

## 1

## The Critical Role of Risk, High Concern, and Crisis Communication

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter addresses the role – and necessity – of successful communication in situations involving risk, high stress concerns, or crisis. It describes the book's intent to serve both as a handbook for individuals and as a resource for training and education. At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- describe the professional value of learning about risk communication principles and skills,
- identify how recent changes in the social and technical environment affect communication practices, and
- relate the organization and contents of this book to your individual needs.

*The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.*

—George Bernard Shaw

This book is about communicating with people in the most challenging circumstances: high stress situations. The ability to communicate effectively in a high stress situation is an essential communication competency. It is a competency that differs in significant ways from other generic communication skills. If done well, it can build trust and agreement, enabling beneficial solutions and constructive behaviors even in the face of fear and anxiety. In a public health or environmental hazard situation, it can save lives. Poor communication in high stress situations can have disastrous consequences, whether the loss of a business or the failure to resolve a high impact policy or operational issue. Professionals in every field can be thrust into situations demanding specialized high stress communications skills, whether they are confronting an external crisis or leading organizational change. I wrote this book so that you can be prepared.

As a manager or technical professional, you likely have a logical, research-based approach for addressing complex issues. You strive to ensure that people and communities benefit from this expertise. Yet all too often, the individuals and populations you serve do not share your trained perspective and thought processes; they do not consider your facts, judgements, and decisions persuasive, especially in situations fraught with high concern.

Enabling technical expertise to inform decisions and policy outcomes requires a body of well-researched knowledge and trained skills in risk, high concern, and crisis communication. Without this knowledge and related skills, the negative consequences can be major.

## 1.1 Case Diary: A Collision of Facts and Perceptions

A few years ago, an established nuclear research facility hired me as a consultant. The facility housed a nuclear reactor used for high-level research. It was also near a densely populated community that sat above a protected aquifer. This aquifer was the community's sole source of local drinking water.

The site managers contacted me with concerns about a local newspaper article on this nuclear reactor. The article reported the facility's nuclear reactor had leaked radioactive water for over a decade. Site managers and engineers had reportedly known about the leak for years. The leak resulted from a hairline crack, but the amount of the leaking radioactive water was well below levels that could cause human health consequences.

Leadership did not report the leak because they feared community outrage. They believed the public could misunderstand the science and react irrationally, even though the technical facts proved there was no significant environmental impact. Revealing the leak to the surrounding community might lead to unwarranted fear and panic and give ammunition to activists who were lobbying to shut down the reactor.

Unfortunately, the article also reported an internal poll of managers and engineers at the facility, asking how they would like to spend the facility's end-of-year funding surplus. Respondents had two primary choices:

- 1) repair the hairline crack and stop the leak of radioactive water, or
- 2) support work enhancements, including refreshments for the facility's visiting speaker program.

The facility's employees – applying their scientific knowledge and logic that the hairline crack was inconsequential – chose the refreshments.

I was hired to consult *after* the publication of this newspaper article. The engineers and managers explained to me, in meticulous technical detail, the nature of the crack and why the amount of radioactive water leaking into the community's aquifer was miniscule and posed no threat to human health.

After I sat and listened to a variety of technical presentations, I conducted a training on basic principles of risk, high concern, and crisis communication. I agreed that accurate technical facts were essential for decision-making, but facts by themselves were not always sufficient. Technical facts are only one factor that influences public fears and risk perceptions. Emotional factors also drive decision-making. Trust is based on attributes, including caring and concern. People in high-stress situations need to know you care before they will listen to you. I pointed out that nuclear power and radiation is a highly emotionally charged issue and raises high levels of anxiety for the public.

I predicted the public would perceive the facility's actions as a major breach of trust, notwithstanding the actual lack of potential harm. I recommended actions the managers and engineers could still take to regain trust and counter community anger and outrage. These recommendations included a sincere apology for not communicating early and a commitment to restore trust and ensure the mistakes would not be repeated. Such actions included environmental restoration and creation of a community advisory committee with significant oversight powers.

