



A Risk Communication Primer— Tools and Techniques



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On the cover: (1) U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Molly A. Burgess; (2) U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Candice Villarreal; (3) U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Regina L. Brown; (4) U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 3rd Class Kristopher Wilson; (5) U.S. Navy photo by Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Douglas E. Waite; (6) U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Mark Logico; (7) U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class David G. Crawford

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Preface

Purpose and Need

Navy and Marine Corps leadership, as well as other spokespersons, should clearly and effectively communicate on a daily basis with any stakeholder on any issue that could potentially affect our operations and our mission. An effective Navy and Marine Corps risk communication strategy ensures the consistency and minimizes potential negative impacts to the military mission, manpower or budget. This primer is a tool for civilian and military personnel to use to ensure the continued success of the Navy and Marine Corps mission and consistency with Navy Core Values.

NMCPHC Role

The Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (NMCPHC) is the subject matter expert for risk communication issues for the Department of the Navy (DON) and the Marine Corps. NMCPHC helps to integrate effective risk communication into the Navy and Marine Corps environment, safety, and health programs. We have developed this primer as an executive summary of proven risk communication tools and techniques to assist military and civilian leadership in effectively communicating with internal and external stakeholders. It is not a complete summary of the risk communication literature, rather, it is a useful reference guide. It is meant to provide a consistent framework for explaining environmental, health, or safety risks to our many stakeholders. Successful application of these basic principles will help to increase stakeholder knowledge and understanding, build and maintain trust and credibility, resolve conflict, and ensure the long-term success of our individual and organizational goals.

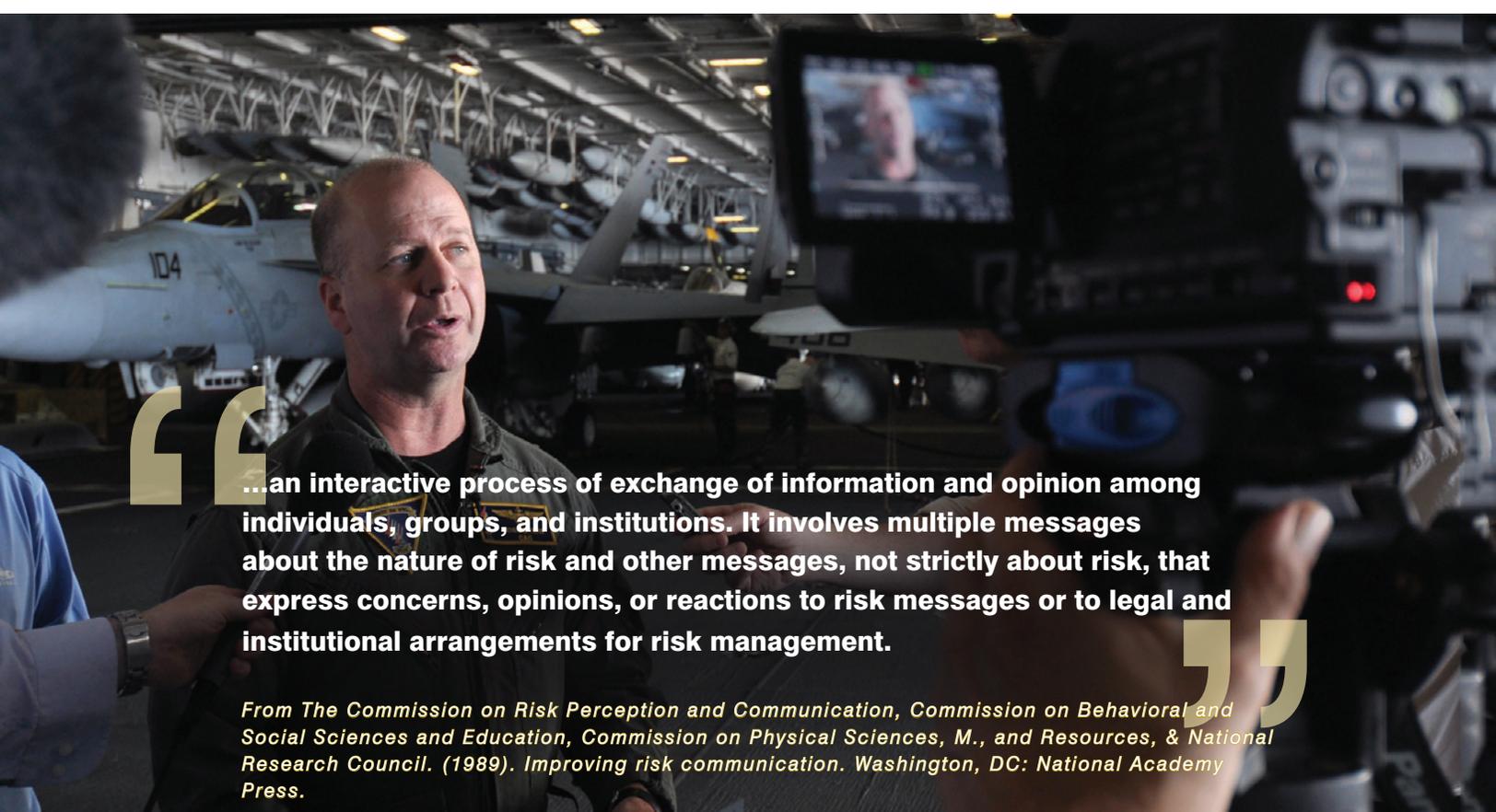
We gratefully acknowledge the many contributions in this publication from Dr. Vincent Covello (The Center For Risk Communication) and Keith Fulton and Sandy Martinez (Fulton Communications). Their assistance in the development of this product has been invaluable and we greatly appreciate their continued contributions to the overall success of the Navy and Marine Corps risk communication program.

