CERC: Stakeholder and Partner Communication

This chapter reviews the following topics regarding stakeholders:

- Common interests and challenges
- Responding to your stakeholders and partners
- Crisis coordination and crisis collaboration
- Working with communities

Stakeholder and Partner Communication and Community Relations during an Emergency or Crisis

Stakeholders are people or organizations with a special connection to your agency, the issue, or the emergency. Perhaps they have long-term supportive relationships with your agency and are considered partners as well. Sometimes they emerge within the context of the specific event. Sometimes they are near and directly affected, and sometimes they are remote and the crisis only impacts them indirectly. Take the time to understand your stakeholders’ interests by anticipating and viewing any incident from their perspective. They will be most interested in how the incident will affect their activities, well-being, family, friends, property, and future.

Common Interests and Challenges

Expectations

Stakeholders expect action from agencies. It might be as simple as information released through the media or a website, or as complex as in-person meetings with key organization officials. Throughout this chapter, advocates, adversaries, and those who are ambivalent will be discussed:

- **Advocates:** You want to maintain and enhance their loyalty and support. Where appropriate, it may also be helpful to influence advocates to take some action.

- **Adversaries:** Discourage them from getting involved. It may also be possible to shift adversaries to an ambivalent position or, in some cases, shift them to be advocates.

- **Ambivalents:** They tend to stay on the sidelines or provide tacit support. In many cases during a crisis, maintaining large percentages of stakeholders in an ambivalent position may be all that is possible.
In crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC) planning, the first step when responding to stakeholders is to identify them. Stakeholders may vary according to the emergency, but your core stakeholders will be interested in every public health emergency involving the organization and will expect some form of response from your organization. Build positive relationships with stakeholders before an event occurs. This will increase your reservoir of goodwill and help improve the effectiveness of the response.

A good reputation, a track record of effective response, and a history of responsible conduct will build a reservoir of goodwill for your organization. This will make your organization seem more credible and help ensure that your messages are received positively.

Stakeholders are persons, groups, or organizations that may be affected by the event, your organization, or both. They include the following:

- People directly affected by a crisis and their family members
- The medical community, including all who care for the sick and injured
- People whose livelihoods are affected by the crisis (They are more remote stakeholders.)
- People who have visited the crisis location (They are also more remote stakeholders.)
- Communities and cultural groups that may occasionally be associated with a disease outbreak, sometimes unfairly
- Organizations, community groups, and supply chains

Stakeholder relationships are usually extensive and may take careful consideration to fully understand. It’s best to think of everyone as a stakeholder, while recognizing that some have greater stakes than others.

**Potential Stakeholders**

The list of potential stakeholders includes the following:

- Employees
- Families
- Retirees
- First responder community
- Board members
- External advisors
- The organizations’ clients
- Individuals and agencies who provide funding
Local residents
Business and community leaders
Community groups, such as schools and faith-based organizations
Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)
Cultural groups and organizations
Elected officials
Consumer action groups
Business communities
Union or labor organizations
Competitors
Legal advocates
The media

Some of these stakeholders may not be supporters of your organization. It is important to identify those stakeholders who may be unsupportive or critical and be prepared to respond to them appropriately. Your response to stakeholders will depend in part on whether they are advocates, adversaries, or ambivalent. Ask the following questions to anticipate stakeholder reactions:

- What type of relationship do they have with your organization?
- Do they have an affinity with your organization?
- How have similar groups reacted in the past when this type of crisis has occurred?

Why expend energy on stakeholders during an emergency? They are key audiences and sources of critical resources. A retailer may be able to deliver resources such as bottled water quickly and efficiently. Coordination with stakeholders is necessary for an effective response. The effort to connect with stakeholders secures critical information you need. They represent points of view that are vital to understanding how various groups perceive your organization’s response efforts. Involving stakeholders gives them a chance to tell you what they feel you need to know. It also ensures that everyone is aware that their involvement is welcomed and valued.

“I think one thing you need to understand about NGOs, faith-based organizations, not for profits that are working in these communities; number 1 they are close to the people, they have institutionalized relationships with them. They understand the community and they can translate the needs of the people and reconcile that with the resources that are available. So if you can make the delivery end of the service through an NGO or faith-based organization, you’re going to get a far better response.”