Unfortunately, I was brought into this situation too late. An avalanche of negative stories followed the first newspaper article, triggering community outrage before leadership could implement any of the recommended actions. Outrage was further fueled by the publication of a previously unrevealed government report that cataloged a long history of environmental shortcomings at this facility. That report cited the facility for failing to respond to the discovery of a leak

of radioactive water over 10 years earlier and described delays on promises to make environmental improvements.

Government agencies withdrew their support for continued operation of the reactor, citing environmental and economic concerns. Community and environmental groups pressured government representatives to deny the reactor a permit to continue to operate. The nuclear reactor was indefinitely closed, and all the scientific research it supported ended.

I began Chapter 1 with this story because it encapsulates several vital lessons:

First, effective communication is critical to the effective prevention of and response to risks, high concern issues, and crises.

Second, trust is a prerequisite for communicating successfully about controversial and emotionally charged issues.

Third, organizations and institutions interact with their environments, eco-systems, and communities. Those responsible for leading those organizations and managing them at every level must understand how stakeholders view what they do; they must seek and be prepared for stakeholder engagement, and they must build – and earn – and nurture trust from those interested or affected.

Fourth, leaders, managers, supervisors, and technical professionals require training in the principles of trust, stakeholder perceptions, and communication about risks, high concerns, and crises prior to encountering situations that require effective communication.

If the facility managers and engineers in this story had learned and applied the principles and values discussed in the chapters to follow, the research reactor would likely be in operation today.

## 1.2 What Will Readers Find in This Book?

This book identifies the principles underlying effective communication in situations where there is risk, crisis, or other causes of high concern. This book describes both the differences between and similarities among the situations of risk, crisis, and high concern, describing principles that underlie all such situations and practices specific to each. Previous books have written about these topics, but there are now important new fields of scientific inquiry and enormous new challenges in the communication environment. Inquiries are taking place on diverse fronts, including scientists and experts in anthropology, economics, engineering, epidemiology, law, psychology, sociology, media studies, medicine, statistics, toxicology, and neuroscience. Each discipline has generated publications related to risk, high concern, and crisis communication, and each adds to the understanding of the practice. However, with few exceptions, nearly all existing resources focus on a specific subset of the literature, on a specific area (e.g. bioterrorism, nuclear power, climate change, or genetically modified foods), or on topics of direct interest to the authors' discipline. As a result, the literature has become highly specialized and dispersed.

While this literature specialization serves experts within specific disciplines, it is less useful for the many professionals who work outside of these explicit fields and who may encounter any one of a wide range of challenges. This book offers a common framework of the major principles, strategies, and tools and shows how they relate to inform the work of communicators in high concern or emotionally charged situations.

This book provides the background and practices essential for successful communication in risk, high concern, and crisis situations. It describes what often happens when feelings and facts collide. It explains why leadership accepts some ideas for managing a risk, high concern, or crisis issue and rejects others.

Why do some projects that encounter high concern and controversy go forward and others do not? Why are some facts, information, and guidance recommended to stakeholders in high concern situations heeded more than others? Why are some presentations about high concern issues well received, while other presentations are ignored or incite anger? Why do some team interactions proceed without a hitch and others fail? Why are some interactions with upper management effective and others are ignored? Why are some people trusted with challenging communication responsibilities and others are not? Why do some meetings about high concern issues succeed while others fail? Why are some people better able to handle difficult or controversial situations than others?

This book addresses and answers these questions. The answers often come down to knowledge of risk communication principles and practices.

### 1.3 Why You Will Use This Book

I organized this book around two primary aims. The first is to help professionals understand the best communication practices for a high concern or emotionally charged situation. My second goal is to give readers the skills to apply these best practices in a variety of situations.

How you communicate in high concern situations will directly influence the course of the events you manage. In a crisis, stakeholders (i.e. interested and affected individuals and organizations) demand timely and accurate information. Leaders, managers, engineers, scientists, and technical professionals will be asked to take on unfamiliar roles and responsibilities. Those involved in the crisis will be surrounded by uncertainty, ambiguous information, high emotion, and upset people. Beyond the situation of an immediate crisis, competence in risk, high concern, and crisis communication is a prerequisite for navigating through the many situations where feelings and facts are at odds, whether it is concern about a health-threatening risk or high anxiety about an impending change. Performed well, high concern communication can enhance trust and confidence, calm nerves, reduce anxiety, encourage cooperative behaviors, provide information for informed decision-making, and help mitigate or reduce potential adverse outcomes. Poor, inadequate high concern communication can disrupt processes, fan emotions, undermine trust and confidence, and result in adverse outcomes.