Introduction

What we say, and how we say it, can have a profound impact on people’s perceptions and opinions, and can result in potential negative impacts if we don’t choose our words carefully. Taking the time to develop an effective risk communication strategy helps ensure that people get the information they need, when they need it, and in a format they can easily understand. By engaging our stakeholders early and often, information can be provided right up front to help avoid major conflicts and controversies that could potentially impact day-to-day operations and long-term planning.

What Is Risk Communication and Why Is It Important?

The National Academy of Sciences defines risk communication as:

A man in a military uniform is speaking in front of a camera in an aircraft hangar. The background shows several fighter jets, including one with the number 104. The scene is dimly lit, with the camera's monitor and lights visible in the foreground.

...an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management.

From The Commission on Risk Perception and Communication, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Commission on Physical Sciences, M., and Resources, & National Research Council. (1989). Improving risk communication. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Today’s Navy and Marine Corps personnel are trained, organized and equipped for our primary mission of national defense. Virtually everything we do is in support of this primary mission. As a result, risk communication within the Navy and Marine Corps context can be further defined as: “...communicating with any stakeholder, internal or external, on any issue that could impact your organization’s mission.”

Policy, Laws and Regulations

It is Navy and Marine Corps environmental policy to keep stakeholders advised of proposed actions (and any risks associated with such actions) to minimize potential impacts to mission and operations.

In keeping with that policy, the NMCPHC and Civil Engineer Corps Officer School (CECOS) offer risk communication workshops that focus on the importance of effective risk communication training for Navy and Marine Corps civilian and military leadership and other spokespersons. Information regarding workshops is provided in Appendix A, “Navy Risk Communication Training Resources.”



“Risk communication is communicating with any stakeholder, internal or external, on any issue that could impact your organization’s mission”

Examples of some of the many environmental and public health laws, regulations and guidance that require significant stakeholder involvement and risk communication planning include:

- Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA, or, as it is commonly known, “Superfund”)
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)
- Executive Order 12898, Environmental Justice in Minority Populations
- Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA)
- Natural Resource Damage Assessments (under both CERCLA and the Oil Pollution Act)
- Deployment Health Protection
- Department of Defense (DOD) Public Health Emergency Management
- Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) Public Health Emergency Management

Other guidance, including state and local requirements, may also require risk communication activities as part of the overall risk assessment and management process for specific projects and operations. The risk communication strategy must consider all appropriate local, state and federal policies, laws and regulations in order to be truly comprehensive and effective. When in doubt regarding which risk communication activities may be specifically required by policy or regulation, please consult with the cognizant legal office for your specific region.

Cardinal Rules of Effective Risk Communication

Academic research on effective risk communication strategy has been ongoing since the early 1970s. Numerous books, journal articles and other reference materials have been written (and continue to be written) on this topic. Experts in effective risk communication generally agree on seven cardinal rules essential for success.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has defined these seven cardinal rules as follows:

- 
1. Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner.
 2. Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.
 3. Listen to the public's specific concern.
 4. Be honest, frank, and open.
 5. Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.
 6. Meet the needs of the media.
 7. Speak clearly and with compassion.

From U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (1988). *Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication*. OPA-87-020. Washington, D.C.

The remainder of this primer discusses the various steps required to implement an effective risk communication plan consistent with these overarching rules and principles. The following sections discuss tools and techniques to identify stakeholders, develop messages, deliver messages, prepare messengers, and evaluate the effectiveness of your specific communication strategy.

Building an Effective Risk Communication Strategy

Effective risk communication is a skill set that is useful in any scenario that could potentially impact our military mission. Taking the time to plan and execute a successful risk communication strategy helps identify and address stakeholder questions and concerns up front before they can result in negative impacts to ongoing and future operations.

Communicating about these issues often involves explaining or presenting highly technical, scientific, and/or controversial information to a concerned audience. There is no “cookie cutter” approach to presenting this type of information that will be effective in all situations. Careful planning and application of proven risk communication tools and techniques, in a site-specific strategy, is the most effective way to ensure successful communication with stakeholders.

There are five fundamental interactive components of an effective Risk Communication Strategy:



Typical risk communication issues encountered with Navy and Marine Corps projects can include:

- Environment, safety, and health issues
- Ecological issues
- Legal and regulatory issues
- Trust, equity and fairness issues
- Political, economic and social issues
- Historical, cultural and symbolic issues
- Stakeholder agendas, emotions and perceptions
- Quality of life issues
- Insert your site- or topic-specific issue here...

This document explains each of these components and provides proven techniques to help communicate consistently and effectively. Also provided is a CD containing all of the Appendices referred to in this document. The NMCPHC is also available to assist with any risk communication strategy and outreach.

These tools will help create an effective strategy designed specifically to meet the overall goals of risk communication:

- Increasing stakeholder knowledge and understanding;
- Building, maintaining and repairing trust and credibility; and
- Resolving conflict before it can potentially impact our mission and operations.



1. Identify and Prioritize Stakeholders

A stakeholder is anyone interested or impacted by the issue. BEFORE communicating any information, you must get to know the stakeholders and understand their issues and concerns.

Stakeholder identification and prioritization is the first step to any effective risk communication strategy. The primary objective of this step is to help ensure that no individual or group is missed and that messages can be tailored to specifically address their concerns and issues.

