

# Risk and Crisis Communication: When Things Go Wrong<sup>1</sup>

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No matter how careful and safety-conscious an organization is, if it's long-lived enough, some crisis or another will occur sometime in the life of the organization. When an agricultural organization fails to plan for potential disaster, the outcome can be severe—even tragic. Think about some crisis situations that could happen in an agricultural setting. Did these come to mind?

- Bacterial pathogen resulting in a food recall
- Food contamination
- Chemical run-off
- Pesticide poisoning
- Soil erosion and crop loss
- Weather catastrophes
- Disease

You name the bad luck scenario, and it *could* happen. And yet many agricultural organizations operate without a plan for what they will do when things go wrong. Still more organizations have no plan for communication during a crisis.

Why are organizations not prepared for things to go wrong? Being prepared for a crisis ahead of time will help your organization get through the rough times when things go wrong. And part of that overall crisis plan should be the integration of **crisis communication**. In this publication, we will examine an extremely important aspect of communication practice: **crisis and risk communication**.

## Risk Communication

**Risk communication** done effectively informs people about hazards to their environment or their health, manages potential problems in a manner that promotes goodwill, disseminates information, and communicates potential crisis and emergency situations well, encouraging prudent action and reducing panic. Here are some examples of health and safety issues that qualify as risk communication topics:

- How safe is the water we drink?
- How polluted is the air we breathe?
- What risk does the landfill down the street pose to my family and my community?
- Is it safe to eat beef?

Risk communication skills and techniques are used to handle both risk and crisis situations. With risk communication, communicators lay the groundwork for trust between the community and the organization dealing with the risks involved. However, bad risk communication could cause a crisis communication episode to develop. Communication experts generally agree that three elements exist when communicating a risk:

- **Message:** Messages are the overall information an organization wants its audience to comprehend, even if the audience forgets the details. The message should inform and persuade. The goal is for the audience to understand the message and take certain action.

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- **Medium:** The medium for the message depends on the specifics of the situation. It could be a brochure, a billboard, or a television commercial.
- **Audience:** Risk may vary dramatically in different populations. Targeting a specific audience is extremely important.

Successful risk communicators must know how the public perceives risk and how to distinguish between **objective risk** and **subjective risk**. **Objective risk** is calculated by scientists based on research. **Subjective risk** is the risk that the public perceives. Subjective risk is lessened or increased by familiarity (“I knew someone who this happened to”), dread, and personal control (US EPA, p. 5). For example, it is much safer statistically to fly than to drive, and the chances of getting bitten by a shark are small compared to the chances of being attacked by dogs. These statistics are *objective risks*. However, people fear flying and shark attacks much more than they fear driving or dog attacks. It is the *subjective risk* that plays into people’s fears.

Vincent T. Covello, director of the Center for Risk Communication, and Frederick W. Allen, counselor for the National Center for Environmental Innovation, Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation with the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), produced a pamphlet titled the *Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication* <https://nepis.epa.gov/Exe/ZyPDF.cgi/P1013X07.PDF?Dockey=P1013X07.PDF>. Any organization communicating risk issues should follow these rules, summarized here:

- **Accept and involve the public as a partner.** Involving the public early, preferably before any decisions are made, helps establish an atmosphere of trust and sincerity. The release of information from your organization to the public goes more smoothly if you are seen as trustworthy with nothing to hide. If you fail to involve the public at an early stage, the community may become angry and overestimate risks.
- **Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.** Develop communication strategies and plans as early as possible. Begin with specific objectives, such as providing information to the public, motivating individuals to act, or contributing to the response to a conflict. Recruit spokespersons who are good at presentations and interactions.
- **Listen to the specific concerns of community members.** Risk communication is a two-way exchange. You must listen; do not make assumptions. Recognize people’s emotions.

- **Be honest, frank, and open.** Trust and credibility are your most important assets when communicating risk information. If you lose trust and credibility, you will find them almost impossible to regain. To maintain trust and credibility state your credentials, admit mistakes, and disclose risk information quickly.
- **Work with other credible sources.** Develop partnerships, when applicable, with other organizations or governmental agencies. Try to partner with other trustworthy experts, such as university scientists, trusted local officials, or doctors.
- **Meet the needs of the media.** The news media transfer risk communication to the public, so you must meet reporters’ needs. Be open and accessible to reporters. Before a risk situation occurs, build a relationship with reporters. “Banking goodwill” ahead of time with reporters may help you in a risk situation.
- **Speak/communicate clearly and with compassion.** Do not use technical language. Be simple. Be sensitive to people’s emotions. Promise only what you can do, and do what you promise.

