

CRISIS+EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION

Engaging the Community with Credibility

In order to carry a positive
action we must develop here
a positive vision, *Dalai Lama*

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INTRODUCTION

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: Engaging the Community with Credibility is a quick guide to essentials in planning and executing community outreach. This quick guide can help officials navigate a discussion with people in the community before and during those times when community-level emergency actions must be taken even though 1) time constraints do not allow for a protracted consensus building process and 2) the community-level decision must be made with incomplete, new and possibly changing information.

Emergency: Harmful, negative change or looming change that requires action

Risk: The probability of something happening (usually something negative)

Engage: Interact with principle

Community: People who are bound together in a shared location or identity

Credibility: Bestowed by others the recognition of one's expertise and trustworthiness

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Engagement Strategies: Methods and Measures

Each of these engagement strategies allows the public to share its perspective on the issue of concern. Each strategy has pros and cons. Decide what works in the context of the current emergency. One size does not fit all and multiple engagements in different forums can be helpful in addressing dissent.

Community Engagement Strategies (from least to greatest engagement):

1. Social media chat (real time or set period for comment): Facebook or twitter.
2. Town hall community conference call
3. Open regularly scheduled official function to public comment (monthly commissioner's meeting)
4. Specially scheduled town hall meeting.
5. Authorities meeting with organized potentially dissenting groups on the group's turf.

1. Social media chat: Facebook or Twitter.

Determine whether the chat will be live and interactive or a post/blog with possible options posted on the topic so the public can post questions or comments over time at the site. Depends on the degree of emergency and the timeframe in which community decisions must be made.

Notify on multiple social media sites that official(s) is/are hosting a discussion on the topic and set the date/time. Explain the intent: offer information, gather diverse perspectives. Do not promise an outcome. Link notifications to factual information sites that can help inform the discussion but do not imply the final decision has been made.

Encourage people who have in-depth or highly personal concerns that may need a directed answer to go to another medium for a response (call center or email complaint system) to unclog discussion forum.

Day of the chat: Announce again that the chat will take place and name the official participants.

Have empathetic, complete answers prepared to anticipated questions. Share these answers in response to questions. Use open-ended questions to get the discussion started, such as “What have you heard about the topic and what would you like to hear more about?”

Acknowledge diverse points of views and concerns.

Don’t be defensive or accusatory about motives of those engaged.

Be careful that your responses do not seem condescending or arrogant in any way.

Express gratefulness that people are engaged and remain open to hearing from others.

Offer facts as you can. Don’t dominate the forum. Encourage people to address each other as a community.

Success measures: Volume of participation, diversity of perspectives shared, clicks back to information sources shared by officials during the chat

Pros: Fast and free. Can be a conversation starter—finger in the wind

Cons: Difficult to ensure people feel they are being heard and messy give and take may frustrate some. Not everyone is social media savvy and may feel left out.

2. Town hall community conference call

Notify the community through multiple channels, including through the media, that officials will host an interactive town hall by phone on the subject and possible courses of action. Set date/time limits and provide the phone number.

Host an operator-managed conference call. All lines muted during introduction. Let the operator explain the “rules” of engagement.

Explain that this is not the only means that views can be shared (offer alternate comment options). Be careful not to overpromise the purpose of the call.

Set out the facts (as unbiased as possible). Acknowledge potential concerns (don't hope they won't be raised—instead, get credit for already listening).

Limit remarks and then open the operator-assisted phone lines for questions and comments. (Operator will require name/location of speaker)

Consider an option for instant polling—a VERY unscientific way to allow people to voice their opinion on a topic. Create questions that allow listeners to state the degree of importance they put on the topic: press 1 for very important, 2 for important, 3 for not too important, 4 for not important at all. The polling question should not be about voting among options, but dissecting the issues by weight of importance to the listeners. Intermingle polling questions within the discussion and share the results at the end of the call. Also, tell people the total number of their community members who were on the call with them.

