

# Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

Emergency Management Support  
April 19, 2011

- **Crisis and emergency risk communication**
  - to help people cope, empower decision-making, and begin to re-establish a sense of stability in their lives

# Purpose

- Emergency risk communication can help people cope, make risk/benefit decisions, and begin to return their lives to normal.
- Attempt to provide the public with information to make the best possible decisions within nearly impossible time constraints and to accept the imperfect nature of choice.

# Types of Crises

- Multi-jurisdictional, outbreak, environmental, natural disaster
- Unknown infectious agent (think of SARS)
- Site specific (labs, hostage, bomb, explosion)
- Terrorism – bio/chemical; suspected or confirmed

# What is the same?

- Emergencies, disasters, and crises are when something bad has happened or is happening. What we call it depends on the magnitude of the event, the capacity to deal with it and its impact.

# What is different about how we communicate during these events?

- To determine that we need to look at the communicator, time pressures and the purpose of the message

# Crisis Communication

**Communicator:** Participant

**Time pressure:** Urgent and unexpected

**Message purpose:** Explain and persuade

# Issue(s) Management Communication

**Communicator:** Participant

**Time pressure:** Anticipated

**Message purpose:** Explain and persuade

# Risk Communication

**Communicator:** Nonparticipant, neutral about outcome

**Time pressure:** Anticipated, no time pressure

**Message purpose:** Empower decisionmaking

# Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

**Communicator:** After-event participant, invested in outcome

**Time pressure:** Urgent and unexpected

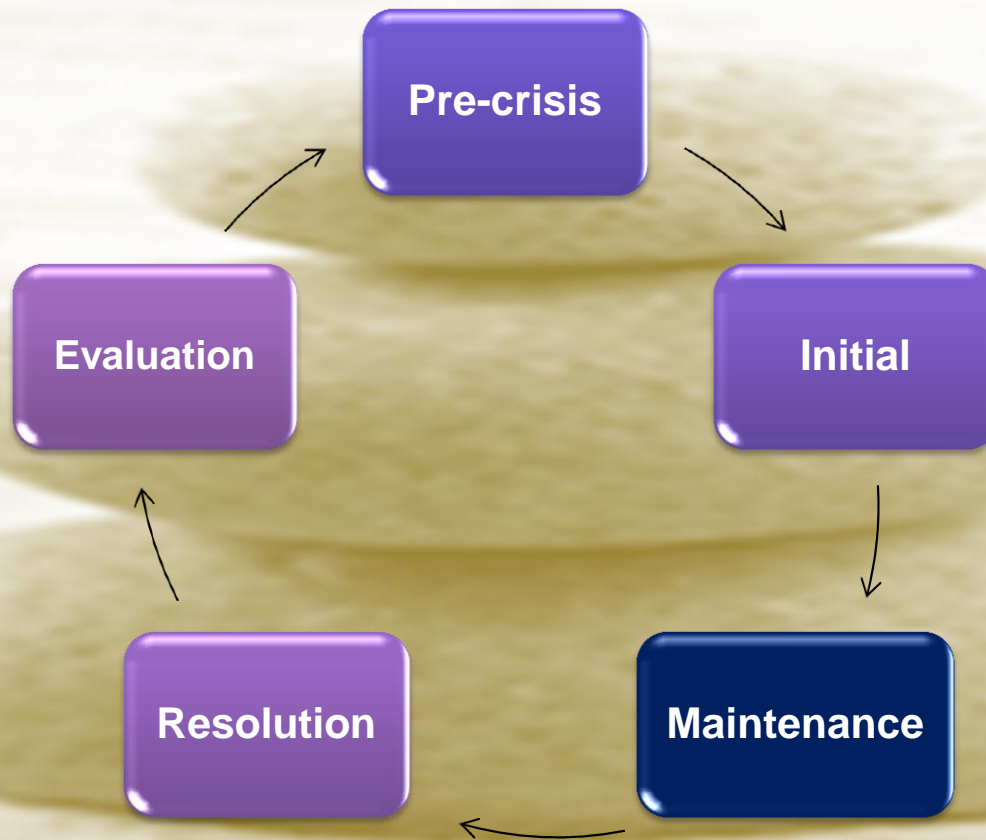
**Message purpose:** Explain, persuade, and empower decision-making

# Crisis Communication Lifecycle

- Every emergency, disaster, or crisis has a lifecycle and evolves in phases. Effective communication must be in sync with these phases.
- Each phase requires specific information

# Crisis Communication Lifecycle

Evaluation



## Pre-crisis Phase: Plan Plan Plan

- Prepare your stakeholders
- Foster alliances
- Develop consensus recommendations
- Test message
- Evaluate plans

## **Initial Phase: The initial phase of a crisis is characterized by confusion, intense media coverage, incomplete information and the facts**

- Simplicity, credibility, consistency, and speed are essential
- Express empathy
- Recommend actions
- Commit to stakeholders

## Maintenance: Sustained scrutiny

- Further explain risk – consider needs of diverse groups
- Provide more background
- Gain support for response
- Empower risk/benefit decision-making
- Capture feedback for analysis

# Resolution

- Lessons Learned
- Opportunity for public education
- New alliances
- Organizational leadership

# Psychological Factors to Consider

- Most people will behave responsibly
- There will be denial and filtering
- Risk perception must be addressed; known vs. unknown; encountered vs. novel; voluntary vs. involuntary; child vs. adult; unfair, immoral, arbitrary

# The Effective Way to Communicate

- Don't over-reassure
  - Assess whether imposed and/or known
  - Acknowledge how frightening it is
  - Maintain vigilance and situational awareness
  - Put the good news into dependent clause (i.e. We continue to battle the forest fires that are burning, even though no new ones have started in the past 72 hours.