I have organized this book to introduce theory and best practices in high concern communication, focusing specially on meeting the communication needs of those who work as engineers, technical professionals, leaders, or managers in fields that may encounter health, safety, occupational, and environmental responsibilities and challenges. Communications related to health, safety, occupational, and environmental issues are often stressful. They often raise complex technical, economic, social, political, policy, and ethical questions and then place the resulting demands on organizations.

I also wrote this book for technical professionals, leaders, and managers at all levels who desire to communicate more effectively in high concern situations within their organizations. For example, organizational change often raises concerns and emotionally charged issues from employees, including such questions as: What is the proposed organizational change and why is the change needed? Will I lose my job because of the change? How will the change affect me and my relationship to others? How technical professionals, managers, and supervisors respond to these and related questions is critical to the successful initiation and sustainability of change.

During high concern situations, ineffective communication can cause inefficiencies; disruption; low morale; and wasted time, money, and other resources. Ineffective communication

results in messages being garbled by the noise, unintended adverse consequences, rejected messages, and unnecessary fear and confusion. When deployed effectively by leaders and managers at all levels, risk, high concern, and crisis communication skills serve as invaluable tools for engendering trust, protecting organizational value, and helping people make informed decisions.

Leaders, managers, supervisors, and technical professionals can benefit from effective risk, high concern, and crisis communication skills by ensuring their customers, potential customers, and the public have the information they need to evaluate the company's products and operations. Effective communication often determines why some ideas and products are accepted over others, and why some individuals are accepted as leaders over others.

By keeping internal and external stakeholders informed about potential risks, corporations can reduce adverse outcomes and protect themselves from reputational damage. Internal stakeholders are particularly important because of their high credibility, especially when their views about a risk or threat differ from those of management. Similarly, nonprofit and governmental organizations can benefit from effective risk communication by educating and informing their constituents about threats and issues. With the ever-widening array of information sources, the negative effects of misinformation are more likely and damaging. People may not be aware of critical information or may take actions based on misinformation.

Engineers, technical professionals, leaders, and managers, as well as students aspiring to these positions, can read this book, gaining a comprehensive overview of the most important aspects of the field. I wrote each chapter to be self-contained and have provided additional resources for those who want to further probe particular topics. The intent is to make it easier for readers to home in on issues, such as stakeholder engagement, communicating numbers, decision-making tools, warning systems, working with the media, theory, message development, or evaluation.

## **1.4 The Need for This Book – Now**

Critical changes have occurred in the field and in the environment in which high concern communication occurs, changes further magnified and intensified by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020–2021 as described in the last section of this chapter. This book draws on new, and established, valid, and reliable research and applies it to relevant, complex, and difficult communications environments, including lessons learned in the extraordinary global public health crisis of the pandemic.

### **1.4.1 New Literature, New Research**

The scientific literature on risk, high concern, and crisis communication has expanded considerably in the past three decades. From modest beginnings, there are now more than 8,000 articles published in journals and more than 2,000 books focused on risk issues. The research spreads across fields, drawing on the work of behavioral scientists, social scientists, engineers, economists, statisticians, medical scientists, toxicologists, epidemiologists, industrial hygienists, lawyers, media studies, neuroscientists, and a host of other disciplines. The field has benefited from these new understandings and insights.

The material needs to be selected, synthesized, and interpreted for practitioners, integrating new findings into concrete recommendations for application.

I wrote this book to give you that synthesis.

### 1.4.2 Changes in the Communications Landscape

Technological, economic, and social changes have upended many of the traditional ways that risk-related information is communicated. Changes in communication technologies have radically transformed the way risk information is shared and transferred and how it is used.