Identify Stakeholders

With most risk communication issues, the audience is not simply one big homogenous group (i.e., the general public). It is made up of many diverse stakeholder groups who will be affected and/or who will be most interested in a project or issue.

Examples of the many different types of stakeholder groups can include:

Internal Navy and Marine Corps Stakeholders

- Military and civilian leadership
- Planners
- Public affairs
- Program managers
- Contractors



External Stakeholders

- Local, state and federal government
- Tribes
- Property owners
- Businesses
- Community groups
- Environmental groups
- Individual citizens
- Media



Take the time to identify your stakeholders and their specific concerns before developing messages. It is important to recognize that stakeholders can be motivated not only by perceptions of risk but also by a wide range of agendas and emotions.

Another aspect of stakeholder identification is culture. Culture is often thought of as country of origin, ethnicity or tribal affiliation, but it is more extensive. Culture is a group of behaviors, values and beliefs held by a group that defines how they conduct their lives. A group's culture is a consideration that is often overlooked when considering stakeholders. See Appendix B, "Cultural Considerations in Risk Communication" for additional detailed information.

Taking the time to identify your stakeholders and their motivations is a critical part of developing an overall effective communication strategy. Knowing what their primary motivation is can help you focus on their specific information needs and enable you to develop the most effective message possible—targeted to their issues and concerns. See Appendix C, "The 3 Arenas of Risk Communication (Perceptions, Agendas, & Emotions)" for additional detailed information.

Identifying stakeholders and their concerns can be done formally—through various types of surveys—or informally through reviews of media coverage; calls to Public Affairs or complaint hot lines; conversations with community leaders and ombudsmen; and other methods. The informal approach frequently works well and is the most cost-effective means of gathering information on stakeholders. Many successful outreach programs use informal approaches as primary methods of stakeholder identification, analysis and prioritization. Regardless of the method, stakeholders and their concerns can change over time and this information must be continually updated as part of any long-term communication strategy. The Public Affairs Office is a good starting point for identifying local stakeholder groups and ways of taking the "pulse" of the local community.

Questions to ask to help identify stakeholders:

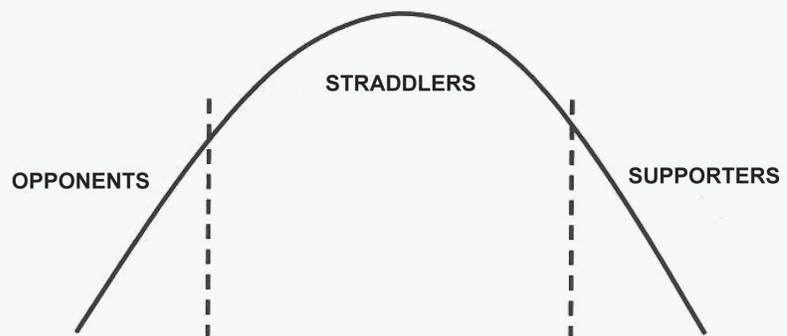
- Who needs to be involved?
- Who is likely to be affected?
- Who is likely to perceive they are affected?
- Who is likely to be upset if not involved?
- Who has previously been involved in this or related issues?
- Who could help ensure you receive a balanced range of opinions on the issue?
- Who might provide third party support?
- Who would you least like to communicate with on this issue?
- Who is most active, attentive or passive?

Prioritize Stakeholders

After identifying key stakeholders, take the time to organize them into the following three primary groups. This will help differentiate communication missions and develop effective communication strategies:

Opponents: People may oppose your project or issues for many reasons, such as concerns over actual or perceived risks, general mistrust or dislike of the Navy and Marine Corps, or as a result of competing agendas (i.e., anger over another unrelated issue with your installation or organization). These groups are often the most vocal and tend to attract much media and public attention. It can be hard to establish and maintain effective communication with this group because they are often motivated by agendas and emotions and may not be receptive to two-way communication.

People who oppose your project or issue are still entitled to information, regardless of their openness to consider it, so continue to provide information, listen to them, and invite them to meetings. The primary mission in communicating with these groups is to ensure interactions with them do not adversely influence other stakeholder groups.

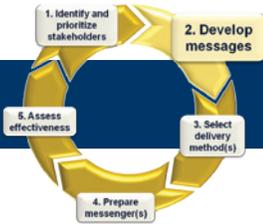


Supporters: Supporters trust, believe and agree with you and/or the organization's mission and objectives. Keep them informed and keep up the two-way dialogue. Ask them for advice, ideas, and for help with learning about other stakeholders. Supporters are typically very easy to communicate with because they see you as a trustworthy, credible source of information. The primary mission in communicating with supporters is to maintain the established, positive relationship.

Supporting and opposing stakeholder groups usually make up the smallest part of your audience. Typically, they have already made up their mind about the issue and generally stand firm on their opinions and perceptions. Because of this, opponents and supporters should be kept informed, but they are not necessarily the primary focus of a communication strategy.

Straddlers: Straddlers fall somewhere on the curve between supporters and opponents. Straddlers may be undecided or apathetic, but they are typically open to finding common ground and/or listening to suggestions. Like supporters, straddlers often have many good ideas to help the communication mission, goals, messages and action plans. **This group makes up the vast majority of stakeholders and should therefore be the primary focus of risk communication efforts.** The primary focus of risk communication is to meet their information needs and move them towards a more supportive position, if possible. You do not want to give these stakeholders any reason to mistrust you or your organization and potentially drive them towards opposition.

