

Emergency/Crisis/Risk Communication Definitions

Introduction

Communication theorists today are apt to slice and dice their definitions quite finely. The following definitions should be acceptable to the palate of most communication theorists and still allow the practitioner a firm foundation for discussing with others the differences and similarities among the fields of communication. Call it what you want, the fact is that communication expertise which fulfills the needs of public health professionals responding to a public health emergency or crisis will borrow from many areas of communication study.

Emergencies, Disasters and Crises

What do emergencies, disasters, and crises have in common? Simply, something bad has happened or is happening. When something bad and unexpected happens it may be called an emergency, a disaster or a crisis, depending on the magnitude of the event and which phase of the event you are experiencing.

Crisis Communication

Crisis communication can be defined in two ways and, therefore, can cause some confusion for a practitioner looking for expert training and counsel. Today, the term is most often used to describe an organization facing a "crisis" and the need to communicate about that crisis to stakeholders and the public. Typically, it is an event that occurs unexpectedly, may no longer be in the power of the organization to control, and may cause harm to the organization's good reputation or literal viability. An example of an organization facing a crisis is the occurrence of a mass shooting of employees by a disgruntled employee. In most instances, the organization is facing some legal or moral culpability for the crisis (unlike a disaster where a tornado wipes out the production plant) and stakeholders and the public are judging the organization's response to the crisis.

A more simplistic definition of crisis communication separates the "judgment" or reputation factors in the communication and deals primarily with factual communication by an involved organization to its stakeholders and the public. Crisis communication could simply be the effort by community leaders to inform the public that, by law, they must evacuate in advance of a hurricane. In this definition, the organization is not being overtly judged as a possible participant in the creation of the disaster, and the information is empirically sound so the individual can judge its truthfulness without the help of an expert.

The underlying thread in crisis communication is that the organization is itself experiencing an unexpected crisis and must respond. Crisis also implies no control by the involved organization in the timing of the crisis event.

Communicator: Participant

Time pressure: Urgent and unexpected

Message purpose: Explain and persuade

Issues Management Communication:

Issues management communication is similar to crisis communication; however, the organization has the "luxury" of advance knowledge of the impending crisis and the

opportunity, to some extent, to choose the timing of the communication to stakeholders and the public about the issue and the organization's plan to resolve it. Again, the organization is central to the event.

Communicator: Participant

Time pressure: Anticipated, timing somewhat in control of communicator

Message purpose: Persuade and explain

Risk Communication

Risk communication is a field that has flourished in the area of environmental health. Through risk communication, the communicator hopes to provide the receiver information about the expected type (good or bad) and magnitude (weak or strong) of an outcome from a behavior or exposure. Typically, it is a discussion about an adverse outcome and the probability of that outcome occurring for an individual. In some instances, risk communication has been employed to help an individual make a choice about whether or not to undergo a medical treatment, continue to live next to a nuclear power plant, pass on his genetic risks, or elect to vaccinate a healthy baby against whooping cough. In some cases, risk communication is used to help individuals adjust to the knowledge that something that has occurred in their past such as an exposure to harmful carcinogens may make them at greater risk for a negative health outcome such as cancer in the future. Risk communication would prepare them for that possibility and, if warranted, give them appropriate steps to monitor for the health risk such as regular cancer screening.

Communicator: Expert that did not participate in the event and is without investment in outcome

Time pressure: Anticipated communication with little or no time pressure

Message purpose: Empower decision-making

Emergency risk Communication

Emergency risk communication encompasses the urgency of disaster communication with the need to communicate risks and benefits to stakeholders and the public. Emergency risk communication differs from crisis communication in that the communicator is not perceived as a participant in the crisis or disaster, except as an agent to resolve the crisis or emergency. Emergency risk communication is the attempt by experts to provide information to allow an individual, stakeholders, or an entire community to make the best possible decisions about their well being within nearly impossible time constraints and ultimately accept the imperfect nature of choices during the crisis. This is the communication that goes on in emergency rooms, not doctors' clinical offices.

Emergency risk communication is different from risk communication in that a decision must be made within a narrow time constraint, the decision may be irreversible, the outcome of the decision may be uncertain, and the decision may need to be made with imperfect or incomplete information. Emergency risk communication is an expert opinion provided in the hope that it benefits its receivers and advances a behavior or action that allows for rapid and efficient recovery from the event.

Communicator: Expert who is an after-event participant invested in the outcome

Time pressure: Urgent and unexpected

Message Purpose: Explain, persuade and empower decision-making

