

Risk Communication Guidelines

Know the Stakeholders:

Identifying both external and internal stakeholders and finding out their diverse and sometimes competing interests and concerns is the first step to any successful risk communication effort. The best way to determine stakeholder interests and concerns is to ask them! Conduct interviews with key leaders both outside and inside your organization. Use the information gathered in this step to develop your risk communication program for establishing collaborative problem-solving and communication efforts.

Simplify language and presentation, not content:

When trying to communicate the complex issues behind a health risk, it is easy to leave out information that seems to be overly technical. Risk communication research and studies have proven that all audience members can understand any technical subject if it is presented properly. This can be done, for example, through the use of visuals and diagrams and by defining all technical/medical/scientific jargon and acronyms.

Be objective, not subjective:

It is often very easy to differentiate between opinions and facts. It can be difficult however, to respond credibly to opinions without substantiating them or offending the individual asking the question. In order to maintain credibility, respond to both opinions and facts in the same manner.

Communicate clearly and honestly:

To communicate clearly, present information at the audience's level of understanding. People can reject information that is too difficult for them or they can reject a communicator who is perceived to be dishonest or untrustworthy. As a result, they may refuse to acknowledge the information or become hostile. On the other hand, they may become hostile if they feel patronized. The bottom line is – know the audience! In addition, whenever possible, provide familiar examples and concrete information that can help put the risk in perspective.

Deal with uncertainty:

When communicating health risks, results are not definitive. Discuss sources of uncertainty, such as how the data were gathered, how they were analyzed, and how the results were interpreted. This demonstrates that the uncertainties are recognized, which can lead to an increase in trust and credibility. However, when discussing uncertainty, the communicator should stress his/her expertise and knowledge of the subject. This will reinforce the leadership's ability to handle the situation and could allay concerns and fears regarding the risk and the risk-management decision.

Be cautious when using risk comparisons:

In order to put risks in perspective, comparing an unfamiliar risk to a familiar one can be helpful. However, some types of comparisons can alienate audience members. Avoid comparing unrelated risks, such as the risks associated with smoking versus those associated with air contamination. People rarely accept the comparison of unrelated risk.

Develop key messages:

Key messages are those items of importance, the health risk information that needs to be communicated. They must be clear, concise, and to-the-point. No more than three messages should be communicated at one time. Repeat key messages as often as possible to ensure they are not misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Be prepared:

When either presenting health risk information or answering questions regarding an individual's concerns, be prepared. Most questions and concerns can be anticipated if the audience is known. In fact, the communicator should know 70 percent of the possible questions that could be asked. Consider how to answer general questions and how to respond to specific inquiries.