RADM Thad Allen, Retired, Former Commandant, United States Coast Guard
An emergency or crisis may also be an opportunity to strengthen stakeholder relationships as they see your organization in action. An effective response will enhance credibility. Don’t forget to consider existing stakeholder controversies or concerns and how the ongoing relationship will affect their attitude during the incident.

A common challenge with certain stakeholder communication is their expectation to be treated differently than the average group. This is especially true when a group has been harmed or experienced loss.

**Communicating with Stakeholders**

The following are common mistakes any organization can make in communicating with stakeholders during a crisis:

1. **Inadequate accessibility:** There is a tendency during a crisis to focus internally, circle the wagons, and engage in internal decision making. This may make your organization seem inaccessible and its response efforts seem not transparent.

2. **Lack of plain language:** Retreating into jargon is a natural response and officials use it in high-stress situations. It may frustrate stakeholders who simply need to understand.

3. **Lack of empathy in the response:** Stakeholders need to know that response officials understand at a very human level what stakeholders are experiencing.

4. **Problems with timeliness:** Are you providing information too little or too late? Time is always critical in a response, and the natural tendency to wait to get all the facts before issuing a response can make matters worse.

5. **Paternalistic attitudes and coming across as arrogant:** Do you value your stakeholders or do you express a “we know what’s best for you” attitude? In a crisis, stakeholders often feel disenfranchised and powerless. They may be particularly sensitive to responses they see as arrogant.

6. **Lack of opportunity for input into decisions:** Those who have been most affected by a crisis want a voice in key decisions. The opportunity for input can help offset feelings of being powerless.

Key internal and external stakeholders require timely and accurate information that meets their specific needs. They must have opportunities to be heard and offer input. Several helpful strategies are listed below:

- Make sure appropriate messages are tailored to your specific stakeholder audiences.

- Use audience assessment tools and worksheets, such as the stakeholder reaction worksheet at the end of this chapter. They will help you sort through audience needs, values, issues, and preferred means of communication.
Consider the relationships you have with specific stakeholders. Some stakeholders are dependent on you. Some may have the ability to directly influence how you conduct your public health business.

Focus on a set of concerns and reactions common to various stakeholder groups. Address these universal issues.

Certain communication strategies may help minimize negative reactions. Focus on factors that inspire trust:

- Express empathy.
- Show competence in core areas of expertise.
- Encourage stakeholder feedback and information exchange.
- Be honest and sincere in your communication and actions.
- Establish a long-term commitment through a steady visible presence.

Trust may be assessed and given swiftly during the early stages of a crisis. However, that trust may quickly erode if information is inaccurate, inconsistent, or overly optimistic.

To maintain good relationships with your stakeholders, do the following:

- **Do not underestimate risk:** Your organization might estimate the risk to be lower than it actually is, and you might wind up having to say it is “more serious than we thought.” This underestimation may damage your organization’s trustworthiness and credibility. On the other hand, your organization’s reputation may be less damaged if you overestimate the degree of risk. People prefer to hear “the incident is much less serious than we thought.”

- **Pay attention to organizational process:** When possible, involve the affected community in action planning.

- **Explain your organization’s procedures with care:** Be prepared to describe the organization’s mission, tools, and methods used to provide service.

- **Describe the desired outcome:** Explain to your stakeholders what factors make a successful response effort. This will include desirable outcomes, such as fewer deaths, decreased infection rates, and establishing systems to detect secondary outbreaks. Be open with your stakeholders to help clarify issues.

- **Promise what you can deliver, then follow through on commitments:** Under the pressure of scrutiny and the desire to fix or mitigate problems, you may be tempted to guarantee outcomes. Public commitments can create serious problems and should only be made after very careful consideration. Make every effort to get back to your stakeholders to ensure them that you have kept your promises.
- **Remain forthcoming with information:** Focus on building trust and providing good technical information. After identifying key stakeholders, determine their interests. Provide information that meets the needs of the people involved.

- **Consider your method of communication and its impact on trust:** Ask yourself, if it is possible to satisfy stakeholders' needs with mass e-mails or faxed messages, or is it necessary to make phone calls or hold special meetings to ensure continued understanding and support?

Coordinating your messages with other responding organizations before reaching out to stakeholders. You need to make sure that messages are consistent and that it is possible to accomplish key goals. Stakeholders may also be stakeholders of other responding organizations. Power struggles or visible confusion among organizations will reduce the credibility of all the players and frustrate stakeholders.

