World Organisation for Animal Health

Australian Government
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

UNIT 9
RISK COMMUNICATION: CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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Outline

- Importance of crisis communication

- Key principles

- Key steps to communicate risks in a crisis situation

- Crisis communication channels and tools

- Public perception management and media coverage

- Knowledge check questions

- Resources

Crisis communication

Crisis communication is the strategic process of sharing information **during an emergency** or disaster **to protect public health**, **maintain trust**, and **minimize panic**.

J.Otte

Factors contributing to a crisis

1. MISTAKES OF THE SOCIETY:

- Misinformation
- Risk ZERO

Factors contributing to a crisis
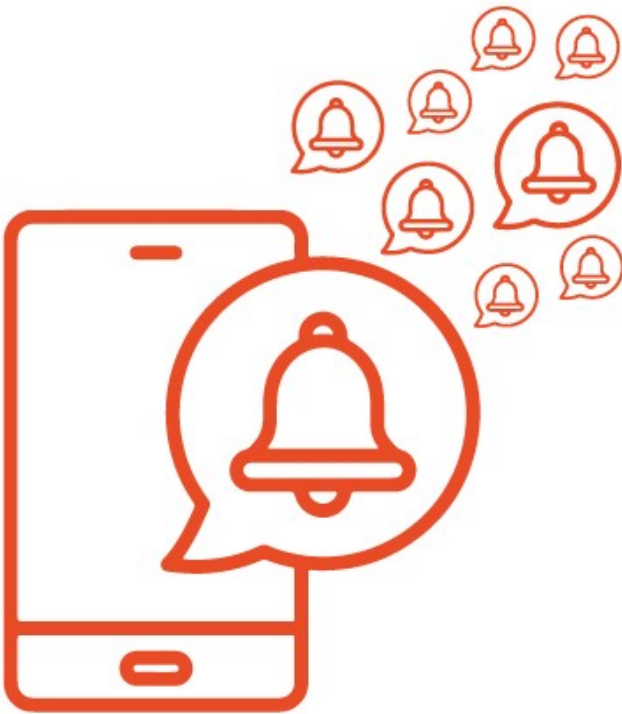

2. MISTAKES OF HEALTH AUTHORITIES:

- Miscoordination, delegation of responsibilities on others
- No preparedness → No communication plan nor structure, improvisation
- Information of facts without interpretation
- Insufficient data or knowledge…
- Hasty or rash communication
- Late information, not in advance

Factors contributing to a crisis

3. MISTAKES OF INFORMATIVE MEDIA:

- No real experts
- Opportunism
- Sensationalism
- Alarmism

"Happening vs. scientific knowledge"

Key elements of a good crisis communication

TRUST. Transparency and honesty foster credibility.

TIMELINESS. Early communication prevents rumors and speculation.

COORDINATION. Reduces panic, ensures coordinated response

PLAN PROACTIVELY. A well-structured communication plan is crucial

Risk Communication: Key steps

1. Identify and assess **risks**
2. Define **target audiences** and stakeholders
3. Draft **clear and actionable** messages
4. Choose appropriate **communication channels**
5. Beware of **fake news and misinformation**
6. **Post-crisis evaluation** – what could have been done better?

RISK= Likelihood x Consequence x Outrage

	Low Likelihood x Consequence	High Likelihood x Consequence
High outrage	High Risk (which can be lowered by reducing the level of outrage)	High risk (crisis communication)
Low outrage	Low Risk (no need to do anything)	High risk (need to inform people of the risk)

Reducing the level of outrage

A. Acknowledge and validate public concerns

- **Listen and respond with empathy** People want to feel heard
- **Avoid scientific jargon**
- **Help in damage control and recovery efforts**
- **Zero Risk does not exist** → frame the risk realistically while promoting solutions

"We understand your concern, and here's what we are doing about it."

Reducing the level of outrage

B. Be transparent and honest

- **Proactive sharing of information**
- **What is known, what is unknow, what is being done to find answers**
- **Search for knowledge from day 1**
- **PREPAREDNESS**, prepare people for what might happen, prepare speech to calm people. Simulations.
- **Avoid withholding critical information**; secrecy fuels speculation and fear
- **Acknowledge mistakes** → do not blame but focus on solutions

Reducing the level of outrage

C. Community engagement

- The **messenger** matters as much as the message
- Train **spokespeople** to communicate calmly, confidently and compassionately
- Enables **public feedback**

Reducing the level of outrage

D. Improve coordinated response

- **Regular updates** to reduce speculation
- **Consistent** message, even if the situation is evolving. Avoid contradictions in official statements
- Engage with **credible experts and respected institutions**
- **Straightforward messaging**: what needs to be done, why and how it helps
- **Multiple communication channels** to reach diverse audiences
- **Monitor social media and news outlets** to address misinformation promptly

The ideal health crisis communicator

- Can interpret a scientific text and extract the most relevant information

- Can differentiate knowledge from events- not everything is news

- Knows from reliable sources and experts

- Knows the public to which the messages are directed at

Myths in crisis communication

- **No time or resources**
- **We are going to create alarm**
- **We cannot explain the risks clearly, we will create confusión**
- **We shouldn't inform until we have all the solutions**
- **This is too difficult for the general public to understand**
- **It is a technical decision, thus it stays within the technical people**
- **This is not my job**
- **"Give them an inch and they will take a mile"**

Crisis communication channels and tools

TRADITIONAL

- Real times updates
- Press briefings
- Official statements

- Critical if low literacy
- During power outages or internet disruptions
- Several languages