## Distinction Between Risk Communication and Crisis Communication

Risk communication differs from crisis communication. Crisis communication deals with things that *do* go wrong. Risk communication deals with things that *might* go wrong. Risk communication responds to any event that could cause public concern and could focus media attention on an organization. Here is an example of how the distinction between risk communication and crisis communication could play out:

- **Risk communication:** You own a food processing facility. A food product a competitor sells has been found to have salmonella. The competing company issues a food recall. Your product is free of salmonella; nevertheless, you realize that the concern about salmonella connected to this product generally will inevitably affect your company, so you go into “risk communication” mode. You initiate a toll-free telephone hotline, informational websites, and distribution of information through various media to inform consumers that your product is safe. You are being proactive and are listening to and responding to the public. Because you act quickly to bring the public in as a partner, concern about your product is alleviated. Sales decrease in the immediate aftermath and you suffer some economic loss, but because you have responded in a way that enhances the public’s trust, you are seen as a responsible company and recover quickly.

- **Crisis communication:** Your food processing company unknowingly shipped out salmonella-tainted food. Within a short time, people around the country are getting sick, and the cause has been traced to your company. You are in “crisis communication” mode. In this scenario, you must respond quickly to the media and the public’s food safety concerns. If you respond in a way that addresses their concerns, you can maintain credibility and trust.

## Crisis Communication

An organization in crisis will be best served if it has developed a **crisis communication** strategy to communicate to decision makers and the public. First, it’s important to understand the nature of crisis. All crises have some common characteristics:

- **They are potentially damaging.** They cast shadows of doubt about the credibility of an organization in the eyes of the public.
- **A crisis can create improper or distorted perceptions.** A crisis may involve allegations that tell only part of the story and stimulate negative impressions by the public about the organization. An organization, therefore, must be prepared to respond to incorrect perceptions.
- **Crisis situations are almost always disruptive to the organization.** Work is placed on hold until the crisis is resolved.
- **A crisis generally takes the organization by surprise.** The organization is placed in a “reaction” mode, where it responds to the situation, rumors, comments, and potentially hostile interviews. **Crisis also implies lack of control.** To counteract that impression, an organization’s response to crisis must be swift and competent. Speedy and effective action in the immediate aftermath of a crisis will show the public that the organization has prepared for the crisis.

## Preparing for the Crisis

The best way to handle a crisis communication situation is to have a plan in place for managing a crisis situation. Of course, you will not know what specific crisis might occur, but having a contingency plan in place—so that your organization knows who will talk with the media, the “chain of command” for decision-making, and how communication will be handled overall—is extremely important. Your organization’s overall crisis plan should devote significant time and effort to the **crisis communication plan**, especially if the crisis affects a large sector of the public. The more people a crisis impacts, the more important it is to

communicate to the public. The plan should address these key issues:

- **Organize a “what if” brainstorming session with others.** Come up with “what if” scenarios about potential crisis situations and write a general procedure for responding to the “what if” crises.
- **Select crisis management and crisis communication teams.** Who is responsible for communicating with the media during a crisis? Who fields telephone calls? Who decides what to say to the media? Everyone in your organization should know who is on the crisis communication and crisis management teams.

Your crisis communication plan should be developed to fit your organization. Each crisis is unique, of course, and there are many more actions you may need to take, but for most crises, the ones below will be the ones you’ll need the most:

- **Identify key audiences.** Determine to whom you want to communicate. It could be parents, students, local officials, or the general public.
- **Designate a spokesperson.** One person should answer all questions and make all presentations. This ensures that information comes from one source.
- **Provide guidance to the public.** In a crisis that entails physical harm or a health risk to the public, give the public the information they need quickly. If it is an evacuation, for example, have a plan to communicate information so that the public evacuates quickly and safely.
- **Develop messages and then communicate the messages and the facts.** Develop a few clear, simple messages for the media. These messages should be delivered repeatedly and clearly and by one person. The content of the messages should communicate concern about what is happening and explain what the organization is doing to alleviate the crisis.
- **Anticipate the tough questions.** Make a list of potential tough questions and be ready to respond to them.
- **Control the message.** Stick to the message and the facts. Control the information that is disseminated. If bad news is to be released to the reporters, be up front about it and get it out at once, instead of letting the bad news trickle out a little at a time. This way all of the negative news gets out at once, instead of having smaller “negative news” reports throughout the day.

- **Control the flow of information.** Hold regularly scheduled news conferences or reports so that the information gets aired frequently and reliably.
- **Keep track of media calls and requests.** You will use this information later as you evaluate your crisis communication plan and your response to the crisis.
- **Respond to the news media quickly and fairly.** Reporters want to get the message to the public. If you try to avoid the news media, reporters will have to seek information from other sources, and you will lose control of the message. Furthermore, the news audience will wonder why you have elected not to communicate with the media, and the conclusions they arrive at are unlikely to be favorable to your organization. Therefore, cooperate with reporters, be sensitive to deadlines, and provide all reporters with the same information.

