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“Why Risk Communications Planning is Important”

I. INTRODUCTION

When I was a young attorney/environmental scientist, risk communication was scarcely even whispered about.

Basically, communications strategies were designed to address problems that occurred after a release, a spill, or some form of contamination that threatened the public.

Blissfully unaware of this burgeoning field until I decided to go back to the government as a senior-level Presidential appointee – to head OSWER, The Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

Ink had barely dried on my nominating papers, when, before I was even officially confirmed by the Senate, I came on as a consultant to learn about the job.

I walked into the then Administrator, Christine Todd Whitman’s, office at EPA to learn that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center.

Suddenly, I found myself as a well-intentioned, untrained, risk-communicator.

Today, I would like to share some of the things I learned between September 11th, 2001 and June, 2004 – my time spent as Assistant Administrator of OSWER and the six months I spent as Acting Administrator of the Agency.

I will provide a framework of some important elements of risk communication (the “whys” and the “wherefores” if you will) and talk through some actual examples of how that information works when one is actually standing there in front of a boom microphone, the clicking of digital cameras, and the hum of direct feeds from network broadcasters.

II. THE ISSUE OF UNCERTAINTY IS REAL AND INFORMS THE ENTIRE RISK COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Include relevant data

Present your analysis so that it is understandable not one thousand pages

On dioxin NAS especially highlighted uncertainty.

Until ORD responds, no change in OSWER. Can't change risk management without new risk assessment unless compelling case.

- *Important not to have regulations and statutes all over the map.*

III. ELEMENTS OF RISK COMMUNICATION: RULES TO LIVE BY

Risk communication planning falls into several major categories:

- Inreach;
- Outreach;
- Planning and Metrics;
- Credibility and Transparency

INREACH

Collaboration and partnering is the key to the success of any kind of risk communication.

In government, we are often called “the Federal Family,” quite a misnomer, at times.

To the public, we are a great monolith, all speaking from the same page, furthering common public goals.

We all wish that this were always the case!

Careful, early and frequent collaboration with federal, state and local partners is essential to guarantee a consistent message.

****Establishment of JIC with NASA and CDC after the shuttle disaster*

Bring in credible partners in science, research, advocacy

The public gets confused when there are too many messengers

By incorporating other environmental experts into the decision making process, agencies can thoroughly assess and manage environmental and human health information

****Bringing CDC into anthrax communications*

Work with other credible sources to share messages and information.

Conflicts and disagreements among organizations make communication with the public much more difficult.

****Should we reopen the Hart Building?*

OUTREACH

Accept and involve the public as a partner. Mean it.

When thoroughly and adequately informed, the public can often play a key role in creating excellent ideas for helping its own communities.

True public involvement means listening as well as lecturing! Hear them out. They may have critical missing pieces to solve the puzzle.

Diverse approaches tailored to diverse audiences. It is important to have a representative of each affected community involved in the risk communication process.

**** Recently, EPA recognized this issue, and began offering multi language versions of all of its risk information materials*

**** Using language specific media to get messages out—
Example, Fish health and safety in Boston—Portuguese
In parts of California, Chinese or Hispanic.*

PLANNING AND METRICS

Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts. A plan of action for situations that can pose significant health risks to the public and risks to the environment should be in place ahead of time.

Develop ways to evaluate how effectively you have communicated your message to the public.

Examples: Focus groups, baseline sampling, etc.

****Superfund clips file and counterpunch log*

CREDIBILITY COUNTS

Be honest, frank, and open.

Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain, once lost they are almost impossible to regain.

The public will have more respect for you and your agency if you are straightforward and honest.

*****Hazelton, PA – no buy-outs . . . Chemical engineer – standing ovation for “P2 will not happen overnight.”*

HAVE COMPASSION

Speak clearly and with compassion.

When you are dealing with a health threat or an environmental risk, you must be prepared to show compassion.

People often care more about trust, credibility, competence, fairness, and empathy than about statistics, details and deadly graphics

MEDIA MANAGEMENT

THINK LIKE A REPORTER—NOT A SCIENTIST

Do background briefings well advance of any announcement

Talk about the process, the challenges and limitations

Reporters usually prefer simple facts, easy for fact-checkers

Think of their perspectives; know their deadlines and policies.

When talking with news reporters, be specific about the risk, do not make assumptions or give possible out-comes.

Be friendly but do not be mistaken, reporters are not your friends.

****Examples of turning news coverage around on superfund, despite uncertainties and basically the same facts—*

Talk about backgrounding key reporters, building working relationships, telling it straight—but planning events around THEIR news cycles, not the scientists. Calling them when it's not a story helps guarantee a more fair, balanced article when it hits.

CONCLUSIONS

Uncertainty is real

Sometimes form is as important as substance in risk communication

Understanding the media helps ensure that messages are widely received

There is no magic bullet—the art of solid risk communication planning and is a key to meeting legal requirements, ensuring public participation and transparency, and preserving credibility, and helping the media protect the public's right-to-know.

CLOSING QUOTATION

The brain is a beautifully engineered get-out-of-the-way machine that constantly scans the environment for things out of whose way it should right now get. That's what brains did for several hundred million years -- and then, just a few million years ago, the mammalian brain learned a new trick: to predict the timing and location of dangers before they actually happened.

Our ability to duck that which is not yet coming is one of the brain's most stunning innovations, and we wouldn't have dental floss or 401(k) plans without it. But this innovation is in the early stages of development. The application that allows us to respond to visible baseballs is ancient and reliable, but the add-on utility that allows us to respond to threats that loom in an unseen future is still in beta testing.

-- From Don Norman's "Being Analog"

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