- In depth reporting
- Public education
- Official press notes

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Best practices for traditional media

- Establish partnerships with journalists with scientific knowledge and train spokespersons

- Science-health issues different pattern than information on social events

- Regular briefings

- Visual aids

- Counter misinformation

Crisis communication channels and tools

DIGITAL MEDIA: speed, accesibility, 2-way communication

- websites and official webs
- Centralised and verifiable information

- Direct communication with stakeholders and institutions

- Push-up notifications
- Health tracking
- Real time alerts

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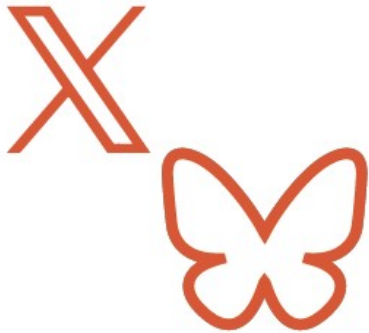
Best practices for digital media

- **Website stability** to handle high traffic volumes during crises

- **Keep information up to date** and fast-checked before publication

- **"Myth vs. Fact"** section

- **Accesibility** on all devices

- **Multimedia formats** (infographics, videos, podcasts...)

- **Downloadable resources**
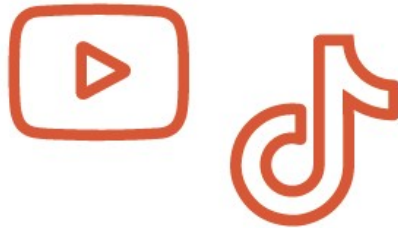
Crisis communication channels and tools

- Breaking news
- Emergency alerts
- Direct interactions

- Live updates
- Q&A
- Sessions
- Community engagement

- Community messaging
- Emergency helplines
- Rapid response groups

- Educational videos
- Myth busting
- Expert interviews

SOCIAL MEDIA:
instant communication, real-time engagement

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Best practices for social media

- **Verified accounts**

- **Pin urgent messages** at the top for easy visibility

- **Monitor comments and respond quickly,** particularly to concerns and misiniformation

- **Platform-specific content**

- **Leverage influencers and trusted figures** to amplify messages

Crisis communication channels and tools

FACE TO FACE COMMUNICATION

- **Enhances trust**
- Particularly vital in rural or marginalized áreas
- Through community leaders, townhall meetings, door-to-door campaigns, workshops and public fórums, health workers & NGO…

Cecilia Kindelán

Best practices for interpersonal communication

- **Adapt to local languages and dialects**

- **Story-telling**

- **Provide training to community representatives** for accurate information and dissemination

- **Engage in 2-way communication**

- **Printed material or drawings** to reinforce messages

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE. DEBUNKING MYTHS

Scenario: Your organization is facing a sudden health crisis. There are limited resources, and you need to communicate preventive measures quickly. Authorities hesitate to announce it because they fear public panic. You need to explain the risks to the general public, including rural population. Response plans are still developing. Scientists and policy-makers discuss about a new regulation. There is fear that too much public engagement will lead to excessive demands.

Choose the most appropriate communication tool from the options provided. Write or select a response to debunk the myth.

Risk Communication Team

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITIES
Crisis Communication Lead	Oversees communication strategy and coordination.
Spokesperson(s)	Serves as the public face, delivering official statements.
Media Liaison	Manages press releases, media interviews, and relations.
Digital & Social Media Manager	Handles website updates, social media, and online engagement.
Internal Communications Officer	Ensures internal staff receives accurate and updated information.
Stakeholder Liaison	Engages with key partners (government, health agencies, NGOs, businesses).

Risk Communication Plan Phases

PHASE 1. PREPAREDNESS (PRE-CRISIS)

- Develop **pre-approved messaging templates** for different crises.
- Train spokespersons and crisis communication teams.
- Identify and establish **communication channels** (TV, radio, social media, SMS alerts).
- Set up **monitoring systems** for misinformation detection.
- Conduct **simulation exercises** to test response efficiency.

Risk Communication Plan Phases

PHASE 2. CRISIS RESPONSE

1. **Gather and verify information**, consult experts and authorities
2. Activate the **Crisis Communication Team**
3. Issue **initial public statement** acknowledging the crisis with empathy, providing known facts, offering clear steps and guidance, outlining when next statement will be provided
4. **Regular updates and stakeholder engagement**, through multiple communication channels, monitoring public sentiment and misinformation, keeping stakeholders aligned.

Risk Communication Plan Phases

PHASE 3. POSTCRISIS RECOVERY AND EVALUATION

- Conduct **post-crisis debriefs** to assess communication effectiveness.
- Identify **gaps and areas for improvement**.
- Publish a **"Lessons Learned" report** for future preparedness.
- Maintain **public trust and engagement** with follow-up communications.

Questions/discussion

1. Did you consider **speed and accessibility** in your choice?
2. Would **traditional media be too slow or resource-intensive** in this case?
3. How does **lack of information contribute to panic**?
4. Can you recall **an example where clear messaging reduced fear**?
5. Why is **visual communication important in crises**?
6. Have you seen **a successful example of crisis infographics**?
7. What are the risks of **delaying communication** in a crisis?
8. How can **uncertainty be managed without misinformation**?
9. How does **audience background affect message clarity**?
10. Have you ever seen **technical information communicated poorly**?
11. What happens if **technical decisions are not communicated clearly**?
12. How does **public engagement strengthen policy acceptance**?
13. Why is **controlled public engagement better than avoidance**?
14. Have you seen a **successful example of public crisis engagement**?