Follow up with ways that people with more to say can voice it after the call concludes.

Pros: Higher degree of interaction between officials and the public than social media (voices versus keystrokes). Possible way to gauge the degree of emotion on topic areas.

Cons: May still not be satisfying to people who are more distrustful of their government. Potential misunderstanding between listeners and officials when follow up is hampered by clunky phone system as the communication channel.

Success measures: Volume of people who phone in—in comparison to other issues; range of comments (more diverse views raised, the more likely you came to the community for input early); level of participation in comment/question period (more comments, more engaged the public is and the more free they feel to participate); percent of people who participate in polling as part of the total listeners; and percentage of people who complete the call (number of drop offs).

3. Open regularly scheduled official function to public comment (monthly commissioner's meeting)

Notify the public that the topic will be discussed as part of the regular meeting and that if more time is needed a follow up date for interaction will be offered.

Limit the opening remarks to briefly set up the problem and proposed actions—allow the discussion and questions to characterize the issues.

Authority convening the meeting can start with rules to be followed (expect the public to ignore time limits).

Have security visible but restrained.

Offer microphones for speakers so everyone attending can hear what public commenters are saying.

Have a visible countdown clock that shows how long each person has to talk and when their time is up (be generous) but firm.

Don't offer pronouncements or interrupt community members when they are telling you their concerns or correct the facts as they share them. Digest what they've said and make a note about the misperception so you can correct it later. It won't go well if you get into a "tit for tat" flow of correcting what is said. You will only antagonize the public and it will feel like officials are stifling free flow of information among attendees.

Show in some concrete way that you are capturing what they are saying: write points on a whiteboard, take notes, or repeat back what you believe their stated concerns are. Be careful not to "put words in their mouths" but do interject at times with sincere, "Did I hear correctly" or "do I understand" and repeat what you think their point was.

Conclude by offering alternate ways for people to continue the conversation.

Don't promise what you can't control and if a decision must be made at the meeting, make sure people know that it will conclude with a decision before it begins.

Webstream the meeting and ensure the public is aware it will be shared on line (live or archived). Give on-line people a way to comment too.

Pros: Allows for face-to-face engagement and instantaneous feedback between officials and community members. It can be archived for others to view. Media can observe

Cons: Time constraints because the meeting has other business to conduct could be frustrating. Officials may perceive a vocal minority as representative of the community which could distort conclusions.

Success measures: Public leaves feeling officials listened.

5. Specially scheduled town hall meeting with the public

If a decision has truly NOT been made about a final course of action, consider using the 5 steps to empower decision making

If possible, hold the meeting in a place that encourages decorum (e.g., school library versus a school gymnasium).

This meeting would be conducted much like scheduled community meetings (#4 above), but be a single focus.

It would be valuable to bring experts who can provide answers to questions but not be expected to defend a position. Include experts inside and outside of government, if possible.

Set the ground rules and expect them to be ignored—gently remind people of the purpose for the ground rules (allow for discourse and fair opportunity for disparate views to be aired). Hint, if one person dominates and the attendees seem OK with it, that means this person's point of view likely mirrors their own or the person is entertaining enough that attendees are willing to let them go on.

You may want to ask that large signs or props be left outside the meeting place.

Don't lecture. Introduce the topic and give the floor to participants. The most important point here is: LET PEOPLE TALK. As an official you have lots of opportunities to be heard—the concerned public doesn't. Limit your own talking time and do not interrupt to correct a point.

Do interrupt to stop someone from hijacking the time or who is overly belligerent and repetitive. Be sure you stop them so someone else can speak, not yourself.

Ensure that comment cards are available at the end to allow people to share thoughts on paper in real time. Give them an option on the comment card to share their name, number or email if they want a very specific follow-up question answered. Offer that general questions will be answered on a website.

Pros: Same as #4—people will know you “get it” that the issue is important to them and you are soliciting their comments.