## Human Psychology & Responses

- Overload – simplify; nuances may be missed
- Hanging onto existing belief systems – anticipate difficulties when asking people to change beliefs (i.e. evacuating when it seems safer to stay) – use a trusted voice
- Reliance on anecdotal information – anticipate people will rely on experience not necessarily facts – use experts

# Messages

- The public will judge your message by its content, messenger, and method of delivery.
- Needs to be timely, have facts, credibility and empathetic (first 30 seconds) and speak with one voice

# Key Elements To Build Trust

- Expressed empathy
- Competence
- Honesty
- Commitment
- Accountability

Accuracy of  
Information

Speed of  
Release

**CREDIBILITY**

+ =

**Successful  
Communication**

Empathy  
+  
Openness

**TRUST**

# Initial Message

## It **MUST**:

- Be short
- Be relevant
- Give positive action steps
- Be repeated

# Initial Message

## It must NOT

- Use jargon
- Be judgmental
- Make promises that can't be kept
- Include humor

# Contents

- Focused and short
- Relevant information only
- Positive actions (in case of evacuation go to the first exit vs. don't remain in the building)
- Repetition and exposure
- Use groups of three, rhymes and acronyms
- Personalize it – “We are investigating, we are taking action to...”

# Important Principles

- **Be First:** If the information is yours to provide by organizational authority—do so as soon as possible. If you can't—then explain how you are working to get it.
- **Be Right:** Give facts in increments. Tell people what you know when you know it, tell them what you don't know, and tell them *if* you will know relevant information later.

# Important Principles

- **Be Credible:** Tell the truth. Do not withhold to avoid embarrassment or the possible “panic” that seldom happens. Uncertainty is worse than not knowing—rumors are more damaging than hard truths.
- **Express Empathy:** Acknowledge in words what people are feeling—it builds trust.

# Important Principles

- **Promote Action:** Give people things to do. It calms anxiety and helps restore order.
- **Show Respect:** Treat people the way you want to be treated—the way you want your loved ones treated—always—even when hard decisions must be communicated.

# Speaking with one voice

The spokesperson becomes the message

- Gives it meaning – Reagan and the Challenger tragedy "...slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch ... the face of God."
- Expresses the same wishes of the audience – "I wish we were not in this situation"
- Asks people to bear the risk and do more (Giuliani) – I ask people to not be frightened to cooperate and to continue on

# What is a good spokesperson?

- The spokesperson must embody the identity of the organization
- The spokesperson is the organization first and then the individual
- Sets the groundrules

# Who wants what?



# Who wants what? Match the following:

## Audiences

- Victims and their families
- Politicians
- First responders
- Trade and industry
- Community far outside disaster

## Concerns

- Opportunity to express concern
- Personal safety
- Resources for response
- Loss of revenue/liability
- Speed of information flow
- Anticipatory guidance
- Family's safety

# What about the media?

- They can be your best ally if:
  - You build alliances ahead of time
  - Link them to your EOC
  - Help them fill in the technical and scientific gaps

# Social Media

- Emerging tool
- Creates resilience
- Can empower
- Can get in the way
- Requires a place in the plan

# Terrorism and Bioterrorism

- May not be recognized right away
- Intended to create fear, uncertainty
- Re-establishing stability is the key to addressing
  - Media
  - Symbols
  - Rituals

# Diversity, Hard to Reach and Vulnerable Populations

- Use citizen groups to develop plans
- Create community coalitions
- Use faith based and indigenous leaders
- Use the appropriate channels
- Consider cultural values and risk perception
- Understand gender, racial, ethnic and socioeconomic issues

# Channels Count Too

- Use too many and you will be over extended
- Use too few and you will overlook some groups
- Determine hard to reach and high risk groups and situations
- Plan ahead and test when you can
- Understand that some channels are trusted more than others
- Some channels may distort your message

# Putting it all together

Maple Leaf Foods – Listeria Recall

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgk3o3AJM2U>

# Summary

- Build trust and credibility
- Show empathy
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Give people a job
- Ask more
- Stay on message
- Be First, Be Right, Be Credible

## Acknowledgements

The purpose of this presentation is to provide the audience with an overview and general understanding of crisis and risk communication. This presentation is drawn from work by many professionals in the field including Dr. Barbara Reynolds, Dr. Vincent Covello, Dr. M.W. Seeger, Dr. T.L. Sellnow and Dr. R.L. Ulmer.