The following tips are not needed for all stakeholders, but if used will help you maintain good two-way communication:

- Designate stakeholder-specific meetings.
- Create specific Web pages for partners and key stakeholder groups.
- Provide quick updates through microblogs, e-mails, and text alerts.
- Designate stakeholder liaisons.
- Hold telephone calls that include management or management representatives.
- Provide information releases on the background of the organization and the incident.
- Provide periodic updates relevant to stakeholder interests.

**Assessing Stakeholder Reactions**

Part of stakeholder communication strategy involves identifying and describing the advocates, adversaries, and those who are ambivalent. Know your audience:

- Identify what they want to learn and their likely reactions.
- Project the full impact, the political or financial effect of their reactions.
- Identify stakeholders whose reactions will have the greatest impact if the crisis escalates.
- Forecast the involvement and response of top management.
- Develop a management strategy for likely reactions by key stakeholders.
Responding to Your Stakeholders

In your CERC plan, include the goals for communicating with advocates, adversaries, and ambivalent stakeholders. First understand the relationship of the stakeholder to the organization and the event. Understand the general goals of the stakeholder group, such as what they want to achieve and what outcome they desire.

In thinking through your CERC plan, consider how actions, decisions, and messages will be perceived by various stakeholder groups. What might shift their views? For example, during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, CDC originally posted guidance for schools that advised they close if they had a suspected or actual case of H1N1 flu. This guidance was provided to lessen the risk of spreading the virus into their communities.

However, more information became available suggesting a lower risk of severe illness and death from H1N1. In addition, communities provided feedback saying that closing schools placed a burden on parents and their employers. Parents had to arrange child care or stay at home with their children. In response to this new information, CDC changed its recommendation 6 days after the first notice.

Stakeholders’ reactions, and whether they are advocates, adversaries, or ambivalents, will vary based on several factors:

- The level of disruption they experience and the specific nature of the disruption
- Past history of interaction and the reservoir of goodwill
- The level and form of impact (short term or long term, minimal or severe)
- The level to which stakeholders depend on your agency and vice versa
- Perception of common goals, interests, and values
- Perception that your organization and stakeholders are all in the event together and share a common fate

When designing message strategies, consider the following:

- Address common concerns and reactions.
- Identify strategies that minimize negative reactions.
- Engage in confidence-building actions and communication.
- Fulfill commitments to develop trust.
- Offer consistent themes and messages.
- Use pre-emptive and proactive communication to address emerging or anticipated issues.
- Consider plans to provide advance notice to important audiences.
- Prioritize stakeholders according to the type of emergency.
**Partnership Development**

A partner may be defined as anyone with a role in aiding in the crisis response. Almost all crises require partners and close coordination among partners for an effective response. Most crises are too large or diverse for any one agency to manage alone.

Partner relationships should be developed in advance of the crisis. One of the best methods of building partnerships is to start with informal relationships through community, social, and professional networks. A number of networks have been developed to bridge the divides within public health, including local emergency planning committees (also known as LEPCs), liaison groups, and joint exercises. Strong, collegial relationships can be invaluable when emergency coordination is required. Base partnerships on a common purpose of serving the community, on mutual needs, and shared understanding of what is necessary during a crisis.

Each potential partner should play a specific role during a crisis. This role should be determined and agreed upon before a crisis situation occurs or, if necessary, in the first few hours of a crisis. It is helpful to assess what each partner brings to the table, including strengths, weaknesses, and unique abilities.

Your partner organizations will most likely choose a representative. That person should be someone who will execute the partner’s role and has the authority to make decisions and speak on their organization’s behalf. Usually this person is not the head of the organization, but typically will keep his or her leadership informed.

The following are tips for developing partnerships:

- Design plans for building relationships before the crisis.
- Look for opportunities to interact with the partner organizations.
- Create a partner contact sheet with every available phone number (work, home, cell), e-mail address, and website address. Obtain permission to contact the people by any means necessary during an emergency.
- Draft a plan for partner communication during a crisis upon which all partners agree. This plan should outline methods such as using e-mail and text alerts, twice-daily faxes, and conference calls.
Reality Check

Despite every good intention to allow partners a preview of a press statement or press release, it may be impossible to do so. With some time-sensitive issues, it is important to consider the increased possibility of leaks. You may choose not to share.