Cons: Messy process that can feel like a “complete waste of time” for officials who may know what the issues are that will be raised. May be difficult for some officials to refrain from striking back.

Success measure: The public leaves believing they've been heard. Officials gain more perspective about the depth of concern by the people who attended.

6. Authorities meeting with organized potentially dissenting groups on the group's turf.

Meet with organized groups who you perceive may have strong opposing views to possible decisions for community action.

Limit the time and format of the interaction. Offering a meeting and going to them shows respect. Ask for their understanding, if not support about the decision. Limit expectations about outcomes. Be careful about implied promises.

Express an “I wish.” I wish we didn't have these hard choices before us.

Don't lose your temper. Clarify for them that you will set the record straight if they tell their members you made a promise you didn't.

Include unbiased third party in the meeting to adjudicate conflict.

Expect the group to go to social media or local media about the visit. Have a statement ready to express why you chose to have the meeting—desire to be open and respectful.

Pros: Shows official willingness to engage opposing views before a decision important to the group is made. May weaken the claim of “outrage” by the group over the decision to be made.

Cons: May strengthen the organization’s media power.

Success measure: Organization acknowledges publicly the official’s willingness to be open to opposing views in the process of making the decision.

Empower Group Decision-making: 5 Credibility-boosting Steps

Leading a public engagement discussion *before* a decision must be made about a community course of action can seem daunting. When there is still time to weigh alternatives and the discussion itself can be helpful in making the decision, try these steps to organize the discussion. Select an unbiased, skilled moderator.

Officials should have a rehearsal first—think it through. And, recognize that the public will quickly see through an attempt to manipulate the direction of the conversation. Before the public discussion begins, let them know the steps you will be moving through and check the steps off as you move through them.

Sometimes the steps will lead to a “stalemate” among choices. That is not a failure of the process—if done competently, people will envision the hard choices and appreciate more completely how tough it will be for officials going forward. The sooner the public is engaged the better if a perceived stalemate is possible.

1. **Identify the problem** that needs fixing and possible alternative actions to solve the problem (try to capture what the community may be proposing).
2. **Analyze each proposed alternative** (ease of implementation, believed efficacy, conflicts with community values/beliefs, cost)—don’t get too quantitative here
3. **Present all scientific information**—don’t “cherry pick” among the science that is credible. If you ignore a dissenting scientific point of view, credibility drops (explain why scientific sources are more or less valuable to the discussion)
4. **Lead a discussion on “wants” versus “must haves”** in the proposed alternatives. Examples: One may “want” a 100% guarantee of effectiveness but “must” have a high probability of success. One may “want” an action that does not restrict any civil rights (no restrictions on movement) but “must” have the least impact on civil rights possible (brief, limited restrictions on movement).
5. **Conclude with a clear, justifiable decision.** It may be possible to rank alternatives and allow for more discussion or follow-up if more data are needed. Don’t overpromise on outcomes or final decisions if you do not have final authority.

Ways to Engage the Public Before Decisions are Final

Assumptions:

Different courses of action have to be considered against the intended outcome that is expected to disrupt the status quo.

Different segments of the public are perceived to be more at risk than others (various level of concerns).

Values and strong beliefs will be challenged by one or more courses of action.

A vocal, well organized minority point of view can skew perceptions about what the community desires.

The more potential conflict, the more valuable early discussion and face to face events become.

Good faith engagement and listening sessions won't eliminate objections but will help preserve trust in authorities who must make final decisions.

Remember, the primary objective before a decision becomes final is to ensure the public has input and their perspective (expert or not) is considered.

When a person is faced with a new decision, a new risk situation, a new recommendation from authorities to confront an emergency problem, they will filter that recommendation decision by asking themselves the following four questions:

1. If I take this action, what will I gain?
2. If I take this action, what will it cost me (resources, social standing, psychological stress, emotional stress)?
3. What do those important to me want me to do?
4. Can I actually carry out this action (physically capable, means to do so, emotional strength)?