Remember, the overall goal with risk communication is to preserve or increase trust among stakeholders by providing timely information and addressing as many questions and concerns as possible. Identifying your stakeholders and prioritizing them based on these three primary groupings (opponents, supporters and straddlers) will help focus the communication efforts and resources where they will truly be the most effective. Once this critical first step is completed, it is time to develop messages that will both meet the mission goals *and* address your stakeholder's primary issues and concerns, while allowing them to make informed and educated decisions.



2. Develop Messages

The underlying objective of any communication process is either to exchange information or convey a message. There should be a balance between giving people so much data and technical information that they are overwhelmed and oversimplifying information so much that important details are left out. Convey the information you want, as well as the information your stakeholders most need to know and understand.

Determine the Appropriate Messages

When developing a risk communication strategy, there are three basic questions in determining the appropriate messages.

- 
1. *What do you want to tell your stakeholders?*
 2. *What do they want to know?*
 3. *What is likely to be misunderstood?*

What do you want to tell your stakeholders?

Take the time to answer this first question prior to actual message development. This will keep focus on the communication mission. Depending on specific needs, the communication mission or purpose may be to:

- Raise awareness
- Educate and inform
- Achieve consensus
- Correct inaccurate or false statements
- Change behaviors or perceptions

Understanding the communication mission, and maintaining that focus throughout message development, will help develop and deliver the most effective message possible to all stakeholders.

What do they want to know?

This second question seems obvious, but is often overlooked or seriously underestimated. By knowing stakeholders' issues and concerns, you can anticipate many of the questions that may be asked during stakeholder interactions. Anticipated questions can be grouped according to similar categories, and messages can be developed to address each category of stakeholder

concern. Doing this up front helps ensure consistency of messages and helps prepare the entire project team to communicate with one voice to your stakeholders, using pre-approved messages specifically developed to address potential issues.

What is likely to be misunderstood?

This important question helps to evaluate your overall communication strategy and to ensure all messages can be easily understood and remembered. It also forces communicators to evaluate beforehand what messages could potentially be misunderstood, and to make a conscious effort to modify them to avoid any unnecessary confusion.

Message Mapping

Developing well-planned, well-constructed messages can reduce misinformation and help provide stakeholders with the correct information they need to make informed decisions. Message mapping is a simple technique that can be used to organize information into key messages designed and tailored to address stakeholders' specific issues and concerns. This technique is illustrated by the sample message map template shown below:

Message Map template

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Stakeholder: The Public Question or Concern: How can I avoid contracting West Nile Virus? | | |
| Key Message 1: Remove Standing Water | Key Message 2: Wear Protective Clothing | Key Message 3: Use Insect Repellent |
| Supporting Information 1-1: Unused swimming pools | Supporting Information 2-1: Long sleeves | Supporting Information 3-1: Containing DEET |
| Supporting Information 1-2: Flower pots and bird baths | Supporting Information 2-2: Long pants | Supporting Information 3-2: At least 23% |
| Supporting Information 1-3: Buckets and cups | Supporting Information 2-3: At dusk and dawn | Supporting Information 3-3: Medically proven effective |

<http://www.epa.gov/nhsrc/news/news040207.html>

A message map is built from the top down by providing the simplest explanation first in the form of a key message, with up to three key messages per template to address each stakeholder issue or concern. Under each key message there is space for additional detailed information that supports each message, with up to three supporting facts per key message. This organization of information from the simplest and most direct answer down to more complex detail and supporting facts is called layering.

Layering of information in message map templates provides multiple benefits. It provides an efficient and effective tool for developing key messages to address stakeholder concerns. It also serves as a handy reference for all spokespersons who deliver timely and accurate key messages. Multiple spokespersons can easily work from the same message maps to ensure consistent and efficient distribution of core messages across multiple communication channels to various stakeholders.

Once developed, these message maps are the foundation of your risk communication. The key messages developed in the template can be used as the baseline for all future responses (written and verbal) to ensure that all communicators can quickly and efficiently deliver consistent, accurate information to stakeholders. These organized, consistent statements can be used again and again in correspondence, fact sheets, poster displays, news articles, web sites, all-hands emails, social media, etc. to distribute key messages throughout selected communication channels.

Additional Tips for Effective Communication

In addition to developing key messages, there are a number of other tools and techniques that can help to improve the effectiveness of both written and verbal communications. These include:

Keep Messages Short and Simple

Focus on the primary key messages to support the overall communication objectives. Good key messages should be developed using simple sentence structure and everyday language.



Additional Tips for Effective Communication

- **Keep messages short and simple (6th to 8th grade reading level)**
- **Avoid acronyms and jargon**
- **Layer information**
- **Focus on conclusions and actions**
- **Practice delivering messages**

If there is an issue that could cause concern or anger or one that involves a large amount of information or highly complex information, it is crucial that messages be kept short and simple to ensure that people understand and remember them. To ensure everyone understands the message, aim for a 6th to 8th grade reading level.

Readability software is now widely available that can quickly analyze words and sentences to determine the reading level of any document. This software is often provided as an integral part of word processing programs or can be purchased separately from a wide variety of software providers.

Avoid Acronyms and Jargon

Eliminate the use of acronyms and jargon to the maximum extent possible. Stakeholders typically do not have a working knowledge of Navy and Marine Corps acronyms and jargon and they should not need a vocabulary lesson just to understand your message. Translate information and explain it in a way that is meaningful to stakeholders. If it is absolutely necessary to use acronyms or jargon, be sure to introduce and explain the terms first in plain language, then refer to the technical term or acronym—never use an unfamiliar term unless it is first defined!