If you cannot give partners a preview, consider doing one of the following:

- Tell partners to expect a release on a subject.
- Ensure that they get the release and any supporting documents at the same time as the media.

Coordinating with Partners

Crises almost always require a joint effort between multiple agencies and organizations working together. Coordination is one of the most important challenges to effective partnerships in an emergency. One definition of crisis coordination is “mutually agreed upon cooperation about how to carry out particular tasks.” An example of a method for crisis coordination is a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that crisis response partners create to predefine their roles and responsibilities during a crisis.

A common problem with crisis coordination is the Robinson Crusoe Syndrome. This is when partners focus on their own tasks, and work independently in response to a crisis instead of focusing on the bigger picture and how their tasks fit into the overall response.

Three perspectives regarding disaster response coordination have been described. These are the bureaucratic perspective, the structural perspective, and the network perspective (see Table 7–1).

1. **Bureaucratic method:** This is a “top-down” system, such as the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Coordination is achieved through highly centralized systems where decisions and activities are determined at the top and flow down to lower levels. As described in Chapter 4, NIMS is a standardized, universal on-scene, all-hazards incident management approach that is scalable and can be applied to all incidents. The NIMS approach is required when federal dollars are being used in a response.

2. **Structural systems:** These describe specific areas of expertise or domains. Each agency may have a specific area of expertise they bring to the incident. Each agency works within their specific area or response. For example, police deal with issues of public safety, public health officials focus on health-related issues, and the Red Cross focuses on providing shelter and immediate support for victims. Because each agency knows its domains of activity in advance, it is able to respond more quickly with little direction.
3. **Networked coordination:** This uses a system of linked and integrated agencies where information is shared. Networked coordination requires ongoing communication and interoperability between communication systems. As information about various activities flows between agencies, ongoing decisions can be made about which agency is doing what, where, and with what success. Networks may emerge around a disaster as needs and conditions become clear. Sometimes, networks are spontaneous and can incorporate many community groups and organizations involved in the response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coordination Perspective</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucratic</td>
<td>• Command-and-control response to chaos in disasters</td>
<td>Incident Command System (ICS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Top-down and centralized</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rigid, universal, hierarchical structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>• Disaster response is a blend of elements of structure (domains and tasks) and agency (resources and activities)</td>
<td>Response to the attacks of September 11, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A range of different organizational forms created on continuum from formal organizing to collective behavior.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networked</td>
<td>• Networks of organizations are formed to respond to a particular disaster based on needs and situation. Two types: 1. Emergent multi-organizational networks6 2. Joint information centers, or JICs</td>
<td>CDC's JIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Network structures are flexible and fluid to determine the most successful strategies and organizations necessary.</td>
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Differences Between Crisis Coordination and Crisis Collaboration

Crisis coordination and crisis collaboration are different. Understanding the distinction between the two is important. Failure to understand this distinction sometimes becomes a source of conflict. Different organizations have assigned different meanings to the word “coordination.” Sometimes they refer to “coordination” when they are really talking about collaboration.

There are at least three ways the term “coordination” can be used by disaster response groups:

1. Coordination can be as simple as informing others about what an organization will be doing in response to a crisis. Often, this is effective, but can create the impression that one group or agency is “going it alone.”

2. Coordination may also be seen as centralizing decision making within a particular agency or with key officials. In such cases, managers control the response, and coordination is a function of a centralized authority.

3. Coordination may be seen as based on mutually agreed upon cooperation that is sometimes negotiated. Participating groups reach an agreement on how to carry out crisis response tasks. In these cases, groups and agencies share authority.

When partners come together to respond to a disaster, they may become easily frustrated with one another because they feel other partners are not coordinating with them. They may be really looking for some form of collaboration. These are different:

- **Crisis coordination:** This implies a minimal level of involvement between organizations to achieve synchronized crisis response and mitigation.
- **Crisis collaboration:** The term “crisis collaboration” suggests a deeper alliance where each values the other’s interdependence, and promotes equal input of participants in shared decision making. Collaboration is based on shared goals of effective crisis response and mitigation, shared values, and usually a longer history of interaction.