Community Engagement: 1 Big Mistake, 1 Bigger Fix

In a public emergency, putting on a John Wayne swagger and ostensibly answering the public's concerns with a "don't worry little lady, we got ya covered" doesn't work. People want and expect information to allow them to come to their own conclusion. As a leader, it's not enough to satisfy your own worries with copious bits of information so you can then turn around and state a public bottom line, which you then fail to support with the facts you know when talking to the public.

Are you John Wayne? Should you be John Wayne?

Don't just tell them what they should do or, even worse, what you've chosen to do for them without their input. Don't just tell them what, explain why. What is the process here? How is this decision being made? What alternatives were considered before this decision was made and why were they rejected? What are you trying to accomplish with this decision?

Treat the public like intelligent adults and they will act like intelligent adults. Treat them any other way and they will either turn on you or behave in ways that seem illogical to you. Tell people what they need to know so they can reach the decision that they do not need to worry quite so much. Engage the public in the process and they will follow, in larger numbers, your lead.

Using reason to quiet emotion—how has that been working for you?

If a leader takes only one concept from this community engagement quick guide, this may be the most important and, for some, the most challenging. Your peers, who have experienced a leader's role in a public-safety emergency, and academic experts from around the country agree on this point: a sincere expression of empathy is as essential to your ability to lead the public in a crisis as the right key is to opening a sturdy lock.

You can stick other keys or bent paper clips or tiny screw drivers into a lock, but it won't open until you insert the key with the right grooves and edges. So it is with your message: the public won't be open to your message until you express empathy.

So what's empathy? Empathy is the ability to understand what another human being is feeling. Empathy does not require you to feel what that person is feeling. Empathy does not require you to agree that what the person is feeling is appropriate.

Expressed empathy is the ability to, at the very least, describe your understanding of what they are feeling. In its best form, empathy is talking from the heart and relating to fellow human beings as fellow human beings, not victims, not casualties, not evacuees or refugees or the public, but as people who, in an emergency, are hurting physically, perhaps, but especially emotionally.

Research shows that an expression of empathy should be given in the first 30 seconds of starting your message to the public in harm's way. To do otherwise is to waste your time, because, the public will be waiting to hear whether or not "you get it." Your audience is wondering whether you understand they are frightened, anxious, confused, or even angry? If you don't articulate what they are feeling in the moment, your audience's minds will be consumed with the question, "do they get it" and not hear a thing you are saying. A sincere expression of empathy early in your communication will allow people to settle down the noise in their minds and actually hear what you have to say.

Community Engagement: When the Hard Decision has Already Been Made

A free society demands that dissent be heard and that government authorities be held accountable. In some public emergency situations, officials may need to make quick public safety decisions. However, that does not negate the need for public discourse on that decision. Advocates who support the decision and advocates who do not support the decision need a public forum to air their concerns. Social media can substitute for some of this, but there is no better way for a public official to be accountable than to hold a town hall or community meeting.

We dread town hall meetings because we enter them with faulty objectives: give people the facts and persuade a vocal adversary to our side. Once a decision is made, if you enter into the town hall meeting with one objective, there's hope for success: have the public leave believing they have been heard. Simple as that. They want to be heard. Understand to be motivated to make the effort to come to a meeting—after a long day at work and finding a baby sitter—means they are not seeking “just the facts” from the meeting. Again, they want to be heard.

Do:

- At all times, seek common principles on 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 inequity has occurred.
- Work to get input from *all* stakeholders.
- Leave the community or population better off than how you found it.
- Decision makers in the community should have access to open and complete scientific information.

Expect strong emotions and open the forum public comments even before the official meeting begins.

Do limit the official presentation portion of the meeting to 5 minutes (hard, but smart—because people are there to talk, not listen).