Layer Information

As was previously mentioned in reference to message mapping, layering information is an excellent way to convey information to stakeholders. By providing the simplest explanation first, then providing additional supporting facts when (and if) needed, stakeholders can easily process messages and make informed, educated decisions about potential issues. Layering of information can be used effectively in both written and verbal messages and in products such as fact sheets, poster stations, etc. For example, the primary key message may be conveyed in written or oral form with supporting facts and details provided on a poster station or companion fact sheet, executive summary or reference document. Use layering techniques whenever possible to match the unique informational needs of each stakeholder.

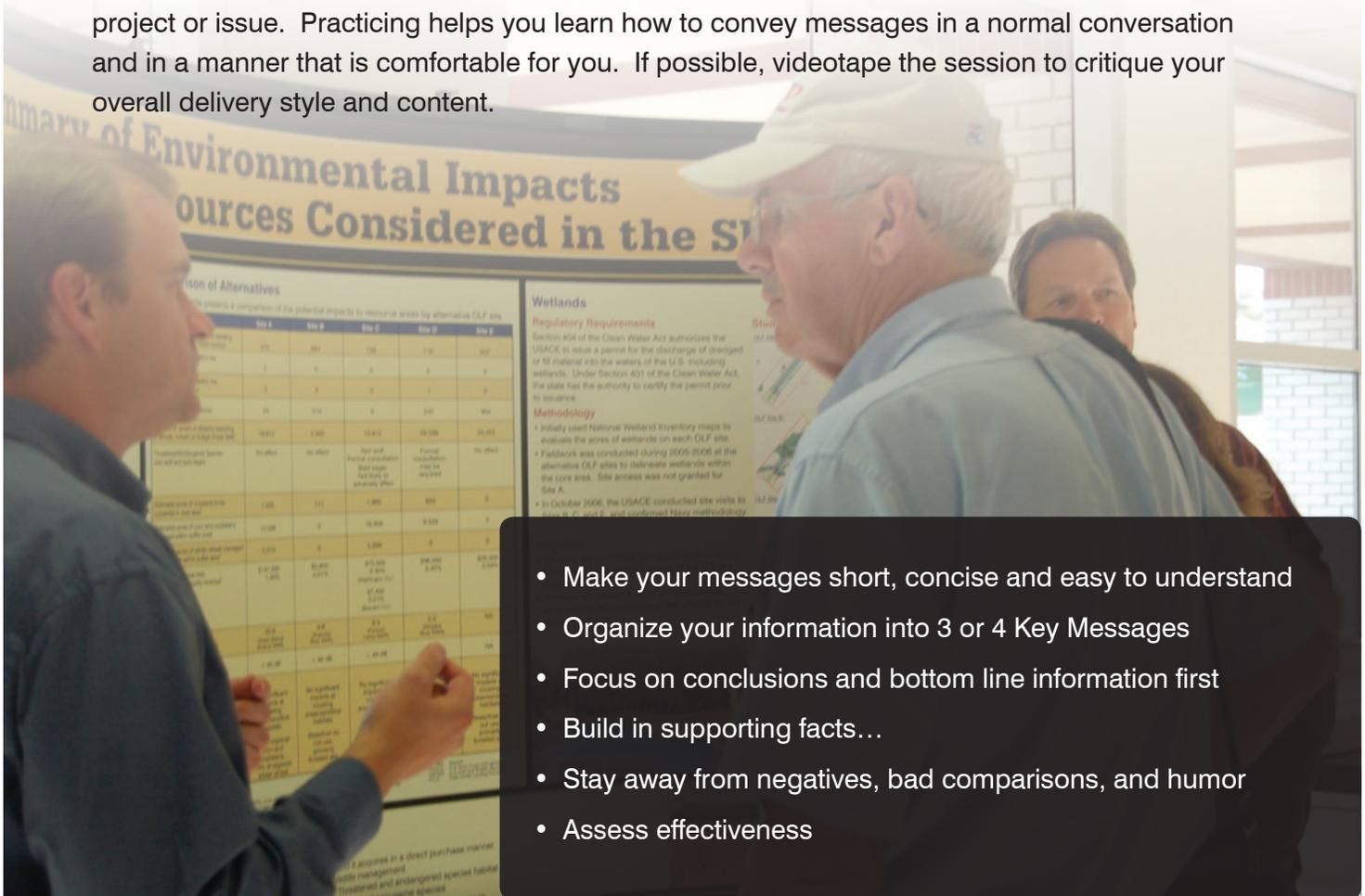
Focus on Conclusions and Actions

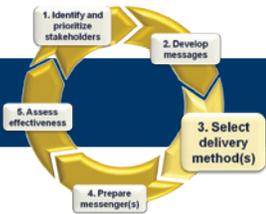
A common trap that some people fall into is providing too much technical information and detail. Scientists and engineers often forget that others may not want (or need) the same level of detail they prefer. Highly technical facts and figures do not belong in primary key messages. Develop messages that highlight the conclusion that can be drawn from the facts and figures. As an example, for a drinking water quality issue, the key message would not be the amount of chemical contaminant found in recent water samples, but whether the water is considered safe to drink. This bottom line information is what most concerned stakeholders are interested in hearing first.

Actions to correct problems or address an issue are also excellent key messages. Usually, people want to know what the technical information means for them, what is being done or the plan to fix the problem, and what will change in the future to avoid additional issues.

Practice Delivering Messages

Practice delivering the developed message to someone who has little or no knowledge of the project or issue. Practicing helps you learn how to convey messages in a normal conversation and in a manner that is comfortable for you. If possible, videotape the session to critique your overall delivery style and content.