Changes are occurring at both the societal and personal level that affect risk communication. Three of the biggest impacts of these changes are:

- 1) experts and authorities are less trusted;
- 2) whom to trust is now a central topic in virtually all risk, high concern, and crisis communications; and
- 3) the way the people seek information about risk, high concern, and crisis issues has shifted from traditional broadcast and print media to online sources and social networks.

Because of changes in the communications landscape, information about risks, high concern issues, and potential or ongoing crises is now readily available 24/7. The streams of information have increased exponentially. Websites of many news organizations update their information every few minutes.

On a personal level, powerful communication changes have resulted from the extensive use of social media and mobile device technologies. People exchange emails, send text and voice messages, make video calls, and share images, videos, diagrams, charts, and emoticons to express thoughts and meaning to what's going on in their world and lives. Messages posted on a vast array of social media platforms communicate instantaneously to multiple recipients or mass audiences. Mobile communications allow people to connect from almost any location. People schedule and conduct virtual meetings with anyone in the world who can connect with them through the Internet or cellular network.

The wide use of social media and virtual interactions are making communications less nuanced as there are fewer face-to-face interactions. As a result of these impersonal interactions, information communicated with nonverbal cues makes it difficult to interpret the sender's intended message. These changes are also influencing writing. For example, people are less likely to spell carefully and write complete sentences because of their increased use of text messaging and social media platforms. Their mode of communication more typically relies on short sentences or fragments, simple tenses, and a limited vocabulary, using phonetic spelling and little or no punctuation. As a result, texting and social media platforms encouraging brief messages are replacing traditional conventions in writing that enabled fuller explanation.

Changes in communications and communication technologies increase the volume of messaging about all topics. Email and texting are currently two of the most popular forms of online communication, even after discounting the large volume of spam messages sent. Beyond even normal increases based on ease of email/text use, many people are addicted to checking and sending email or texts. Billions of business and consumer emails are sent each day. Information overload increases, which also hampers communication. Dependence on continual online interaction also makes communications by individuals and organizations more vulnerable to problems such as mass power outages, disruptions, scams, identity theft, and cyberattacks.

These and related changes affect every aspect of risk communication. On a macroscale, they shape major social institutions (e.g. economics, politics, religion, family, education, science, technology, and legal systems). On a microscale, they shape values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

### 1.4.3 Changes in Journalism and the Perception of Facts

The profession of journalism is radically changing, in part because of changes in communication technologies. The models on which modern journalism was founded, including fact checking, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, are no longer universal norms. Even the definition of *journalist* is evolving. These changes are forcing many news organizations to cut staffs and scale down operations. Misinformation is rising and trust in traditional broadcast and print media is declining as alternative sources of information become readily available. Basic assumptions about truth in journalism are being increasingly challenged by accusations of fake news, hyperbole, and the existence of *alternative facts*. Confirmation bias – whereby people search for “facts” that confirm what they already believe and discount information that is inconsistent with their beliefs – has become epidemic. Citizen journalism and peer-to-peer communication often replace information from professional journalists and other central or “authoritative” sources.

### 1.4.4 Changes in Laws, Regulations, and Societal Expectations

Right-to-know and right-to-participate laws and regulations have increased. Many public and private sector organizations have made risk and crisis communication and consultation an obligatory task of risk and crisis management. Citizens increasingly expect risk and crisis managers to recognize that (a) people and communities have a right to take part in decisions that affect their lives, their property, and the things they value; and (b) the goal of best communication practice is not to diffuse concerns or avoid action but to engage people in a dialog that produces informed individuals and organizations that are involved, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and collaborative.

### 1.4.5 Changes in Concerns about Health, Safety, and the Environment

Public concerns about exposures to potentially toxic substances, physical agents, and hazardous events have significantly increased in recent decades. These interests have led to increasing demands for risk information in crisis and noncrisis situations. Interest and concerns about risks have also resulted in the expansion of risk-related issues by traditional broadcast and print outlets and on social media channels.

Inequalities in health, safety, and exposures to hazards between different populations are increasingly being brought to light. The increased understanding of the harm caused by governments and organizations to marginalized, vulnerable, and minority populations has further eroded trust, increased suspicion of “authorities,” and raised demand for more nuanced information and more complete data.