Do acknowledge what people are feeling

Do maintain your composure (including body language)

Do moderate yourself if you can maintain your composure (if not, have it moderated)

Do set rules and do allow for them to be broken if it's within community norms of acceptable behavior.

Do hand out comment cards that ask if a person's point of view was expressed and if not, give them a place to do it.

Do have fact sheets ready for after the meeting that will provide clarifying facts.

Do expect the media to cover the "controversial" portions

Do understand that strong emotions will dissipate more quickly if there is nothing resisting it—chants and cat calls will die down naturally if you are patient

Do have security present, but use great restraint—try not to eject people from the forum for unruly behavior if it's not threatening—the attendees will police each other if someone dominates unfairly

Do webstream the meeting and remind attendees it will be archived

Do expect organized detractors to dominate the meeting and express anger or outrage

Do commit to being open to new information when the situation itself is fluid.

Do put into words what you believe people are saying to you—verify your understanding.

Do understand the spiral of silence—that some people may be intimidated by a dominant view, and give ample opportunities for other views to be expressed

Don't

Don't take personal abuse. You represent the people who elected or appointed you and remind opponents that everyone concerned about the issue can't be in the meeting.

Don't strike back—verbally or physically (watch your nonverbal)—any loss of temper on your part will be the only thing covered and you've lost the 95 percent of the public who appreciated your openness to dissent (Excuse yourself or call for a break if you can't keep it together)

Don't interrupt to correct facts. Correct information when possible.

Don't try to manipulate the discourse by limiting the discussion at “listening stations” or information booths—that's cheating and doesn't quell the public's need to be heard. Start the meeting as one group and then direct people to booths for more information (if there's time in the emergency to organize that way)

Don't get into the way of byplay between attendees with different views.

Don't make promises you can't keep.

Engaging the Media during Public Safety Emergencies

When public safety decisions that may be controversial loom—sit down with local media and layout the process you are using to make decisions. Don't be afraid to show them how decisions are being made.

Media are affected by crises too

Experience over time in various crisis situations have shown that media, who, after all, are part of the community can be affected by the crisis too.

Like everyone, they will be concerned about their safety, the safety of their families and their pets. However, the way they do their job changes too.

Consider three important ways that the media change. Verification of facts goes down, media abandon their adversarial role early in the crisis, and many of them will lack scientific expertise.

Take the media to school

Evidence strongly suggests that coverage by the media is more factual when reporters have more information. They become more interpretative when they have less information. What should you conclude?

Simple. Do you want to reduce the number of times reporters are interviewing reporters about what other reporters have just reported? Then give them something more. Want to reduce the number of times you hear reporters and their paid experts suggest what you as the officials responding to the crisis should be doing (while you're actually doing it)? Give reporters something to report.

A crisis event provides only so much event-specific information in a day. Even so, media outlets have round the clock air time to fill. What are they going to fill it with? Consider this, not everything you share with the media needs to be event specific. Instead, educate the media with background information.

Turn them into experts on the subject by teaching them what you want them to know to help put the situation in context. If a reporter hears new information about how a lab test is done to diagnose a disease, it isn't news, but it feels like news because it's new to the reporter. The public will feel the same way. Have the resources in place to help take the reporters and, by default, the public to school. A dirty bomb is detonated in the town square? Teach them radiation 101. Engage experts who you can partner with in advance of a crisis who can be trusted resources for accurate background information to the media.

Ensure you have plenty of content resources available on subjects that could affect your community. Chemical plants in town? Have ready fact sheets on the chemical properties. If you don't "take the media to school," you can be certain someone else will and they may not be invested in the best outcome for you and your community.

Another reason to take the media to school is because many of them will need it. Only a small percentage of reporters will be experts on issues that come up in the crisis. For all the rest, they will need quick remedial training. It's not unreasonable to expect a health reporter would understand the difference between a virus and bacteria, but it may be unreasonable to expect the lifestyle reporter reassigned to the big outbreak story to know the difference. Plan accordingly and don't assume the media know what you know.