3. Select Delivery Method(s)

There are many available communication channels to choose from and selection should be based on the level of stakeholder interest and site-specific knowledge of how the stakeholders would most like to receive and discuss the information.

Available Communication Channels

A wide variety of communication channels are available to relay messages to stakeholders. Do not choose just one delivery method. Use multiple channels to increase the probability that messages will reach as many stakeholders as possible. Regardless of the selected channels, remember to use the tips for effective communication discussed in the previous section before distributing any information (i.e., keep messages short and simple; avoid acronyms and jargon, etc.). For examples of communication channels, refer to Appendix D, “Examples of Communication Channels.” Also, refer to Appendix E, “A Guide to Writing an Effective Executive Summary” on how to write executive summaries.

Social Media

Various forms of social media have turned into the primary way people receive information today. All over the world, casual observers have turned into “citizen reporters”. These new forms of distributing and receiving information have influenced everything from elections to the overthrow of governments. These tools can be useful if used well. They can also create problems if you are not fully aware of the negative consequences of how they can be used to your disadvantage. Because of this, people at times feel that they can no longer speak as freely or informally for fear that their comments will be posted on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or various blogs. Social media is changing as quickly as information travels in today’s world. Please refer to Appendix F, “Navy Command Social Media Handbook” for DOD and U.S. Navy guidance pertaining to social media.

Some available communication channels:

- Public notices, Public Service Announcements (PSAs)
- Information repositories, libraries
- Fact sheets, brochures, newsletters, all-hands emails
- Executive summaries of technical reports
- Internet resources (websites, social media, discussion forums, etc.)
- Info lines, phone calls
- News media, press releases, articles
- Site tours
- Site-/topic-specific videos
- Meetings (one-on-one, small group, public)



Regardless of the communication channel, basic messages and supporting facts should be developed so they can be delivered as simply and efficiently as possible.

For example, graphics and visuals are great tools to reinforce or explain a message, but they must also be very simple and easy to understand. If a graph, map, or photo takes lengthy study for stakeholders to understand and connect to the message, it should be simplified or replaced.

Public Meetings

When the level of interest or concern within the public is high and/or there is a large amount of information to share, the public meeting format is an excellent way to communicate. There are two general types of public meetings: traditional town-hall style and open-house style.

Town-hall meetings

A key benefit of a town-hall meeting, the traditional format for public meetings, is that they hold an audience's attention better than other forms of communication and everyone is receiving the same information at the same time.

However, in a town-hall meeting, the information you provide can be limited by format and time constraints. The meeting typically starts with a brief presentation followed by a question-and-answer session in which only one person can ask a question at a time. The answers provided likely will not meet everyone's individual information needs. The town-hall format may also limit participation of audience members who do not want to speak in public, due to a fear of public speaking or a reticence to disagree with a more vocal majority.

Open-house meetings

This style of public meeting meets most legal public outreach requirements and has been found to be much more effective in educating or informing the public. Essentially, an open-house meeting is a poster exhibit, typically comprised of four to seven displays. The displays each highlight one topic and are each manned by subject matter experts (all of whom have had risk communication training and know the appropriate key messages). They are spaced around the poster stations to allow for individual discussions and two-way communications with all stakeholders attending the meeting.



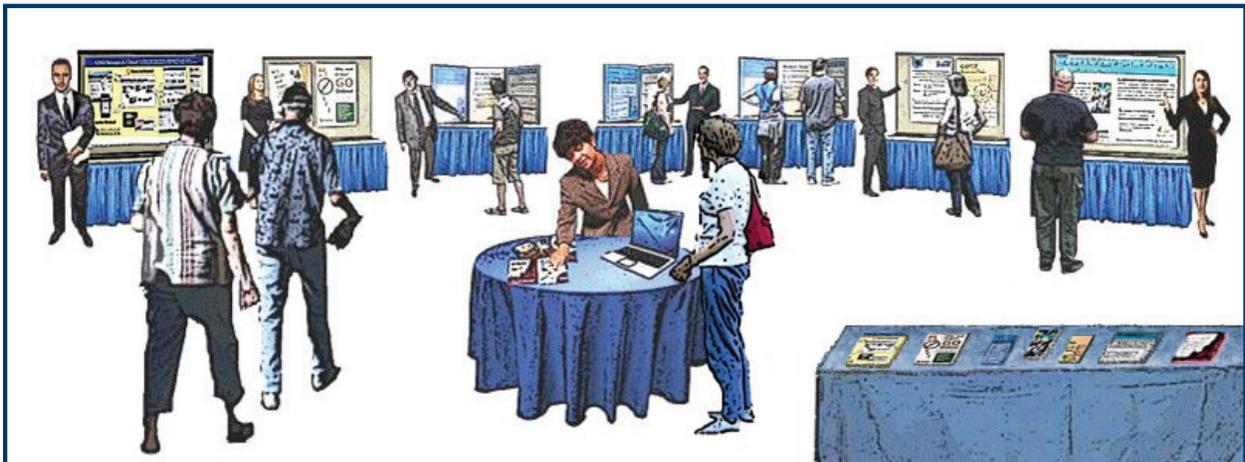
Advantages of an Open-House Style Public Meeting

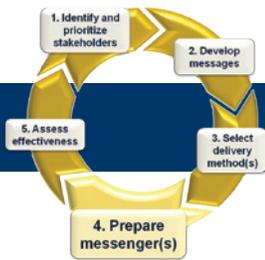
Preferred format of the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center

- Provides an opportunity for one-on-one interaction
- Encourages true two-way communication
- Provides information at a pace that is comfortable for everyone
- Provides a way to share a variety of layered information that meets individual information needs.