Differences in meanings of coordination among partners can be a source of conflict and tension. This can result in problems concerning the following:

- Information sharing
- Resource sharing
- Decision making
- Trust

In pre-crisis planning meetings with response organizations, discuss and clarify the goals of a crisis response. Also be sure to determine what crisis collaboration and coordination mean. This will lessen potential conflicts, lead to more effective communication with stakeholders, and enhance the ability of response organizations to create consistent messages.
Working with Communities

Community Partnerships

Community leaders and institutions, such as schools, community organizations, religious groups, and major employers can be valuable partners in supporting public health strategies, distributing information, and countering rumors surrounding an event.

These partners may be familiar, trusted, and influential with the target audience. Community partners may be more likely than the media alone to motivate the public to take recommended actions. Partners can reach groups of people in settings with which they are familiar. In addition, many public health strategies, such as social distancing and vaccination, require the support of institutions.

Establishing these partnerships requires ongoing interaction and mutual trust. In pre-event planning, make an effort to reach out to these groups:

- Use MOUs to engage partners as information distributors during a public health emergency.
- Supply partners with background information before or soon after an emergency occurs.
- Work with them to determine the best role for your partner organization or institution to take and the best way to reach their target population.
- Develop fast and reliable channels of communication that provide information directly to these community leaders so they will have facts ready when their constituents begin to ask questions.
- Invite partners to tour emergency facilities.
- Include them in training drills and exercises.
- Brief community partners on such issues as the strategic national stockpile, available state and local assets, social media strategies, public health emergency laws, and response strategies.

Consensus Building

Controversies will inevitably develop around a crisis. These often require engaging stakeholders and partners in building consensus. Controversies should not be negotiated through the media. Instead, engage a neutral third party to speak for the diverse group and help resolve differences. Neutral parties can do the following:

- Speak to the media on behalf of all involved.
- Facilitate a face-to-face meeting.

“When your whole community is in crisis, things really do change. People step up.”

Leng Caloh, Interactive Strategies
Manager, KPBS San Diego
Express both consistent and inconsistent points of view held by the entire group in an effort to find and build consensus.

Engage the public in community forums, create task forces or advisory groups, and practice effective listening.

Convening a Community Forum

A community forum is a meeting, sometimes open to the public and media, and other times limited to invited participants. In these meetings, people who have particular experiences or insights share their knowledge and perspectives. These meetings can help build positive stakeholder relations by doing the following:

- Sharing information
- Seeking input
- Demonstrating openness
- Building consensus

In addition to the strategies presented for managing public meetings in Chapter 5, community forums may benefit from a facilitator. A professional facilitator should be comfortable with the culture of the community and perceived by all sides as neutral.

An assessment can determine which stakeholders or partners are associated with the issue. Representatives from all elements of the community should be considered, not just those from a vocal advocacy group. You should also consider inviting community leaders and participants with particular subject matter expertise. Make sure someone takes careful notes.

In some cases, an online forum may be used. This system allows for discussions in real time or over an extended period, and can include offsite participants. This technique also generates a transcript of the conversation for your records.

Task Forces and Advisory Groups

Sometimes, it makes sense to have stakeholders and partners participate in deliberations through a more structured, long-term process. Advisory groups or task forces, composed of carefully selected representatives of stakeholder groups, can be an effective way to build consensus. Be sure to provide a carefully developed charge or mission statement to the task force.

If you create a task force or advisory group, you have an obligation to take their suggestions and input seriously. The group expects you to do so. The decision-making processes of these groups can be facilitated using the following steps:

- Define the problem or issue, including its scope.
- Define the scope, or charge, for the advisory group.
Identify available options.

Present all known information about alternatives.

Analyze the costs and benefits, weaknesses and strengths, and pros and cons of each alternative.

Establish criteria for a solution, including the “must” versus “want” criteria.

Be able to express why one alternative was chosen over the others. The chosen alternative will be such that the highest number of people will be helped with a minimum disruption to self-reliance and community sovereignty.

Effective Listening

Active listening during a public meeting or community forum can help facilitate understanding of the partners’ needs and demonstrate a commitment to the relationship. The first step in reaching consensus on debated issues is to understand the various viewpoints. Asking questions can demonstrate interest and prompt the audience to give you useful feedback. Although active listening is a skill requiring practice, some keys for using active listening in public meetings include the following:

- Manage the flow of conversation carefully by calling on people one at a time.
- Listen for both intent (feeling) and content (facts).
- Ask questions to make sure you understand and indicate your interest in what is being said.
- Pay attention to who is speaking:
  - What are his or her qualifications on this subject?
  - Does this person have underlying motives?
  - Is this person speaking as a representative of other groups, such as a community leader or member of an advocacy group?