Several good examples of crisis communication plans can be found on the Internet. Use a Web search engine and type in “crisis communication plan.” The website for the Canadian Centre for Emergency Preparedness (<http://www.ccep.ca/>) provides a draft crisis communication plan that you can download and tailor to your organization.

## Communicating During the Crisis

Following are some pointers on how to communicate to the news media during a crisis situation:

- **Get the facts.** Miscommunication heightens during a crisis and can be exaggerated by half-truths, distortions, or negative perceptions. Get to the heart of the real story and tell it.
- **Be active, not reactive. Tell it all; tell it fast.** Take the offensive when a serious matter occurs.
- **Gather and classify information into categories, such as facts and rumors.** Facts should be routinely updated; rumors should be verified or exposed as myths.
- **Deal with rumors swiftly.** Report only what you know to be fact. Do not repeat others’ opinions, hearsay, or assumptions.
- **Centralize information.** Designate one spokesperson who communicates effectively, knows your communication plan and comes across as trustworthy and caring. A central spokesperson provides a single “face” for the reporters. Viewers begin to become familiar with a central spokesperson, so this is one way to begin building credibility with the organization. Centralized information also will minimize miscommunication.
- **Do not get angry.** Keep your cool in an interview or news conference with reporters. Some of their questions may be hostile, and some questions and comments may seem to be a personal attack, but remember that they are trying to get information on a crisis-oriented story that may have widespread impact on their audiences. So stay calm and friendly, even when you are asked the “hard” questions.
- **Stay “on the record” in all interviews.** “On the record” means information that you provide to a news reporter can be attributed to you. “Off the record” means you are providing information to a news reporter that you do not want attributed to you. Do not go “off the record.” Any comment worth saying should be said “on the record.” If you go “off the record,” be ready to read it in print the next day. Do not be lured into going “off the record” under any circumstance.
- **No “no comments.”** Try to have an answer for reporters’ questions. But if you do not have an answer, do not be afraid to say, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out.” Saying “no comment” instead, appears to television news viewers and newspaper readers that you have something to hide.
- **In any crisis situation, follow every order, direction, or suggestion from emergency officials.**
- **Write everything down.** Maintain a crisis communication inventory of what was said, by whom and at what time. This way, you will have a record of the event and how it was communicated. You can evaluate your responses so you will be better prepared if another crisis happens in the future.

## After the Crisis

After the crisis is over and all communication with the news media has ended, do not just sit back and do nothing. It is time to evaluate how you handled the crisis. Your review should include the following:

- **A review of why the crisis occurred.** Could you have done anything to prevent the crisis?
- **An evaluation of how the crisis was handled.** Was information disseminated through one spokesperson? Were there any miscommunications?
- **An examination of similar scenarios.** What would you do in a similar situation in the future? What did others do in similar situations?

A crisis will happen in the life of most organizations. Taking time now to prepare for a crisis—even if you think it will never occur—and how to communicate to the news media during a crisis is your best defense.



## Resources and References

### Risk Communication

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### Crisis Communication Plan Information

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### Example Crisis Communication Plan

Canadian Centre for Emergency Preparedness (2010). <http://www.ccep.ca/ccepweb.asp?m=94&ap=3>. Burlington, Ontario: CCEP.

## Why is a crisis communication plan important?

In this section, Jim Handley, executive vice president of the Florida Cattlemen's Association, explains why having and using a crisis communication plan is necessary for an agricultural organization or company.

## Florida Cattlemen's Association



Figure 1. Jim Handley, Executive Vice President, Florida Cattlemen's Association

It is really important that we create and maintain a comprehensive crisis communication plan because we need an outline to follow when a crisis comes up. Whether it is a storm event—such as a hurricane—an animal disease outbreak, or a food safety issue, a plan helps the entire industry—the businesses and individuals within the industry—with a plan of action to respond to the crisis. The plan ensures a set of action steps are outlined, who to communicate with, and how to manage the crisis for the best possible outcome. If it is a food safety crisis, then a good plan will maintain consumer confidence; if it is a storm event, the plan helps the affected parties deal with the aftermath of the storm and resume business; if it is an animal disease issue, a good plan may save the industry from extreme economic loss through proper control of the disease and utilizing the media through proper communication to inform the public and people in the business being impacted.

It is vital that proper advance preparation be done to be ready to respond when a crisis occurs. This might include spokesperson media training. This ensures that a unified, organized message is being communicated to the media when the crisis happens. It is important that a communication chain is established that includes all the key people, agencies, organizations, and media outlets to be included in the execution of a professional crisis management plan. An organization can anticipate the type of questions and scenarios that may unfold in a crisis and have talking points

and factual information ready to disseminate when a crisis is at hand. One idea may be to create a website that is held “dark” or inactive but can be turned on or activated if a crisis occurs. This site may include all information about a given animal disease, a food safety issue, or management ideas for a storm. It will provide media with a place to go to get the facts and ensures a uniform message is distributed to the media and the public once a crisis occurs.