The open-house meeting can be used as a replacement for the traditional town-hall meeting or as a supplement immediately prior to and/or after a scheduled town-hall meeting. The open-house format is the format recommended by the NMCPHC. This format provides a way to share a variety of layered information that meets individual information needs, and to encourage open one-on-one discussions.

For more detailed information on hosting a successful open-house meeting, please refer to Appendix G, “Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center Guide to Public Meetings.”





4. Prepare Messenger(s)

Messengers are a critical component of any risk communication strategy. A significant failure by just one of them can set back the entire program.

Selecting and training the right messengers is just as critical to the communication process as deciding what to say and how and where to say it.

Empathy and caring are important in establishing the trust and credibility of the messenger with the audience. Research indicates that the public will judge trust and credibility within the first 30 seconds of communication with the audience, so the opening remarks and the way in which they are conveyed are critical.

Displaying Empathy

- Know the audience
 - Address their key concerns
 - Communicate early and often
 - Control your body language
 - Listen more and talk less

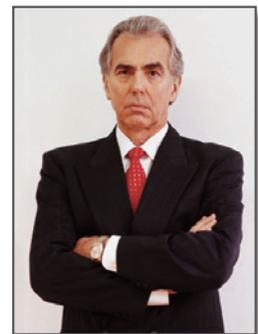


Empathy is not sympathy and empathy is not agreement. Empathy is the ability to determine what it would be like to be in their situation. Empathy cannot be artificial or fake. It must be genuine. The messenger cannot pretend to be empathic to the situation. Stakeholders can tell sincerity by non-verbal communication.

Non-Verbal Communication

In many situations, non-verbal communication can be the most powerful form of communication. The messenger's non-verbal presence should match the verbal information being conveyed. Keep in mind the impact that non-verbal communication, also known as body language, has on the overall message received by stakeholders. Non-verbal communication includes eye contact, gestures, posture, body movements, and voice tone. Remember that verbal and non-verbal communication must work together to effectively convey messages.

Research indicates that body language can provide the vast majority of final message content. In general, body language is noticed intensely by the audience. Increase self-awareness of your body language. Twisting a ring, feet tapping, nose rubbing, eye rolling, looking up or away, crossed arms, etc. most often occur when you become irritated, angry or nervous. All of these actions can be seen by an audience as negative.



➤ Better Body Language

- Lean in slightly
- Maintain a good distance—not too close, not too far
- Make eye contact and keep it
- Square up. Keep your shoulders in line with your hips
- Be open. Don't slump, slouch or cross your arms across your chest
- Keep your hands visible and open and your arms slightly rounded
- Show some movement energy, BUT...
- Avoid distracting motions
- Be yourself! NOT A ROBOT!

➤ Ways to improve your non-verbal communication:

- Practice on a friend, associate, or family member
- Note any nervous movements when you are speaking in public
- Practice in front of a camera and review the video tape
- Experiment by overdoing your expressions



Non-verbal observation skills are a form of intelligence gathering that successful risk communicators must master. These skills are especially important when communicating with stakeholders who are angry, fearful, irritated or concerned.

Another important observation skill is keeping “big eyes, big ears and a small mouth,” particularly in situations involving high emotions. Your ears won't get you in trouble, but your mouth might! Non-verbal observation skills include observing a stakeholder's face, hands, posture, space, eye contact, various body movement changes and voice changes. If someone



Risk communicators must use their listening and observational skills to truly understand stakeholders' concerns. A good rule of thumb is: “Big eyes, big ears and a SMALL mouth.”

is angry, you cannot move to facts until he or she has resolved the anger. Allow stakeholders to speak and vent their anger as needed. Then become more active in the conversation as stakeholders' emotions subside. Your big eyes and big ears will help determine stakeholders' readiness to hear facts.

Observation skills are also important in group settings. How is the group in general reacting to communicators? Note the reaction of the rest of the group if someone within the group gets rude or angry. Use observation skills to answer questions and determine what the appropriate next course of action will be for a particular situation. For example, if one person in the group

gets rude or angry and you observe that the rest of the group is equally agitated, take the time right then and there to address the issue. If, on the other hand, the rest of the group is not angry or agitated by that issue, do not spend a disproportionate amount of time addressing just one individual at the expense of the entire group. In the latter case, one way to address the concern of a single individual is to have another team member engage that person about their specific issue away from the core group if logistically possible. This will enable continued focus on the majority of your stakeholders.

Answering Tough Questions

Spokespersons must be prepared to answer difficult questions. As previously mentioned, risk communication research indicates that most questions can be anticipated in advance. With proper planning and training, communicators can develop answers to anticipated questions. See Appendix H, “Templates for Responding to Difficult Questions”, for specific examples and useful templates.

Traps to Avoid

When responding to or preparing for difficult questions, there are some universal traps that should be avoided to ensure that communications are as successful as possible. Typical traps can include:

Guarantees, absolutes and promises:

Stakeholders may try to get a commitment for a goal or a date that is unrealistic, in other words, a guarantee or a promise. Offer only what you know you can deliver.

Humor: Humor is not recommended because it can be easily misinterpreted, usually with negative consequences, especially if people think the joke is at their expense.

Personal opinions: Messengers should always keep in mind that they are representing the official interests of the Navy and Marine Corps and not their own personal interests or opinions. Messengers are there in an official capacity. Do not fall into the trap of offering a personal take on any issue. There is no place for personal opinions.