### 1.4.6 Changes in Levels of Trust

The erosion of trust in traditional experts and authorities is driving the need for more effective risk, high concern, and crisis communication. Over the past 50 years, there has been a precipitous drop in trust in institutions overall and with risk management institutions specifically.

Perceptions that undermine trust include observations that technical experts and authorities are:

- paternalistic and insensitive or dismissive of concerns and fears about risks as irrational;
- unwilling to listen, express empathy, or acknowledge the emotions people feel when facing risks;
- unwilling to be fully transparent;
- unwilling to share complete and timely information about what they know about a risk;

- unaware they are using bureaucratic or technical language and jargon that people in the public do not understand;
- more interested in protecting their positions of power than in protecting people from harm or adverse impacts;
- often inconsistent in their statements about risks;
- inconsistent in their recommendations regarding preventive and protective actions; and
- often unwilling to allow meaningful stakeholder participation and engagement in the decision-making process.

In this distrusting environment, advantages accrue to those with effective risk and crisis communication skills.

#### 1.4.7 Changes in the Global Political Environment

In the current global political environment, debates about how to manage and control risks often become hostile. Arguments and polarization often replace compromise and joint problem-solving. Disagreements among stakeholders arise from many interconnected sources, crossing political and geographical boundaries. Small disruptions often rapidly escalate, due in part to the complexity and coupling of large, complex systems. The principles and practices of risk, high concern, and crisis communication presented here are essential to make effective policies and sound decisions.

#### 1.4.8 The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Changed Communication Landscape

In December 2019, a new viral disease was reported in Wuhan, a city of 11 million people in Hubei Province, China. Initially, Chinese health officials reported no human-to-human cases of transmission. However, that assessment quickly changed. Human-to-human cases multiplied. Wuhan went into a near complete lockdown, but not before cases began to show up around the world. By March of 2020, the virus had spread to virtually every nation on the planet and entire nations urgently implemented stay-at-home orders. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. In a little over one year, COVID-19 went on to kill more than 2.5 million people, including more than 500,000 in the United States. Hope did not appear on the horizon until the arrival of vaccines in January and February 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the communications landscape in profound ways. Because of the harm being caused by pandemic, the need for effective risk and crisis communication was never greater. Navigating the pandemic called for sophisticated communication skills, not just for public health officials but throughout government – in fact, through all organizations, as change and uncertainty causing high concern became the norm. Even those well-skilled in crisis communication faced unprecedented challenges. The crisis was global, and few governments were prepared for the communication challenges. Responses and messages were uncoordinated, and too often politicized. Even messages based in science were often confusing and frequently changing, as experts quickly learned more about the disease and its means of spread. And the audience for the messages – essentially everyone on earth – had difficulty hearing and understanding even clear messages, as they were experiencing high levels of stress, uncertainty, and anxiety about their health and every aspect of their lives.

COVID-19 was the first pandemic in history where social media was used on a massive scale to communicate information aimed at keeping people safe, informed, productive, and connected. Unfortunately, social media also created a communication *infodemic* – defined as an overabundance of information, both online and offline, that is overwhelming in its volume, largely

unstoppable in the speed and breadth of its spread, and which includes as much, or more, unreliable, misleading, and inaccurate content as it does facts and useful advice. The COVID-19 *infodemic* undermined the global response to COVID-19 and cost lives. The communication *infodemic* jeopardized measures to control the pandemic by enabling and amplifying misinformation, i.e. incorrect information, and disinformation, i.e. information deliberately intended to deceive.

In April 2020, the UN Secretary-General launched the United Nations Communications Response initiative to combat the spread of mis- and disinformation. At the World Health Assembly in May 2020, the World Health Organization Member States passed a resolution that recognized that effective risk and crisis communication was a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to learn from the communication failures and successes of the COVID-19 crisis, and COVID-19-related findings, examples, and case studies are contained throughout this book. The experience of the global pandemic profoundly illustrates that successful risk, high concern, and crisis communication plays a critical role in all aspects of human well-being. The principles and practices described in this book will help its readers achieve a critical positive impact through their communications.

