be easily understood by the general population.

Agendas Arena

Agendas can take many forms; political, economic, social, cultural, historical and personal. The key in an agenda driven conversation is to recognize when an Agenda Driven conversation is taking place, then address it openly and concisely. In some instances it may be clear that the agenda cannot be met. If so, state that clearly and with empathy. Examples of these type agendas would be requests that violate laws, regulations and policies. Other examples might be economic or social requests that cannot be met. Others may be requests that benefit just one individual, group or organization.

In many other instances, the agenda cannot be achieved or partially achieved. State so quickly and discuss possible next steps in these situations. Discussions such as seeking alternatives or common ground may be appropriate, and may assist both parties in reaching an acceptable compromise.

Emotions Arena

The Emotions Arena applies to basic emotions; anger and fear.

Each of these basic emotions has ranges of intensity. For example, **anger** can range from annoyance, irritation, frustration and resentment to even open hostility and rage. **Fear** can range from concern, worry, nervousness, anxiety and distress to even terror and panic.

In the Emotions Arena, factual discussions are usually not effective at first. You, as a communicator, need skills to work through the emotion to a point where the stakeholder is calm enough to be capable of listening and addressing their issue and coherent. This requires effective nonverbal observation skills (Big Eyes, Big Ears) by the communicator.

The 3-Step Guideline for operating in the Emotions Arena is:

- 1) Empathize
- 2) Use open ended questions/statements
- 3) Discuss facts

Empathy is indicating you have a sense of where they are coming from and why. In the case of anger/fear, empathy is understanding why they are angry or fearful.

Open ended questions and statements aren't always necessary, but can be useful if you need more time or more information from them before a factual dialogue can take place. Open ended questions and statements can range from "I hear you", or "That's awful" to "Tell me more" and "Did anything else happen? What else?"

The purpose of open-ended questions is two-fold:

- 1) Provides an opportunity for you to get more information from the stakeholder before a factual discussion takes place
- 2) Gives the stakeholder a chance to calm down

If you get to Step 3—Facts—you are out of the Emotional Arena and in one of the other two arenas previously discussed: Perceptions or Agendas.

A good outline for proceeding with factual discussions in the Emotional Arena is to tell your stakeholder:

1. What you do know
2. What you don't know
3. When (an update) of when you'll know more.