General guidelines when answering questions related to risk communication issues:

1. Only answer on your topic/area of expertise
2. Don't be afraid of the short answer—avoid providing too much information
3. If you do not know the answer, say so and get the stakeholder in touch with someone who does
4. Avoid guarantees and do not promise things you are not absolutely sure you can deliver
5. Focus on positive action
6. Do not take things personally

Speculation: Do not speculate or attempt to answer “what if” questions. A good response to requests for speculation is to bridge back to what you know today and what you plan to do in the future.

Repeating negative accusations or phrases: Do not repeat negative terms or phrases as it lends credence to the original negative accusation simply by repeating it. People tend to key in on negative accusations and remember them whether they are true or not. Always respond to any negative questions or accusations with a positive statement summarizing what you have done to date and what you plan for future action.

Speaking for higher authority: Do not fall into the trap of speaking about any subject matter other than what you are authorized and qualified to address. Do not attempt to answer policy questions, speak for other organizations, or commit resources if not authorized to do so.

Poor risk comparisons: Discussing risk with affected stakeholders can be sensitive. Enlist the help of a trained communicator when developing risk comparisons. A stakeholder’s perception of risk may be very different than that of the technical experts. Stakeholders’ perceptions may vary depending upon their familiarity with such risks and whether or not they perceive that they have any control or benefits from the situation. (See Appendix I, “Perception of Risk” and Appendix J, “Communicating with Stakeholders about the Risk Assessment Process.”)

Taking it personally: Taking it personally means that feeling negative emotions such as anger, frustration and boredom get in the way of being able to communicate effectively. Even if these emotions aren’t expressed verbally, non-verbals (body, voice tone) will project otherwise. The only way to minimize this is for the spokesperson to remember, “This is not about me personally. This is about the job that I need to do.”



Communicating with the Media

Recognize the power of the media and work to establish and maintain a positive relationship with them. Underestimating the power of the media can have disastrous consequences.

However, the power of the media also has its advantages. They are a ready and willing outlet for getting your information to stakeholders. In general, the media want to provide accurate and fair information on a

developing event to their audience. Be prepared and help them get the information they need to deliver the right story, while ensuring your message gets out to stakeholders in a timely and efficient manner.

The most important step in preparing for a media interview is to know what you want to say, as well as what you do NOT want to say. Nothing destroys credibility like a message that is inconsistent with what others in your command have already stated.

Know the reporter's ground rules before agreeing to an interview. Your Public Affairs Officer (PAO) will help spokespersons in pre-interview discussions/negotiations with reporters, as well as help in preparation and practice for the interview. It is against Navy policy to enter into an agreement for an interview with the news media without first consulting your PAO.

Communication with the media is different from communicating with the public. Communicating with the public involves addressing their concerns and issues. Communicating with the media involves using the media communication process known as "bridging." Bridging statements are interview control techniques that allow transition between briefly answering the question asked by the interviewer and getting back to your key messages. For example, an interviewer may ask a "What if?" question regarding a worst case scenario.



In general, the media are interested in the following:

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

From Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. (1994). *A Primer on Health Risk Communication: Principles and Practices*.

Respond by acknowledging that this is a “What if?” question, and state that it is more useful to focus on “What is...” Then bridge to the facts of what you do know, which is your key message. (See Appendix K, “103 Most Frequently Asked Questions at Environmental Cleanup and Hazardous Waste Sites” for some possible questions. Also see Appendix L, “Examples of Bridging Statements” for examples of bridging statements.)





5. Assess Effectiveness

An important, but often neglected, part of any risk communication strategy is continually assessing its effectiveness. Do not wait until the end of the project to evaluate the risk communication strategy. It is important to remember that a good risk communication strategy includes the flexibility to adapt to changing situations. The risk communication guidance contained in this primer is just that—GUIDANCE. Not every risk communication tool in this primer and the toolbox will work in every stakeholder situation. Navy and Marine Corps issues are dynamic and your risk communication strategy should constantly be evaluated to ensure that it continues to meet unique mission requirements.

Even an informal evaluation process after a communication event will show that elements of the message or its delivery could be tweaked for greater effectiveness. For example, did your message work with this stakeholder? Other examples of informal message evaluation include a hot wash or debrief of the messages and spokespersons after the event, or a short, simple customer satisfaction survey administered to the stakeholders. Answering simple questions on a recurring basis can help determine if your communication strategy is effective:

- Were primary messages conveyed?
- Did stakeholders get the information they needed?
- Did stakeholders understand messages?
- How can the program/strategy/communication be improved?
- What lessons are there to be learned?
- With whom should they be shared?

Risk communication is a cyclical process. A good risk communication process allows for a feedback loop, where input from stakeholders and spokespersons are used to fine tune the message and method of delivery. Evaluating early and often may lead to learning about additional stakeholders, other third party credible sources, adding or eliminating something because of lack of impact, or shifting resources to better achieve that mission. (See Appendix M, “Additional Risk Communication References” for supplementary reading on this subject.)

Things to Remember about Evaluation of Risk Communication Effectiveness:

- There are informal ways to evaluate your effectiveness.
- Use evaluation methods throughout the risk communication process.
- Measure success based on whether you reach your stakeholder and whether you understand each other’s points of view.

From U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Effective Risk Communication: The Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s Guidelines for External Communication. NUREG/BR-0308.

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Appendix B – Cultural Considerations in Risk Communication

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

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Appendix E – A Guide to Writing an Effective Executive Summary

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Appendix H – Templates for Responding to Difficult Questions

Appendix I – Perception of Risk

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