Dealing with an Angry Public

Controversies will arise when risks are uncertain because science has not provided an answer or brought stakeholders to a consensus. Add to this the need to make decisions under the enormous time pressure of a crisis, and the uncertainty may seem unbearable to response officials and the public. When science cannot lead to a clear path, decision makers must make choices about what is and is not acceptable. In pressure-free environments, the public may turn to the courts to settle differences about the amount of acceptable or perceived risk.

A crisis creates an imperfect environment for making wide-ranging decisions. Decisions about important issues must be made in minutes, not months. The fallout can be harsh, especially after the crisis is resolved and the decisions are reviewed with the power of hindsight.
The struggle of imposing some risk on individuals or suspending some civil liberties to protect the larger community may be great. In such cases, empowering the public is even more important.

At the community level, empowerment may mean a face-to-face meeting with stakeholders. Building community consensus is the best way to advance compliance with public safety requirements before and during emergencies. Anything less might invite public mistrust of institutions or government agencies responding to the crisis. Public forums can diffuse anger and help the community work toward a mutually agreeable solution to a common problem.

Communication experts and psychologists point out that anger is a defensive response to pain or the threat of pain. Three basic circumstances can give rise to anger:

- When people have been hurt
- When people feel threatened by risks not of their own making
- When people sense their fundamental beliefs are being challenged

The intensity of that anger can be confounded by other factors. For example, when people feel powerless, their anger may be more intense. When people feel that they have not been treated fairly or with respect, they are likely to become angrier. If they have been manipulated, trivialized, ignored—or worse still, lied to—anger and a sense of unfairness will build. However, bear in mind that public displays of anger may be a form of manipulation by another party, especially in public settings. Some will use anger to bully others into accepting certain demands.

Avoid defining anger as either rational or irrational. Such an assessment is judgmental, counterproductive, and truly in the eye of the beholder. Don't label others as irrational because you may then feel justified in dismissing them, which will only heighten their sense of injustice.

**Allow the Audience to Participate in Finding Solutions**

Lectures are generally an ineffective way to communicate about a risk. They generally do not help to address a risk or crisis during a public meeting. A lecture as a one-way form of communication does not engage the audience. Telling is easy; asking and listening is harder. Asking questions is a deliberate action. It forces the process to slow down and forces everyone to stop and think before replying.

Instead of attempting to persuade individuals or community group to take an action, allow them to persuade themselves through a self-discovery process. The key is to not give the solution but help your audience discover the solution through the help of information.

How do you help an audience discover its own answers?

- Ask the right questions.
- Receive feedback.
- Offer the right information.
Using feedback as your tool, ask the audience questions that will create awareness about the situation. Empower them to make a difficult choice. A person who comes up with his own answer, while speaking with his own voice, will often take ownership of that idea. It's better for you to ask a leading question than to make an interpretation. The right questions can help an audience make the necessary connections. This strengthens the audience's tendency to take ownership for the insight.

For example, if an outbreak of a severe communicable disease occurs, emergency response officials may be faced with the challenge of temporarily suspending civil rights to limit the spread of disease. An extreme public health scenario would be to quarantine individuals or communities. A population that understands the need to quarantine will be more likely to uphold the quarantine requirements and support this decision.

### Questions to Help People Persuade Themselves

To help people find solutions through self-persuasion, start with broad, open-ended questions, such as the following:

- What challenges have you (or your community) faced that required consensus building to solve the problem?
- How did it go?
- What did you learn from those experiences?
- Were there difficult choices to make?

Feedback from the audience is critical, not only to get information, but to demonstrate openness. Ask questions to discover the explicit wants, needs, and desires of the audience:

- What is most important to you (or your community) when faced with a problem to solve?
  - Is it consensus building?
  - Is it putting the greater good for the greater number first?
  - Is it avoiding conflict?
  - Is it that the solution is fair and equitably distributed?
  - Is it ensuring everyone has a voice and was heard?
  - Is it that reasonable alternatives be fully explored?
When issues and concerns are presented in broad, general terms that are hard to address, ask questions that are more specific to the audience:

- What are the ramifications to you (your family, your community, or the nation) when faced with this current problem?
- What consequences are you hoping to avoid?
- What do you see as the worst outcome for you (or your community)?
- What courses of action do you believe could lead to this outcome?