The expected questions

No matter what the crisis, the following are the questions that will always be asked and should be anticipated by you. Be prepared to address the following:

- What happened?
- Are my family and I safe?
- What have you found that may affect me?
- What can I do to protect myself and my family?
- Who caused this?
- Can you fix it?

- Who is in charge?
- Has this been contained?
- Are victims being helped?
- What can we expect, right now and later?
- What should we do?
- Why did this happen?
- Did you have forewarning?

What makes a good spokesperson?

- Sincere expressions of empathy
- A willingness to risk saying, “I don’t know, we’re working on it”
- Telling the truth
- Confidence without arrogance
- Appropriate emotion
- Modulated voice
- Direct eye contact
- Humility or a lack of defensiveness

Engaging the Public: 13 Points in 2 Minutes

The right message at the right time can save lives and protect people

1. Discussion should begin in the community BEFORE the decision on a community intervention is final and the action to be taken is imminent.
2. The critical achievement for community engagement is first to inform officials' decision-making (by a vocal public) AND then to ensure the public leaves an event believing they've been heard.
3. Acknowledge the concerns voiced (whether the facts are given by public speakers correctly or not). Listen for the sentiment and tap into that.
4. No one wins an argument solely with their "facts"—strong emotions require acknowledgement and understanding along with the facts.
5. Don't use personal points of view or speak to your desires as motivation unless they mirror the audience's desires—it's not about You or what Your responsibilities are.
6. Allow the discourse to begin and the opposition to speak out before any comments/presentations from experts.
7. Ensure that there's ebb and flow so that both points of view are getting time in the event. Don't try to harness the natural flow of events.
8. Tolerate rude behavior and mob responses (e.g., chanting) unless they become truly malicious or threatening.
9. Think of official information as tiny commercials to get a piece of information in front of people in-between the negative responses.
10. Ensure there are reminders that other points of view exist in the community and speak for that point of view when facing a very vocal minority.
11. Never start to react to the group as if it is monolithic—don't label the group. Don't speak as if their emotion is not legitimate. Less resistance helps dissipate the negative strong emotions.
12. Set ground rules and expect them to be ignored. Let them be—be generous with the anarchy of the event.
13. Provide people who still have more to say, a safe place and way to do that. End with a sense of openness for more discourse in multiple ways and times.

Motivated by Fear and Facing Risks: 10 Things to Consider

1. **Fear is natural** and protective—as an official your job is not to make fear go away. Your job is to help people manage their fear so people can protect themselves and you can protect the community.
2. **Anxiety feels like fear** even though a threat is absent. Feeling anxious, or dreading a potential threat, is exhausting emotionally and physically.
3. **People look for ways** to alleviate their anxiety. Voicing concerns while organizing against a perceived threat is one way to deal with anxiety. Try to channel the anxiety by giving people outlets for discussion and actions to carry out (when possible).
4. **Fear arises** when a threat seems personal and imminent. Threats looming closer in time and location are feared more than threats farther away in time or place.
5. **Consider, risks** likely to generate more emotion are those perceived as: involuntary, controlled by others, exotic, manmade, permanent, anecdotal (negative experiences by others), unfairly distributed, or affecting children.
6. **Comparing new risks** favorably (less risky) to familiar risks (more risky) does not make people less anxious about the new risk.
7. **Caution:** do not over-reassure about a proposed action—it taints your credibility. Acknowledge what is known about a risk.
8. **Allow people the right** to feel fear. Acknowledge the fear, share credible information and never say, “there’s no reason to be afraid.”
9. **Fear is not irrational!** Fear is personal. Panic is irrational and is a fear response that is counter to a person’s survival. Panic behavior is rare, exceedingly rare, so don’t tell people “don’t panic.”
10. **Panic behavior**, while very rare, is most often the result of no clear choice of protective action AND strong mistrust of authorities or no trusted authority present.