Questions that encourage audience members to state the benefits they would like to see result from a course of action may promote understanding of anticipated outcomes:

- What benefits would you (or your community) expect if this disease did not spread further?
- Because you have brought up quarantine, what benefits would you (or your community) expect if you accepted quarantine as a course of action to reduce spread of disease?
- Understanding and expressing the benefits makes it easier to demonstrate how a strategy can solve the problem. In addition, strategies may be refined once benefits are understood. Ask questions about the benefits while looking for the right solution:
- From what I understand, you are looking for a way to protect yourself (or your family or community) from more illness or death. If I can explain how quarantine will meet those needs, are you open to implementing it?
- If you think quarantine would work in this effort, how do you see the quarantine being explained to the entire community?

Allowing people to persuade themselves is not an easy process. Done poorly, it can seem condescending or manipulative. It takes practice and empathy, but it’s worth the effort. It is the most effective way to gain your audience’s acceptance in thought and behavior.
De-escalating Conflict

Conflict is natural and to be expected during a crisis or emergency. It can also impede the ability of stakeholders and partners to work effectively with agencies. You can de-escalate using the following approaches:

- Begin de-escalation by trying to agree on issues that may not be key to the conflict. Do not start with the hot button issue, the one where people are not willing to concede.
- Find the elements that bring some agreement among both groups. This can help as a strategy and can help build trust.
- Establish guidelines for interaction and make an effort to humanize each side for the other.
- Look for common interests upon which to base a common dialogue.
- Remain open to reason, and allow yourself to consider that you might be wrong.
- Strive for fairness in the process, especially where a real or perceived lack of fairness or injustice has occurred.
- Work to get input from all stakeholders.
- Try to agree on actions that will be taken, however small, such as having a subsequent meeting.
- Give decision-makers and others with influence in the community open access to complete scientific information.

Try to get as many “yes” responses as you can. If someone says, “Your proposal is totally unrealistic,” try this response: “Are you saying that you don’t see how this proposal can respect citizens’ rights and stop the spread of disease?” When a person says “yes,” this transforms the relationship. Each question you offer that allows a “yes” answer from the other side further reduces the tension.

Don’t Say “But.” Say, “Yes, and”

Typically, people express their differences by prefacing their responses with “but.” The other group will be more receptive if you first acknowledge their views with a “yes,” and then preface your view with an “and.” For example, you might say, “Yes, we want to protect people’s rights and we want to keep them alive to enjoy those rights.”
Conclusion

Stakeholders are people or organizations that have special connections to the agency, the issue, affected members of the public, or the specific emergency. Partners are agencies and groups who will be assisting in a response. Often, stakeholders and partners emerge within the context of the specific response.

Communicating effectively with partners and stakeholders is critical to managing an emergency. Often, this means careful coordination and collaboration as well as ongoing, two-way interaction, even in circumstances where stakeholders are upset and angry.

Specific communication strategies may help manage some of the anger and concern that are natural in these circumstances. They will create strong, manageable, long-term relationships among your organization, your stakeholders, and your partners.
Worksheet 7–1. Stakeholder Reaction Assessment

Stakeholder group.................................................................................................................................................................

Relationship to the agency ...........................................................................................................................................................

Relationship to the event .............................................................................................................................................................

Nature of likely reaction:  □ Advocate  □ Adversary  □ Ambivalent

Values: .........................................................................................................................................................................................

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Interests: .....................................................................................................................................................................................

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How central is this stakeholder group to the agency or the event? ..........................................................................................

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Likely initial reaction? .................................................................................................................................................................

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Turning point(s) in their likely reaction? .....................................................................................................................................

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What would cause a change in position? .....................................................................................................................................

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Key messages: ...............................................................................................................................................................................

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Key contacts: ........................................................................................................................................

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Opportunities for feedback and interaction: .....................................................................................

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Steps for using feedback: ...................................................................................................................

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Strategies to inform and involve stakeholders: .................................................................................

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Information to provide: ....................................................................................................................

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Services and products to provide: ....................................................................................................

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Contact updates: ............................................................................................................................

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Date, with whom, and how: ................................................................................................................

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References


Resources


- Reynolds BJ. When the facts are just not enough: credibly communicating about risk is riskier when emotions run high and time is short. Toxicol Appl Pharmacol 2011 Jul 15;254(2):206–14.

Notes: