

"Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy"

by Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.
(www.psandman.com)

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Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy

by Peter M. Sandman

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Every emergency is different. At the same time, all emergencies are similar. And one of the key similarities is this: All emergencies pose pretty much the same dilemmas of communication policy.

In this chapter I want to discuss ten such dilemmas:

1. Candor versus secrecy ... or versus misleading statements
2. Speculation versus refusal to speculate ... or versus treating speculation as fact
3. Tentativeness versus confidence
4. Being alarming versus being reassuring
5. Being human versus being professional
6. Being apologetic versus being defensive ... or versus being forward-looking
7. Decentralization versus centralization
8. Democracy and individual control versus expert decision-making
9. Planning for denial and misery versus planning for panic
10. Erring on the side of caution versus taking chances

For each of these ten dilemmas, my own position leans toward the first of the two poles. That is, I prefer candor to secrecy, speculation to refusal to speculate, etc. But these are *dilemmas*, not questions with obvious answers. Not everyone agrees with me. The disagreements take three forms, as follows:

First, I am on one end of a continuum with respect to most of these dilemmas. I doubt you'll find many risk communication or crisis communication experts that occupy the other extreme, but you can certainly find some with more moderate positions than mine.

Second, experts in communication in non-risk and non-crisis situations almost invariably take positions that are more moderate than mine, and sometimes positions that are on the opposite extreme. That's because they're working from a different paradigm. They're used to addressing apathetic publics, not aroused stakeholders (for more on this distinction, see my CDC article on the 2001 anthrax attacks, <http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#head2>). Health educators, for example, are accustomed to working hard to get apathetic publics to take a health risk seriously enough. PR people are accustomed to working hard to get apathetic publics to read the news story. Both may need to adjust to the less common and quite different problem of addressing people who are not apathetic but upset, maybe even too upset.

Third and most important, in an actual crisis high-ranking people (such as politicians) are likely to take center stage. Their intuitions on most of these dilemmas will be on the other side from my recommendations. Under the stress of a crisis, moreover, everyone's intuitions move even further in what I consider the wrong direction.

Bottom line: Your organization is not going to like doing much of what I recommend.

The probability that you will dislike my advice does not mean that the advice is necessarily sound. Sometimes advice is both unattractive and unwise. What it does mean is that you're likely to have trouble giving "my side" a fair hearing — especially if you wait till mid-crisis to consider these dilemmas. I will stand a better chance if you are reading this in non-crisis mode, thinking about the message policy recommendations you want to build into your emergency communication plan.

If you are, I suggest the following process:

1. First think through your own position on each dilemma. Read what I have to say, read some more conventional advice, and bounce them both off your own calm judgment. Focus on what you think would be best, not what you think your bosses will accept.
2. Try to embed your judgments in case studies, real or hypothetical. For each scenario, think through what different approaches to the various dilemmas would entail, and how they would be likely to play out. This should help clarify the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Whenever you do a drill or tabletop exercise, work in some of these communication policy dilemmas.
3. Now involve the higher-ups. Explain why you support the position you do, but explain its downside as well. Get them working on concrete scenarios, so they too can explore what different approaches to the dilemmas would actually mean in practice. Don't skip this step. There is no point in writing a terrific policy section for your emergency communication plan, only to have it overruled in mid-crisis by senior people who had no idea what you had in mind.
4. Once you have management buy-in, draft the policy section of your plan. Try to go beyond platitudes. Use past examples and hypothetical examples to illustrate what you mean. Remember that bad examples are often more useful than anything else in helping readers understand what you want them to do ... and what you want them to avoid doing. Include a brief explanation of the rationales for your prescriptions, and include a brief (and sympathetic) explanation of the opposing case.
5. Now share the draft widely with senior management, with politicians, with partners, stakeholders, critics, and even the general public. The best time to deal with criticism of your emergency communication policies is beforehand, when they're still in draft, when you can debate the dilemmas in principle and struggle toward a consensus. Moreover, if people know in advance what your policies are, they are likelier to understand and accept them when the time comes. And perhaps most important, the more people know about your emergency communication policies, the likelier your organization is to stick to them.

Here's a good way to think about these dilemmas: There is truth on both sides. You want to wind up somewhere in the middle. (I actually think you'd be better off winding up somewhere between the middle and my corner, but let that go.) All the pressure and all your intuitions are going to be in one direction. So aim for the other extreme (my extreme) in order to reach the middle. I'm not saying it isn't possible to go too far my way; it is. However, I suspect you won't

have that problem. Your problem will be making yourself and your organization go far enough. So don't worry much about overshooting — go as far as you can.

During the anthrax attacks of 2001, I gave a presentation to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on "Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action." The presentation was later written up into an article, featuring 26 recommendations on how to communicate during a bioterrorism emergency. That article is available on my web site at <http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm> and is one of the reference documents incorporated into ERC CDCynergy. The organization of this chapter, by dilemmas instead of recommendations, is new for me. The chapter includes some content that's also in the anthrax article, as well as a lot of new content. There is also content in the anthrax article that is not here. For the convenience of readers who want to know more, the discussion of each dilemma includes hyperlinks to the relevant recommendations in the anthrax article.

1. Candor versus secrecy ... or versus misleading statements

For more information on this topic, see:

- "15. Protect Your Credibility — and Reduce the Chances of Panic — with Candor" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#15>)

One of the most difficult decisions organizations face in emergency situations is what information to reveal, what information to withhold, and what information to "shape" so it gives the impression you want to give.

Of course, nobody ever recommends dishonesty; all communication manuals endorse telling the truth. But many readers will interpret this in the narrowest possible way: Don't tell flat-out lies. The real issue isn't lying. It is "shaping" (that is, distorting) the impression you give your audience by choosing which truths to tell and how to tell them. Consider this example from the Three Mile Island nuclear accident. In the midst of the crisis, when many things were going wrong, the utility put out a news release claiming that the plant was "cooling according to design." Months later I asked the PR director how he could justify such a statement. He explained that nuclear power plants are designed to cool even when serious mistakes have been made. Despite his company's mistakes, therefore, the plant was indeed cooling according to design. Needless to say, his argument that he hadn't actually lied did not keep the misleading statement from irreparably damaging the company's credibility. The more recent memory of President Clinton insisting that his integrity depends on "what the meaning of 'is' is" should help drive this lesson home.

Here's a partial list of reasons organizations often give (when pushed) for withholding part of the truth and "shaping" the rest:

- The information hasn't been quality controlled yet; we're not sure it's true. (The de facto quality control standards for bad news are much more stringent than for good news.)
- People will misunderstand the information. In particular, people interpret what we say negatively. If we accurately describe the problem, they'll think it's worse than it is. To get them to see it accurately, we have to imply it's better than it is.
- People might panic if we told them the whole truth.

- Critics/opponents/activists/troublemakers will take advantage of what we say. We have to withhold information in order not to give them ammunition.
- Candor would give the terrorists information they can use to wreak more terror. Homeland security requires withholding information.
- Candor would make it harder to catch the terrorists. Law enforcement requires withholding information.
- Candor about some things could damage our reputation, our credibility, and that in turn would damage our ability to protect the public. Protecting our reputation is not merely self-serving, therefore; it's essential to public health.
- Candor about some things will anger the political leadership — and will lead them to exercise more control over how we manage the crisis. Our autonomy depends on our discretion.

Every one of the reasons on the list has some validity, of course. In fact, there are times when each reason is powerful enough to justify withholding a particular piece of information. The problem is figuring out when.

The argument in favor of candor is much simpler. People are at their best when collectively facing a difficult situation straight-on. Things get much more unstable when people begin to feel "handled," misled, not leveled with. That's when they are likeliest to panic or go into denial, likeliest to ignore instructions, likeliest to develop paranoid hypotheses ... and after the crisis has passed, likeliest to punish the authorities that weren't candid with them.

I have four key recommendations:

- a. Recognize that when to be candid and when to withhold information or tell misleading half-truths is a tough issue, with no clear right answer.
- b. Recognize that when you try to resolve the issue in a specific situation, especially in a crisis, you will tend to withhold or distort too much. (It is difficult to think of an organization, whether government or corporate, that has gotten into trouble for being too candid with the public. In contrast, we can easily generate long lists of organizations that have been punished for misleading the public.) It follows that you should struggle to withhold and distort as little as possible, secure in the knowledge that you won't go too far in the direction of candor; no one ever does!
- c. Document every occasion when you decide to be less than candid. Force yourself to keep a log of internal discussions that ended in a decision to rephrase something or omit something in order that the public would understand the situation less completely than you understand it. Note the reasoning that led to the decision, and note whether anyone disagreed. The main purpose here is to force the organization to be honest with itself, not to pretend to itself that it is being candid when it isn't. A secondary purpose is to create a record that can be assessed afterwards at least by your own organization, and possibly by third parties or even the public. I realize the idea of documenting your own lapses from candor may strike you as demented (which is a good hint that you don't want the lapses exposed, which is a good hint that they may be unwise). Basically, if

you can't think of anything to put into the log that will make your decision look responsible in hindsight, you should reconsider your decision.

- d. Once in a great while you may come across a situation so important and so sensitive that you don't want it in your log. You are convinced that the public welfare requires permanently misleading the public, and also requires being able to deny that you did so. You are sacrificing your integrity for the greater good. So be it — but if you get caught, expect to get vilified. With luck, you will never face such a crisis of conscience. If you face it routinely, and if it no longer feels like a crisis of conscience, you're making major mistakes.

2. Speculation versus refusal to speculate ... or versus treating speculation as fact

For more information on this topic, see:

- "17. Be Willing to Answer What-If Questions" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#17>)

Risk communication and crisis communication manuals often advise readers that they should not speculate. This is absolutely conventional advice. But I think it's not only incorrect; it is flat-out incoherent when the domain is risk communication. The very concept of risk is what might happen — the assessment of the probability and consequence of possible futures. Risk communication, then, is communication about those possible futures. That is, risk communication is a kind of speculation.

In terms of my paradigms of emergency events (see "[Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events](#)"), any time the emergency is "suspected" or any time it is "future," we're talking about speculation:

- Communication about an emergency that will be obvious if it happens, but hasn't happened (obvious/future). (For example, the hypothetical possibility that terrorists may someday launch a smallpox epidemic.)
- Communication about an emergency that is happening already but isn't yet obvious, only suspected (suspected/now). (For example, a weird chicken pox case that might or might not be smallpox.)
- Communication about possible suspected emergencies in the future (suspected/future). (For example, the question of whether we should quarantine if we ever face a weird chicken pox case that might or might not be smallpox.)

But even if the emergency is obvious/now, there are still endless elements of it that are suspected and/or in the future, and therefore uncertain. It is *impossible* not to communicate about these elements. The only choices are what to communicate. One possible but unattractive answer is: "We don't know for sure what will happen (or what has happened) and we therefore have no comment." Some more elegant version of this is what the advice not to speculate presumably means. It's bad advice. Even if you go on to say what you're doing to find out (which you should), you are still refusing to talk about what might happen, how likely it is, how bad it could be, what you'll do if it happens, what you'll want us to do if it happens.... All

these things are speculative. And they are, I think, the very essence of risk communication in an emergency!

Why not just decline to comment until you really know the answers? Because you can't. Like decision-makers, the public demands information in a crisis, even if the information is uncertain. If they do not get it from you, they will get it from someone else — from some anonymous pseudo-expert on the Internet, perhaps.

The problem with speculation isn't that you're talking about things that are uncertain. The problem is that you might be tempted to sound certain. The advice not to speculate, in fact, arose out of a real problem: Sources were sounding like they knew more than they actually knew. They were pretending their speculations were facts. To make matters worse, they tended toward over-optimism, interpreting the uncertainties in a reassuring direction. As more information came out, their over-optimistic speculations looked a lot like reassuring lies. They damaged their credibility, undermined their authority, and devastated their ability to manage the emergency. The advice not to speculate came out of a need to stop this very harmful behavior.

So how do you speculate responsibly?

- a. Make it clear what you know and what you don't know.
- b. Try to replicate in your audience your own understanding of the situation. If you know absolutely nothing about a topic, and have no basis for speculation, say so, and refuse to speculate.
- c. If you have some knowledge, but not certain knowledge, say that. "We're not sure yet what happened. It looks like it's probably X or Y or Z. So far, X seems most likely, for the following reasons. We've ruled out T, U, V, and W, for the following reasons. We haven't yet ruled out Y and Z, though we think they're less likely than X. Of course there are other possibilities we haven't even addressed yet, like P, Q, R, and S; they're long shots so we haven't taken the time yet to rule them out. And then there's always the possibility of something we haven't even thought of. Still, X seems the likeliest, and Y and Z are very much in the running."
- d. If there are discrepant opinions either inside or outside your organization, discuss what they are. Explain what you are doing to respond to these other opinions, or why you think a response isn't necessary. Be clear also about what opinions have achieved a consensus or near-consensus, even though they are still only opinions. In other words, distinguish speculations that everyone you have talked to finds persuasive from speculations that have provoked substantial debate.
- e. Keep emphasizing that you're neither certain nor completely ignorant. Tell what you know and what hypotheses seem likeliest given what you know. Keep saying they're still only hypotheses.
- f. Acknowledge everybody's discomfort with uncertainty — especially when there are decisions to be made that can't wait for certainty. Express the wish that you knew more. Show you understand how badly your audience wishes you knew more.
- g. Explain what you are doing to find out more, and when you hope to know more.

- h. Address worst case scenarios (see "1. Obvious/Here/Future" in "[Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events](#)"). That is, if X is likeliest but Z and Q would be worst (of the options you've considered), say so. Talk about steps you are taking already just in case it turns out to be Z or Q. Talk about steps we can take. Talk also about steps you think it doesn't make sense to take yet, since it's probably not going to turn out to be Z or Q.
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3. Tentativeness versus confidence

For more information on this topic, see:

- "3. Acknowledge Uncertainty" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#3>)
- "4. Share Dilemmas" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part2.htm#4>)

The question of whether or not to speculate is really just a special case of a larger dilemma: Sounding tentative versus sounding certain.

What I often call "the seesaw of risk communication" is your key here (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw>). Do our government leaders and technical experts know what they are doing? When the situation is chaotic and uncertainty is high, someone is going to point out that the experts and authorities are feeling their way. Ideally, that someone should be the experts and authorities themselves. (As a consultant, I have long noticed that clients trust me more when I say I'm not sure.)

Of course sometimes there is no uncertainty to acknowledge. When you are certain or nearly certain, say so. Sounding less confident than you really are is just as bad an idea as sounding over-confident. But experts do not usually make that mistake in a crisis. Professionals are taught to sound confident even when they are not. We imagine that this inspires trust. When people are feeling extremely dependent (patients in an individual health crisis; the whole society in a public health crisis), it does. But when something goes wrong (and things always go wrong) the overconfidence backfires badly. On an individual level, doctors who share their uncertainty, who make the patient into a collaborator, who work against inflated expectations, are less likely to be on the receiving end of malpractice suits. On the societal level, leaders who acknowledge uncertainty, who come across as more humble than arrogant, are less likely to be accused of errors they didn't make, and more likely to be forgiven for the errors they made.

In all fairness, I have to acknowledge that desperate moments do seem to call for resolute leadership that is not overattentive to the complexities of the situation. Many have noted that uncomplicated firmness was a strength of President Bush's style in the days after September 11, 2001. It was, perhaps, less a strength in the weeks and months that followed. Even in crises, I'm skeptical that it is wise to cater to the public's craving for simple answers. What is really needed, I think, is the ability to be simultaneously decisive and unsure, "forward-leaning" and tentative, uncertain but unparalyzed.

Is it possible to carry my tentativeness recommendation too far, to come across as bumbling, timid, out of your depth, indecisive, or terminally self-deprecating? Sure. But you're much likelier not to go far enough, to end up giving the impression that you are arrogant and overconfident. (Just ask yourself how often you have seen other leaders err in each direction.) This is especially true in the stress of an emergency. Professionals tend to sound most

confident, in fact, when they are in doubt and under attack. Confidence is a defense against the uncertainties and the critics. For example, when among their peers in a comfortable environment, most scientists go out of their way to acknowledge the weaknesses of their work and the limitations on their findings; if anything they hedge too much. But put a scientist on the hot seat in a public forum, and suddenly he or she may start sounding omniscient.

Here's a nice example of tentativeness from the November 6, 2001 New York Times. I don't know who is quoted in this paragraph, but the subject is cleaning the Hart Building after its contamination with anthrax spores: "'It's a totally new paradigm and so we're a bit panicked about it until we develop solutions,' said a senior federal health official. Ultimately, the official said, the potential for such microbial assaults and subsequent spread of spores should decline." The reassuring second sentence is all the more reassuring coming as it does from an official who is comfortable confessing that he's "a bit panicked" trying to figure out how to get rid of the spores. And notice the paradox: A leader who casually confesses to being "a bit panicked" doesn't sound panicked at all.

Some key strategies for sounding tentative:

- a. Reserve the word "confident" for things you would bet your mortgage on. Nine times in ten, changing "confident" to "hopeful" will improve your risk communication, help insulate you from attack, and (the paradox of the seesaw) inspire confidence in the rest of us.
- b. Make your content more tentative than your tone. Calmly tell us you're not sure; there's a lot you don't know; much of today's "truth" may be proved wrong by tomorrow. The more explicitly you say these things, the more confident a tone you can afford to use as you say them. Confidently claiming you could easily be wrong inspires trust while alerting us to the genuine uncertainties of the situation. The reverse combination, claiming to be sure in a tone that sounds very unsure, is disastrous.
- c. Don't just acknowledge uncertainty in the abstract ("we are on a fast learning curve") or in the past ("we had to learn a lot over the preceding weeks"). The most important tentativeness is tentativeness about what you're telling us now.
- d. Share dilemmas. (See "5. Suspected/Here/Future" in ["Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events"](#) for more on dilemma-sharing.) If you haven't made a decision yet, say so, outline the options and the pros and cons of each, and ask for help. If you have already decided, but the decision was a close call and could turn out wrong, say that. Still outline the options and the pros and cons of each, making it clear why you decided as you did, but also making it clear that there were some good arguments for a different choice. (Among the dilemmas the CDC had to face during the 2001 anthrax crisis were these: deciding how strenuously to discourage the public from stockpiling antibiotics; deciding which individuals to test, which to medicate, when to stop; deciding which buildings to test, which to close, how to clean, when to reopen. In the early days, I think, the CDC tended to come across as a little more confident than it should have about these decisions. When the agency got around to dilemma-sharing, it sounded like a change in position, even when it was not.)
- e. The purest form of tentativeness is telling people that the decision is a toss-up, that you have no position and no advice to offer. That goes beyond dilemma-sharing; it forces the rest of us to face the dilemma without you. It's still the right thing to do if you have absolutely no basis for judgment, or if there is time to suspend judgment pending further

information. Often, however, you know something but not enough, and you can't afford to wait till you know more. There are decisions to be made and acted upon, both by you and by the public. Be equally forceful, then, about what your decision or your recommendation is and about the regrettable truth that it is grounded in uncertainties and may turn out wrong.

- f. Show your distress at having to be tentative: "How I wish I could give you a definite answer on that...." And show that you can bear the distress. In other words, model the reaction you want us to have as well: You wish you could be sure; you know you can't; you are determined to make necessary decisions and take necessary actions even though you must do so without being sure.
 - g. Show that you are aware of the public's distress: "It must be awful for people to hear how tentative we have to be, how much we have to hedge, because there is still so much we don't know...." Show that you expect the public to be able to bear it too.
 - h. Remember that you are probably not the best judge of the impression you are giving. If you are typical of my clients, you are likely to sound excessively humble to yourself while you're still sounding overconfident to the rest of us. Nor are your colleagues the best judge. Ask a neighbor instead.
 - i. Expect some criticism for being muddled, unsure, confused. The alternative is criticism (often from the same critics) for being cocky, arrogant, dictatorial. You can't win — all you can do is choose which kind of criticism you prefer. Prefer the first kind.
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4. Being alarming versus being reassuring

For more information on this topic, see:

- "1. Don't Over-Reassure" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#1>)
- "2. Put the 'Good News' in Subordinate Clauses" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#2>)
- "16. Err on the Alarming Side" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#16>)
- "22. Never Use the Word 'Safe' without Qualifying It" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part4.htm#22>)

Nowhere is the principle of the seesaw (see <http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw>) more important than in the dilemma of alarm versus reassurance. What's most fundamental here is that when people are ambivalent (that is, when they subscribe to two conflicting beliefs at the same time) they tend to resolve their ambivalence by emphasizing the side others seem to be ignoring. Are people ambivalent about public health emergencies? In the middle of an all-out catastrophe, obviously, there would be little if any ambivalence, and therefore the seesaw wouldn't be your best guide to action. But a much more frequent model is the hypothetical (**obvious/here/future**) emergency, or the ongoing but distant (**obvious/elsewhere/now**) emergency, or the not-sure-if-it's-bad-or-not (**suspected/here/now**) emergency. In all these circumstances, the seesaw will prevail.

Consider the 2001 anthrax attacks, for example. Certainly the attacks were high-outrage. They were (among other outrage characteristics) unknowable, dreaded, in someone else's control, morally relevant, and memorable. Yet people recognized that their personal risk, statistically,

was quite low so far — hence the ambivalence. Reassuring them, riding the confident seat on the seesaw, tended to backfire; it forced the public onto the worried seat.

In such situations, the paradoxical intervention is the one that works. Tell people how scary the situation is, even though the actual numbers are small. And watch them get calmer.

A stunning example of this principle at work has been the Risk Management Program (RMP) of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Under the RMP regulation, chemical plants and similar manufacturing facilities were required (in essence) to figure out the worst possible accident they could have, and then tell their neighbors about it. A worst case scenario is by definition high-consequence; it is also almost always low-probability. These two truths became the two seats on the RMP seesaw. Companies that insisted the risk was low-probability, "so unlikely it's not worth worrying about," found their neighbors insisting worriedly on its high consequence. Often they ended up in contentious negotiations over what prevention and preparedness steps they were willing to take. Companies that understood the seesaw, by contrast, kept their focus on the risk's high consequence: "If this happens and this happens and this happens, all on a day when the wind isn't blowing and the fire department's on strike, just look how many people we could kill!" After a stunned half-minute staring at the plume map, someone would raise his or her hand and ask, "But isn't this really unlikely?" "Well, yes," the smart company spokesperson replied. "But just look at how many people we could kill!" In well under an hour, the typical community audience would pile onto the calm seat of the seesaw, uniting behind the principle that the company should grow up and stop wasting everybody's time with these vanishingly unlikely scenarios.

As I noted earlier, the seesaw is a better guide to **obvious/here/future** or **obvious/elsewhere/now** or **suspected/here/now** emergencies than to **obvious/here/now** emergencies. Does this mean that over-reassurance is the right approach in mid-catastrophe? I don't think so. If things are really bad, people need help bearing it, not denying it. And they need confidence that the authorities are leveling with them, not misleading or babying them. So the prescription for extremely serious situations is gentle, compassionate candor, while the prescription for less extreme situations is to ride the alarming seat on the seesaw. Over-reassurance is never the prescription.

Even if over-reassurance worked (which it doesn't), it is important to remember that an over-reassured public isn't your goal. You want people to be concerned and vigilant (even hypervigilant, at least at first). You want accurate, calm concern now about a possible emergency; during an actual emergency you want manageable fear. Over-reassurance is not the way to get that.

Yet unless you lean over backwards to avoid it, over-reassurance is your likeliest strategy. In a crisis, everyone with influence tends to want to over-reassure, to soothe, to quell the incipient panic they imagine is on its way. Health departments, for example, are usually professional alarmists, mother hens warning their brood about an endless list of health hazards. But in a crisis, they tend to over-reassure. Even journalists abandon their normal preference for hype and hysteria in a crisis, and tend to over-reassure, as they did during the 2001 anthrax attacks. One of the first emergencies I ever worked on was the 1979 Three Mile Island accident. As usual during an emergency (and only during an emergency), the media sat on the reassuring seat of the seesaw. People remember the Three Mile Island media coverage as alarming, not because it was full of warnings, but because it was full of false reassurances. And false reassurances *are* alarming.

If you always knew all there was to know, then being candid and avoiding over-reassurance would add up to telling the whole truth. Unfortunately, often you do not know the whole truth. In particular, you are often asked to judge the seriousness of risks whose seriousness is not yet established. You're going to be wrong sometimes. You have three options: (1) Err on the reassuring side, on the grounds that you should avoid scaring people until you are sure. (2) Make your best guess, equally likely to turn out too alarming or too reassuring. (3) Err on the alarming side.

I've said enough already about why the first choice is a mistake. But I haven't yet explained why the third is better than the second. Risk managers and medical practitioners already know it's better public policy to *be* conservative (that is, cautious, protective); they may not know it's also better risk communication to *sound* conservative. The reason is very straightforward. In a high-outrage situation, having overestimated the seriousness of a risk is a fairly minor problem; it isn't cost-free, but its cost is low. Having underestimated the seriousness of the risk is devastating. The first time a source has to announce that "it's worse than we thought," much credibility is lost; the second time, it's all lost. Having to say it's not as bad as you thought is much more survivable.

Even I wouldn't go so far as to argue that you should proclaim your worst case scenario as if it were your likeliest scenario. But you definitely should present it, and be clear that you haven't yet ruled it out. You should also make sure that less extreme but still worse-than-expected outcomes are presented as likely enough that you don't look like a liar if they materialize. I understand that this is difficult advice to take, and even more difficult advice to sell to the higher-ups in your organization. But the only way not to be caught (in hindsight) over-reassuring the public is to be willing to be seen (in hindsight) as having been excessively cautious.

Some specific advice:

- a. Recognize that you will be tempted to over-reassure, not to over-alarm. So over-compensate. Aim for the alarming seat on the seesaw, and you might wind up closer to the middle. Of course it would be possible to carry this too far. You don't want to come across as excessively depressed, or frazzled and unable to cope, or unrealistically pessimistic. But you are exceedingly unlikely to carry it too far. You're likely not to carry it far enough — to come across as a Pollyanna; as unconcerned and unsympathetic; and when the news turns bad, as dishonest.
- b. When speculating about the future, make sure to put enough emphasis on worst case scenarios and unresolvable uncertainties. Try not to dilute them with meaningless reassurances along the lines of "I'm sure everything will be fine." But avoiding over-reassurance isn't just about your predictions. When describing the past or present, make sure to put enough emphasis on its most negative features. See the glass as half-empty, and the rest of us are likelier to see it as half-full.
- c. Make sure your first communication is the most discouraging communication you will have on the topic. Do this by sharing your worst case scenario — such that you're confident the truth will not turn out worse than what you've described ... which by definition means the truth will almost certainly turn out better. Make sure it's clear that this is your worst case, not your likeliest case, and give the likeliest case and the range of possibilities too.

- d. Give people a sense that you are intentionally and systematically focusing on "what's the worst that can happen," that you consider this a legitimate question, that you are preparing to cope with the worst if it does happen and are simultaneously doing the research you need to do to rule it out. Promise no surprises except good surprises, and by stressing worst cases at the outset, enable yourself to keep the promise.
 - e. Give people the good news too. For the seesaw to work, we need you to give us information to support our taking the optimistic seat, and you have to leave that seat vacant. In mid-crisis, give people the information they need to realize how likely they are to get off easy — all the while focusing your own comments on the possibility that it could get really bad. Later, when the crisis is over, give people the information they need to realize how much worse it might have been — all the while focusing your own comments on how bad it was. One very effective approach is to put the good news in subordinate clauses, with the more alarmist side of the ambivalence in the main clause. "Even though we haven't seen a new anthrax case in X days, it's too soon to say we're out of the woods yet."
 - f. Never say *anything* is "safe." This is just a special case of the principle not to over-reassure. X may be pretty safe, or safer than Y, or safer than it used to be, or safer than the regulatory standard. But it isn't "safe." Nor is it "acceptably safe." The question of "how safe is safe enough?" is not a technical or medical question. It is a values question, answered for society as a whole by the political process, and for the individual by that individual. The seesaw operates here. The question people are likely to ask first is, "Is X safe?" The question you want them to ask is, "How safe is X?" If you answer the first question by insisting that you cannot certify that X is perfectly safe, people will quickly back off their insistence on a dichotomous view of risk and ask you how safe it is. Then you can answer the question — or, if there is no good answer yet, you can present what you know and share the dilemma. By contrast, if you tell people the first question is a stupid question, they'll never get to the smart question; and if you give a falsely reassuring answer to the stupid question ("Yes, it's safe"), you will undermine your credibility and feed their paranoia.
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5. Being human versus being professional

Note: There are no additional references on this topic.

Most professionals are overly preoccupied with looking professional, and insufficiently preoccupied with looking human. And yet it's rare for the public to think an emergency responder or crisis manager was too emotional, too involved, too personal. It's quite common to think he or she was too controlled, too calm, too uncaring. So while "too emotional" certainly exists, it's only a theoretical problem. Too controlled is a practical problem. As usual on this list of dilemmas, find the middle by aiming for the unaccustomed side.

Here are three stories, all of them about government environmental protection officials, all of them, interestingly, women:

Years ago I heard an expert address a public meeting on the question of whether the local water, contaminated with low levels of some industrial toxin, was safe to drink. Someone in the audience interrupted the presentation to ask the speaker, "Would *you* drink this water? Would

you let your kids drink it?" Clearly uncomfortable with the question, she blurted: "I'm here as a technical expert. I'm not here as a person." (Fortunately she heard herself, blushed, apologized, and even answered the question.)

At a different meeting, a mother was testifying about her daughter's leukemia: how awful it is to watch your child sicken and wonder whether it might be the emissions from the nearby waste treatment plant, and all the experts can say is they don't know, they're not sure, there's no proof. She was weeping, and many in the audience were tearing up ... but not the hearing examiner, who remained calm, aloof, unruffled. Her only comment came at the end: "Your five minutes are up. Thank you for your input."

At a third meeting, an agency spokesperson was being given a hard time by angry townspeople. After a few hours of hostile rhetorical questions, she asked for a break. "I need a few minutes alone," she said. "What's happening tonight is important and legitimate, and I really want to hear all your criticisms and bring them back to my agency. But it's hard for me. I don't want to start crying. That would be terribly unprofessional. I just need some time to pull myself together." When the hearing resumed after the break, the criticisms continued, but the tone was much more substantive instead of personally hostile.

Some strategies for being more personal:

- a. Let your emotions show. Don't fake them. Just stop faking not having them. When the content of what you are saying, or hearing, or experiencing merits an emotional response, ask yourself what you are feeling. And then (unless there is a solid reason not to do so), let it show. Leaders who seem to be without emotion are useless as role models for a public trying to cope with its emotions. Show that you are feeling what you're feeling, and show that your feelings don't keep you from doing your job.
- b. Be particularly sure to let your compassion show, not just for the most obvious victims and their families, but also for less directly affected people. Again, don't fake it; just stop hiding it.
- c. Letting your emotions show isn't the same thing as describing them. Your language, demeanor, and nonverbal communication should match the situation. The word "compassion," for example, is pretty bureaucratic, and probably won't sound compassionate. Ditto for "The Department would like to take a moment to express its sympathy for...." "My heart goes out to...." is better.
- d. Fear and sadness are normal responses to many kinds of emergencies. People need to recognize these emotions in themselves, accept these emotions in themselves, bear these emotions in themselves, and do what needs to be done. You can best help by showing that you are feeling these emotions, too; that you can recognize, accept and bear them; and that you are still doing what needs to be done. If you're not feeling these emotions, just keep in mind that your response is strange. If you are, let it show.
- e. Even anger deserves to be expressed. If people are questioning your handling of the emergency, an angry response certainly isn't the ideal response, but it's better than a coldly courteous response.
- f. Talk about yourself — though not to the point where you seem to think the most interesting thing about the emergency is that you're on the scene. Seeming faceless is

the likelier problem than seeming self-involved. You have a life, a family, a professional history. Let them show.

- g. Use personal pronouns. "I" and "me" and "my" are better than an organizational we/us/our.
 - h. Tell stories. (Be careful about accuracy and privacy; you don't want your stories to rebound negatively.) Anecdotes convey emotion, and personhood, much better than abstractions. Where were you when the emergency broke? What was it like as your office debated how best to proceed? Have you had a chance yet to check in with your own family, and what did they say to you? What vignettes have you seen that inspired or worried you?
 - i. Look the way you feel. If you're sleepless and a little haggard, let it show by not always stopping to shave/put on a suit/put on stockings/put on makeup before appearing on camera. Again, it is possible to carry this too far and look like you're losing it. But the far more common problem is looking too aloof, above the fray.
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6. Being apologetic versus being defensive ... or versus being forward-looking

For more information on this topic, see:

- "6. Acknowledge the Sins of the Past" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part2.htm#6>)
- "7. Be Contrite or at least Regretful, not Defensive" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part2.htm#7>)
- "8. Ride the Preparedness Seesaw" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part2.htm#8>)

I routinely advise my clients to acknowledge anything negative about their own performance that the audience already knows, or that critics know and will tell the audience when they see fit. In fact, I advise clients to "wallow" in the negatives until their stakeholders, not just the clients themselves, are ready to move on.

In public relations, as opposed to stakeholder relations, this is not sensible advice. At most, PR professionals recommend acknowledging negative information briefly before transitioning to something more positive. Why wallow in a bad piece of news that most of the audience hasn't even found out about? Stakeholders, on the other hand, are assumed to be interested enough, and critical enough, that they are bound to learn the bad news anyway. So wallowing in it makes sense.

Whether to acknowledge negatives that nobody knows and nobody is likely to find out, to blow the whistle on your own dirty secrets, is a tougher call. Leaving aside questions of law and ethics, risk communicators estimate that bad news does about twenty times as much damage if you try to keep it secret and fail than if you own up to it forthrightly. It follows that secrecy pays for itself only if an organization can achieve a 95% success rate at keeping secrets. If you fall short of 95%, as I think most organizations do, then blowing the whistle on yourself is cost-effective.

While secrecy is usually a bad risk, it isn't crazy. What is crazy is to reveal the secret and then behave as if it were still a secret. If you're going to reveal it at all, wallow in it.

Of course the negatives you're likeliest to wish you didn't have to wallow in are your mistakes. Inevitably, the people managing an emergency are going to make mistakes. More importantly, they are going to do things (or fail to do things) that weren't mistakes, but nonetheless turned out badly. Maybe you couldn't have known better, but in retrospect you wish you had. Maybe you did absolutely the right thing, even in retrospect, but still it didn't turn out as well as you'd hoped.

In the heat of a crisis, these mistakes and sort-of mistakes aren't going to be the focus of attention. People will be focused on their own safety, and they won't want to second-guess the authorities they're hoping will save them. In fact, a working definition of the end of an emergency is when the attention turns more to the past than the future, and the recriminations begin. When that happens, it is important not to fight it. The best strategy, in fact, is to lead it.

In the 2001 anthrax attacks, the CDC had one piece of negative information that was especially important to acknowledge: the fact that in the early days of the attack the agency was in error about whether anthrax spores could escape a sealed envelope to threaten ... and kill ... postal workers. This wasn't a secret; the only question was how often CDC spokespeople chose to mention it. My advice at the time: The more often you do so, the better. I think some CDC officials saw this advice as unfair or unfeeling. I didn't mean it to be. I realize both how difficult it is to guess right about new risks and how painful it is to have guessed wrong. It was nonetheless essential, I thought, for the CDC to refer often to this error, so the rest of us didn't feel compelled to do so ourselves. I actually went further. When asked for its judgment about other matters where the science was unsettled, I suggested, the CDC should remind us that its judgment had been fatally flawed before. As far as I know, nobody took this advice. And perhaps it went too far. Certainly in traditional public relations, a source that incessantly reminded reporters of prior errors might well provoke them to look for a more confident source. Nonetheless, I think the risk of dwelling too much on your past sins is a small risk, both in terms of its probability and in terms of its consequence. The big risk is that you will mention them too seldom.

Mentioning them, moreover, isn't enough. You need to be sorry about them. Ride the seesaw of blame. Go ahead and give us the information that shows you did your best, you couldn't have helped it, it wasn't really your fault, etc. Just put this information in a subordinate clause, while in the main clause you regretfully blame yourself.

There are many real-world examples of the seesaw of blame. In the famous case of the Tylenol poisonings, several people died after someone added cyanide to random Tylenol capsules. The CEO of Johnson & Johnson held a video news conference in which he took moral responsibility for the poisonings, insisting that it was J&J's job to have tamper-proof packaging. Millions of people who watched the clip on the news that night undoubtedly said to themselves, "It's not his fault, it was some madman." The Tylenol brand recovered.

Some specific advice:

- a. When the worst is over, the recriminations begin. Focus on what went wrong, and especially on what you did wrong, so that the public will be freed to focus on other things.
- b. Concede your errors and sort-of errors as the crisis evolves. Point out to journalists and stakeholders what you missed or mishandled; they will usually change the subject, far

more interested in what will happen next. Your contrition in real time will make your errors less newsworthy and blameworthy later, when the crisis is over.

- c. In addition to acknowledging the sins you have committed, it is important also to acknowledge the sins you have been accused of but have not committed — that is, acknowledge what critics have said, and why it is understandable that they feel that way, before you argue that they are mistaken. (Defending yourself against mistaken charges works in proportion to how visibly you concede valid charges.) In the 2001 anthrax attacks, the claim that class or race underlay the difference in how anthrax was handled in Congressional buildings versus how it was handled in postal facilities was the sort of charge that needed to be acknowledged and sympathetically rebutted ... not ignored.
- d. Try not to get into a dispute over what was a "mistake" or "your fault" and what wasn't. If someone jostles you in a crowded elevator, causing you to step on the toe of the person behind you, you turn to that person and say "I'm sorry," not "It's not my fault." There was discussion at the CDC about whether to call it a mistake that no one at the agency realized anthrax spores could get through closed envelopes. I suggested that the CDC didn't necessarily have to call it a mistake, but shouldn't object when others called it a mistake.
- e. Cover all three areas in which you may have made mistakes: preparedness, prevention, and management. As a rule, management is usually the most important — what did you do wrong as you tried to cope with the emergency? But *mea culpas* about preparedness and prevention are often neglected. Consider September 11, for example. The entire society feels it was insufficiently prepared for terrorist attacks, and insufficiently serious about preventing such attacks. We are ashamed of having been so naive, so blasé. Shame normally gets projected — so we blame the government for the blame we all share. To avoid excessive blame, paradoxically, you must take your share readily. This is of course the seesaw again, and it applies to most emergencies, not just terrorism. If you blame yourself for not having taken preparedness seriously enough, the rest of us blame you less; we notice the ways in which you were well-prepared more; we acknowledge our own lack of preparedness more; and we are more supportive of funding now for improved preparedness. It even makes sense to blame yourself for having failed to convince us, beforehand, of the need for more money to fund preparedness and prevention efforts.
- f. Being sorry has three components: (1) Regret — you wish it hadn't happened. (2) Sympathy — you feel bad for the people who suffered as a result. (3) Responsibility — you acknowledge that you are at least partly to blame. Try for all three. Note, however, that these words themselves don't work any more: "regret" sounds more lawyerly than regretful; "sympathy" sounds more smarmy than sympathetic; "responsibility" sounds more bureaucratic than responsible. Like "sincerity," these are all virtues that need to be demonstrated, not claimed.
- g. If you can't get permission to concede responsibility, at least show regret and sympathy. Something went wrong on your watch. Maybe it wasn't your fault, maybe it was unavoidable, but something went wrong on your watch. You need to tell us you're sorry.
- h. The worst response to your mistakes and sort-of mistakes is defensiveness. In mid-crisis there is a balance to be struck between acknowledging what went wrong and focusing on what's to come. After the crisis, acknowledging what went wrong is properly

a major focus. At no time is it useful to focus on the past in a defensive way, claiming you couldn't have realized, you handled other things impeccably, etc. The seesaw rules here. In whatever time is devoted to assessing your performance, your role is to be self-critical, even as you give people the information with which to judge you less harshly than you judge yourself. "Even though we did pretty well with X and Y, I just can't forget how badly Z turned out. How I wish I could decide that one over again with what I know now...."

- i. Be especially careful not to be defensive about bioterrorism preparedness. Before September 11, virtually everything that was written by bioterrorism defense experts argued aggressively that our country was insufficiently prepared. Since September 11, critics have asserted that we were — and are — insufficiently prepared. And suddenly some of the experts have felt compelled to claim otherwise. What is happening here is that some bioterrorism authorities are letting their critics determine their seat on the seesaw: When critics "accuse" them of being unprepared, they forget that they agree, or agree in part; instead, they reflexively climb onto the yes-we-are-prepared seat. Defensiveness about preparedness, of course, backfires into news stories about lack of preparedness.
- j. Don't be in too much of a hurry to shift from what went wrong to what lessons can be learned. Let the public propel this shift, when the public is ready. You have to wallow enough first in what went wrong. Being forward-looking isn't as harmful as being defensive, but there's still a world of difference between "we messed up" and "we learned a lot."

7. Decentralization versus centralization

Note: There are no additional references on this topic.

How centralized or decentralized emergency management should be is a fundamental question that goes way beyond communication issues. But communication policy is greatly affected by how this dilemma is resolved.

Consider the three "pure" positions: (1) One designated organization makes all the decisions, and the others bow out or help. (2) All the relevant organizations make the decisions jointly, and then speak with one voice. (3) Each relevant organization does and says what it thinks best. None of the pure positions is viable, and most emergencies are handled by a compromise among the three. One organization is dominant; the others have some impact beyond just helping; a certain amount of individual autonomy is preserved. A compromise is pretty obviously the right answer. The question is how much of each of the three pure positions the compromise should contain.

My own view is that the centralizing impulse usually goes too far and the autonomy/ decentralization impulse not far enough. Some emergency management decisions, obviously, have to be centralized or shared — you either evacuate or don't, vaccinate or don't, quarantine or don't. Communication, on the other hand, *can* be decentralized if the decision-makers want it to be.

There are two core communication questions here. One is whether lots of information sources are permitted to operate independently. The other is whether dissent and alternative views are permitted to be expressed.

The conventional wisdom is no and no: centralize communication so all information comes from one source; and keep dissent (especially dissent within the organization) as invisible as possible. My judgment is that these two positions, if executed rigidly, tend to backfire. As much as you can, I would decentralize the communication and let the dissent show.

I feel especially strongly about letting the dissent show. No doubt there are times when this is harmful, or at least painful, but far more often it does significant good. After all, it is part of the emergency management job to consider all the options. Decisions are hard and you want the public to know they're hard. What, then, are you communicating when you claim or imply that there has been no internal disagreement about how to proceed? That you don't have the full range of opinion/expertise represented in your organization? That those with minority views feel obliged to be silent? It's got to be one or the other. Which is supposed to reflect well on you?

Pretending that the answers are obvious when they aren't is very bad risk communication. It diminishes credibility and trust. It is especially damaging if the decision turns out badly, and we are left imagining you never even considered the alternative. This pretense of internal unanimity would be devastatingly harmful if it were successful. The only thing that makes it not so bad is that nobody believes it anyway. If yours is a reasonably well-run organization, we tend to assume you have the usual and appropriate internal debates, and just prefer to pretend that you don't. But we will think even better of your organization and its decisions if you abandon the pretense.

I realize that political leaders (most leaders of all sorts, in fact) tend to confuse the obligation to go along with a decision once it's made, to implement it without undercutting it, with the (presumed) obligation to pretend to agree with it, to pretend to have always agreed with it. The battle to let dissent show is one you're likely to lose. Nonetheless, it is worth fighting.

More specifically:

- a. Give up entirely on controlling who will be a source. In a crisis, the media rely on any source they can find. That includes your employees; reporters typically take down license numbers in your parking lot, identify the cars' owners, and telephone them at home. Individual members of the public, meanwhile, mobilize their own information networks of friends and neighbors. Everyone is getting information from everyone. It is usually futile to urge *any* prospective sources to decline to provide information. They'll probably end up talking anyway; even if they don't, their reticence will tend to give an impression of secrecy and danger. Furthermore, if most people decline to comment, the outliers who are willing to comment will have that much more impact.
- b. Instead, let everyone tell what they know — and work hard to make sure everyone knows a lot. Devote substantial effort to briefing everybody you can, not just once but often. Compile lists of people who are likely to be important sources for the media, and work hard to keep them well-informed. Trying to "control" the message by getting everyone briefed makes sense. Trying to control the messenger by telling others to shut up and refer all questions to you rarely makes sense.

- c. Include your critics on the briefing list. I routinely urge my clients to fax or email updated information to their worst enemies as often as they can. Reporters are bound to call these "enemies" for comment — and their comment is likely to be less off-base and less damaging if it is informed by good information than if it is not. Your critics will still be critical, of course. It's just harder for them to take potshots when they know what's going on.
 - d. When a decision is obvious and nobody disagrees, say so. When the decision is tough and there is lots of debate, a far more common state of affairs, say that instead. Let the dissent show. Go out of your way to make it show, to demonstrate that the choices are difficult and that your organization knows it. Think of this as a kind of dilemma-sharing (see "5. Suspected/Here/Future" in "[Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events](#)").
 - e. Distinguish robust debate from irreconcilable disagreement. People or organizations that cannot live with a decision may have no choice but to go public, or quit, or do whatever their convictions tell them they must do. People or organizations that can live with a decision, implement it, and explain it, shouldn't be forced to pretend they supported it. Everyone needs to learn to say things like this: "Some of us wanted to do X, for the following reasons. Some wanted to do Y, for the following reasons. After a lot of debate, we decided on X. I was one of the ones who thought Y was a better choice, but I lost that one. Whoever turns out right, it was a tough call, and the decision has been made. We're doing X."
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8. Democracy and individual control versus expert decision-making

For more information on this topic, see:

- "18. Give People Things to Do" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part4.htm#18>)
- "20. Harness the Hypervigilance ... to Disentangle it from the Paranoia" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part4.htm#20>)
- "21. Ask More of People" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part4.htm#21>)

Closely related to the centralization/decentralization dilemma is the question of how much of the emergency your organization should manage on behalf of everyone, and how much you should leave for the public to manage itself. This may not seem like a dilemma at all. Managing the emergency is your organization's job, after all. It's your field. You have the expertise, the responsibility, the mandate. Nonetheless, there is much to be said for leaving as much to the public as you can.

Who should decide how our society responds to emergencies — the experts or the society as a whole? How many of the policy questions you confront, including the communication policy questions I have been focusing on, should be submitted for public dialogue and democratic decision? Some of this is rooted in the distinction between technical questions and values questions, between science and "trans-science." Inevitably, experts have difficulty drawing this boundary, supposing that their expertise extends to the fundamental values questions about how that expertise ought to be used.

Consider that idiosyncratic case of chicken pox that might be smallpox. Experts are needed to assess many questions: the probability that it is smallpox; the magnitude of the ensuing

epidemic if it is and no quarantine is called; the damage to be expected from the quarantine itself. But the underlying question of when to err on the side of caution and when to avoid over-protectiveness is a values question, especially when the answers to the technical questions are so uncertain. So why shouldn't it be a public/political question?

Think about universal smallpox vaccination in these terms. The risk posed by a nationwide vaccination program is a technical question. So is the risk posed by failing to have such a program. Maybe it's even a "technical" question how likely terrorists are to possess a usable smallpox weapon, though the expertise required has more to do with intelligence-gathering than with medicine, and the error bar around any assessment of this probability is huge. But deciding whether or not these various expert assessments justify a mass vaccination program, (that is, deciding whether to endure the high-probability moderate-consequence risks of vaccinating or the low-probability huge-consequence risks of not vaccinating) sounds like a values decision to me — the sort of decision democracies leave to the political process.

All this is just as true locally as it is nationally. The professionals who are planning how to manage future emergencies should give real thought to which decisions they think should be up to them and which should be democratized. Obviously this includes the sorts of emergency communication planning decisions we are addressing here.

I am not saying merely that you ought to have a public involvement process linked to your planning process. Some sort of public involvement process is virtually guaranteed by law and custom, but there are varying degrees of public involvement. One planning agency is confident that the experts know best; the stakeholders and the public have a right to comment, but the goal of the exercise is to preserve as much of the draft plan as possible. Another planning agency sees many policy questions as more political than technical; it asks questions instead of defending its draft answers; it seeks input earlier and embraces change more easily. They may both have the same public involvement *process*, but they certainly do not have the same degree of public involvement. They will inevitably end up with quite different emergency management and emergency communication plans — and with quite different levels of public understanding and support.

The question I have been addressing so far is who should decide policy. Should the experts decide what everybody must do, or should a democratic political process decide what everybody must do? Sometimes those are the only options. Other times there is a third option — let everyone decide for himself or herself. One possible decision about smallpox vaccination, for example, is to require it. Another possible decision is to forbid it. The choice between the two could be made democratically, or it could be made by experts. The third option is making vaccination optional. Then the choice gets made by each individual. Of course you'd need a protocol for informed consent, and a procedure to keep newly vaccinated people from endangering their unconsenting neighbors. If you assume these and other wrinkles can be ironed out, is voluntariness a good option?

At least in communication terms, voluntariness is the best option. One of the axioms of risk perception is that people are likeliest to overreact to a risky situation when they feel no personal control. Absence of control increases the probability of denial or panic; it increases the paranoia; it increases the chances that people will mistrust (and even disobey) your management decisions. There is a seesaw here too, of course. If you insist on making all the decisions yourself, people are likely to demand more autonomy. If you give them more autonomy, they are likely to ask what you think they should do, and complain if you say you're not sure. The second problem is a better one to have.

At a minimum, you can give people some sense of control by suggesting something they can do. One of the most vivid characteristics of most people's response to the 9/11 attacks was a powerful desire to do something — something to help the victims, and something to protect themselves and their loved ones. A significant piece of the misery that was (in my judgment) more prevalent than fear in the aftermath of 9/11 was the absence of something to do. Action binds anxiety. This is a major reason why it is wiser to "recruit" people's worry and hypervigilance than to try to "allay" it. Even more important, action reduces denial. Action reduces the *need* to deny; if I can do something to protect myself, I don't need to pretend there's nothing to worry about. People who take action in an emergency are telling themselves that the danger is real (otherwise the action would be unnecessary) and that the danger is manageable (otherwise the action would be futile). This is exactly what we want people to believe.

To give people an even stronger sense of control, don't just offer them something to do. Offer them a *choice* of things to do, so they have decisions to make as well. Ideally, your menu of protective responses ranges around a recommended middle. "X is the minimum precaution; at least do X. Y is more protective, and we think wiser; we recommend Y. Z is more protective still, and we think a little excessive, but if you're especially vulnerable or especially concerned, by all means go that extra mile and do Z." The X-Y-Z choice tells people how concerned you think they ought to be, the level of concern represented by protective response Y. But it also gives people permission to be more or less concerned than you think they ought to be — and for whatever level of concern they are experiencing, it prescribes a set of precautions. For those of us who are excessively fearful, you are not trying to "allay" our fears, which to the best of my knowledge cannot be done directly. Instead, you are helping us manage our fears, by giving us precautions to take that match our level of fearfulness. Paradoxically, that allays our fears.

Part of why people calm down when given decisions they must make is that they are so obviously expected to calm down and make decisions. This, too, is part of the dilemma of democracy and individual control versus expert decision-making. Deciding and doing everything yourself disempowers the public. Like over-reassurance, it is a kind of infantilization. It's insulting and demoralizing. If you ask more of people, by contrast, they will generally rise to the occasion. They'll handle the emergency better, recover more quickly, feel better about themselves, and feel better about you.

In a nutshell:

- a. Distinguish technical questions from values questions, and do everything you can to consult with your community in advance about the latter. You may get some good advice on the technical questions too, but on the values questions, public preferences should be determinative. During an ongoing emergency, there won't be time to consult widely and deeply. If you have consulted widely and deeply beforehand, people will feel you are implementing their policies, not your own. And they'll be right.
- b. Be alert to the natural tendency of experts to broaden the definition of their own expertise into questions where they have no special qualifications. (Some of what I am writing here may fit this description!) Every time your organization is tempted to "pull rank" in the making of a tough decision, think about whether the rank is deserved.
- c. Design your public involvement processes to be genuinely consultative rather than pro forma. Come to people with unanswered questions and tentative proposals, not refined

plans you'll feel a need to defend. Consult earlier than you think you're ready, rather than risk waiting too long. Measure the success of the consultation by how much, not how little, gets changed. Make no decision unilaterally unless you feel you must.

- d. Recognize the special value of individual autonomy. Sometimes a decision really must be uniform; a voluntary quarantine, for example, is not a quarantine at all. But don't take decision-making control out of the individual's hands unless you absolutely have to. Too often the policy debate is between "mandatory" and "forbidden." Where it is feasible, "optional" is better than either.
- e. Always offer people things to do. I understand this may be difficult. Suggesting actions that are harmful, or even useless, can obviously backfire badly; it's an ethical problem and a credibility problem. In hindsight, it was probably a mistake to let people give blood in the days after September 11, only to learn later that their blood wasn't needed and had to be thrown out. But action is a powerful antidote to denial, panic, depression, and paranoia. Finding something you can responsibly ask people to do in an emergency is a major, not a minor, task — one well worth planning for in advance.
- f. If you can think of no useful "real" action to ask of people, consider symbolic actions. The danger of symbolic behavior is that it can substitute for genuinely needed real behavior. Do we truly want people attending candlelight vigils instead of training as EMTs? But symbolic behavior can also be a path from paralysis to genuine action. Moreover, if there is no genuine action called for, symbolic behavior can be crucial. The risk of jingoism notwithstanding, it is impossible to overstate the emotional importance of all those flags in the days after 9/11.
- g. Even when the risk is small, consider actions you can suggest for those who are worried. I understand that many professionals consider it inappropriate, even unethical, to prescribe for a fear they deem fanciful. Even if the prescription is harmless, you may feel you have no right to dignify mistaken concerns. Obviously you shouldn't do anything you consider unethical. But when people are fearful — whether their fear is justified or not — precaution-taking is a lifeline. And the absence of any prescribed precaution is terrifying. "Even though the statistical risk is tiny, it can't hurt to spray your mail with disinfectant."
- h. Whenever possible, offer people a choice of behaviors, so their decision-making ability is called for as well as their ability to act. Recommended behaviors should ideally be bracketed by alternatives that are less protective (for those who feel you are overreacting) and more protective (for those who feel you are underreacting). Always try to recommend a range of protective behaviors, so people can exercise their own judgment and autonomy without rebelling. The menu of available actions should address the full range of emotional reactions to the emergency. Precautions address fear; ways to help others address empathy; still other actions may be needed to address guilt, anger, hurt, etc. (For more on these emotions, see "[Beyond Panic Prevention: Addressing Emotion in Emergency Communication](#).")
- i. When trying to get people to act, go beyond suggesting something to do. Tell them how to do it. "Mobilizing information" is information that helps people do things — the telephone number of the blood bank, the time of the hearing, the instructions for storing the antibiotics. People often make a tentative decision to act, and then stop because they're not sure how to begin. Mobilizing information gets them over the hump.

- j. Harness the hypervigilance. When people are frightened, they become hypervigilant, watching for trouble. What will happen next? What *might* happen next? What precautions can I take? What do I need to know in order to protect myself? The best response to hypervigilance is to harness it, to approvingly suggest things to look for and worry about and protect against, and protocols for doing so. Hypervigilance is an appropriate response to a new, scary threat. It is a much healthier response than denial, which is why you should try to harness it, not disparage it or "allay" it. But it still has high psychic costs. It comes entangled with paranoia; it can flip into denial or even mushroom into panic; at best it gives you headaches and ulcers. The point is that if hypervigilance is accepted, legitimated, and harnessed, it settles faster into something tolerable — the new vigilance. Watching for trouble, in other words, is an important kind of action. Tell people what to watch for, and how to watch.
- k. Expect most people to be able to cope — able to help you make decisions, able to make their own, able to carry them out. In short, expect most people to be able to bear the risk. Make sure your communications imply this expectation. Note, however, that expecting us to be able to cope isn't the same as telling us that coping is easy. You should acknowledge that it's natural to be afraid, even natural to feel we're not up to the job. Give us permission to find the situation unbearable, but let us know you expect we can probably bear it.
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9. Planning for denial and misery versus planning for panic

For more information on this topic, see:

- "9. Acknowledge and Legitimate People's Fears" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part2.htm#9>)
- "10. Surface the Underlying Fear of Future Bioterrorism" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#10>)
- "11. Be Gentle about That Awful Future" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#11>)
- "12. Surface and Legitimate the Misery" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#12>)
- "14. Stop Trying to Allay Panic" (<http://www.psandman.com/col/part3.htm#14>)

In another chapter (see "[Beyond Panic Prevention: Addressing Emotion in Emergency Communication](#)"), I have described the range of emotional reactions that emergencies tend to provoke. I argue there that panic is often expected but seldom experienced. Denial and misery, on the other hand, are often experienced but seldom expected.

Of course you need to be alert for exceptions; panic is far less common than we imagine, but it does happen. And you need to be prepared for other reactions entirely — anger, guilt, hurt, etc. Still, the big dilemma here is between planning for panic on the one hand and planning for denial and misery on the other.

The literature on disaster communication is replete with unfulfilled expectations of panicking publics. It turns out that people nearly always behave extremely well in crisis. Recall how people behaved in lower Manhattan the morning of September 11! The condition most conducive to panic, moreover, isn't grim news. People are likeliest to panic (though still not all that likely) when a dire outcome seems highly probable but not absolutely certain, and they cannot tell what to do to optimize their chances of survival. When we feel the authorities are

telling us the truth and it is clear what we should do, panic is unlikely ... even if the truth is very bad and the optimal action isn't very likely to work. But when we feel the authorities are giving us double-messages (we sense the risk is dire but the experts say it's not; we can think of protective actions but the experts say not to do them), then panic becomes more likely. When authorities start hiding bad news in order to prevent panic, they are likely to exacerbate the risk of panic in the process.

Panic is rare, but fear isn't. And extremely high levels of fear can lead to something much more common than panic — denial. That psychological circuit breaker gets tripped. The most dangerous thing about denial is that it looks a lot like apathy. So you may be tempted to respond with ever-scarier warnings — a reasonable response to apathy, but a devastatingly wrong response to denial, since it only forces the recipient deeper into denial.

The strongest antidote to denial is, paradoxically, the legitimation of fear. If it's okay to be afraid, then I don't have to deny my fear and can find ways to tolerate it instead. When people are afraid, therefore, the worst thing to do is pretend they're not; second worst is to tell them they shouldn't be. Both of these responses leave people alone with their fears, and thus make it likelier that they will retreat into denial.

You can legitimate people's fears even as you tell them their fears are excessive (if they are). Timothy Paustian at the University of Wisconsin has a page on his web site on anthrax (www.bact.wisc.edu/microtextbook/disease/anthrax.html). My wife, Dr. Jody Lanard, happened on the site in early November 2001, and sent Dr. Paustian some unsolicited risk communication advice. He changed the site. Here is one before-and-after comparison. (The breezy tone isn't an addition; the original had the same tone.)

Before: However, it will be very unlikely that you will receive one of these letters. Think about how many pieces of mail go out and how many people there are. Your chances are very low.

After: You know it's unlikely that you will receive one of these letters, but you're still scared. You know how many pieces of mail go out, and how many people there are, but you can't completely shake that inner worry. You know your chances are very low, but you find yourself reaching cautiously for the envelope, and you feel ... just a little nuts. Welcome to the human race.

By giving people permission to be excessively alarmed about their mail, while still telling them why they needn't worry, the revised version is far likelier to actually reassure.

Just as important as the fear/panic/denial complex of emotions is the empathy/misery/depression complex. As I have already noted (see "3. Empathy, Misery, and Depression" in "[Beyond Panic Prevention: Addressing Emotion in Emergency Communication](#)"), one of the principal reactions to September 11 was and is a sense of shared misery. Most people expect to survive whatever terrorists throw at us. But we expect to have to watch a succession of terrorist attacks on CNN. Whether or not life got scarier after 9/11, it certainly got more miserable. To a lesser but significant extent, all calamities provoke misery.

The first step in addressing and ameliorating the misery, I think, is recognizing, acknowledging, and legitimating it — that is, sharing it. But sharing it doesn't mean wallowing in it, or falling apart because of it. Share the misery calmly, and model that it can be borne. The best example here is New York's then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, asked about the number of casualties

just hours after the World Trade Center attacks. "More than we can bear," he said — but he was bearing it. Giuliani's impact in the days that followed resulted not just from his calm and his competence and his compassion, but from the fact that these traits were accompanied by his readily detectable pain, his misery, and his ability to bear it.

In sum:

- a. In preparing for emergencies, worry less about panic and more about denial and misery. You still want to watch for panic, of course, and you should have a contingency plan for preventing it if it starts to look likely. For that matter, you need to watch for the full range of possible emotional reactions. Nonetheless, denial and misery are the ones that will probably require the most attention.
- b. To prevent and ameliorate denial, your task is to legitimate fear. Even when the fear is totally unjustified, it doesn't respond well to being ignored, nor does it respond well to criticism, mockery, or statistics. If a child thinks there are monsters in the closet, a smart parent doesn't shrug off the fear or insist that monsters are very rare. You turn on all the lights, take your child by the hand, and check the closet together. When the fear has some basis, ignoring it and disparaging it are even less effective approaches. You don't have to tell people they are right that X is deadly if you're pretty sure they're wrong. Do not emphasize that they're wrong either. Emphasize that it is normal, human, and close to universal to be frightened of X. Then, in that subordinate clause, give your reasons why the risk is low.
- c. Address denial indirectly. Assume I am fearful and don't know it (which is what denial means). If you pretend I am not fearful, you're allying with the denial and strengthening it. If you tell me not to be fearful, you are challenge the denial, which also strengthens it. Labeling my feelings will similarly backfire. If I am in denial, telling me, "You are afraid," (or even "You're right to be afraid") is too direct, and will yield a seesaw response that will only make the denial worse: "I am not afraid!" Telling me, "You're in denial," has the same problem; people in denial will deny being in denial, and telling them so will probably push them deeper into it. Address the fears in a deflected form:

"It is only natural for many people to feel...."
"I have talked to a lot of people who feel...."
"Even though I keep telling myself all the statistical reasons why I shouldn't be too concerned, even I sometimes feel...."

These formulations make the person who is fearful and even the person who is in denial feel understood (but not exposed), thereby ameliorating the fear and the denial.
- d. Don't neglect the other antidotes to denial: action (something to do); efficacy (a sense that you can do it); love (someone or something to act for), and anger (someone or something to act against). In any particular emergency, some of these may feel more appropriate to mobilize than others, but all four are worth considering.
- e. Watch for empathic overreactions (misery, even depression) and distinguish them from fear and its relatives. Telling a miserable person to calm down misses the point; we're calm already. Telling a miserable person that the odds of survival are good even in a worst case scenario also misses the point; we don't expect to die — we expect to have to live through the deaths of others. Telling a miserable person to get on with his or her

life is similarly off-base; we are getting on with our lives, but we're carrying a dead weight of misery. The prescription for misery: (1) Acknowledge and help us acknowledge that misery is part of what we are feeling; (2) Affirm that in a situation like this misery is appropriate to feel; (3) Let us know you feel it too; (4) Expect us (and yourself) to bear it, and in time to get past it; and (5) Suggest empathic actions, ways we can help others.

- f. Remember that small emergencies sometimes provoke excessive reactions (such as misery and denial) because they seem like harbingers of bigger emergencies to come. The anthrax attacks of 2001, for example, were widely seen even by experts as a pilot or precursor. Millions are still waiting for the other shoe to drop. A small bioterrorism crisis is thus a forerunner of a big bioterrorism crisis. People rightly see it that way, but they shy away from their own clear vision, retreating either into denial or into a halfway position that overreacts to the small crisis and ignores the implicit threat of a bigger one. Responding agencies should do what they can to bring the underlying concern to the surface. But gently! Just as when you're confirming a bad diagnosis, you need to give people this bad news gently — clearly and crisply, unmistakably, but still gently. You do not want to drive people further into denial or make them even more miserable.
 - g. Take note that the most extreme emotional responses to emergencies, such as clinical depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), require the intervention of trained therapists. Misery and denial are within your purview, and my purview, as communicators. Depression and PTSD are not.
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10. Erring on the side of caution versus taking chances

Note: There are no additional references on this topic.

This is perhaps the most fundamental of all the dilemmas on my list. It is not mostly about communication; it's about protectiveness. Still, communicators inevitably must face it, and sometimes they must help the rest of their organization face it.

At stake is the age-old question: How safe is safe enough? In particular, the question is what to do when you're not sure how bad the risk might be, maybe not even sure there's a risk at all (that idiosyncratic case of chicken pox I keep mentioning). If you wait until you're sure, it may be too late — too late to quarantine, for example. If you act before you're sure, you may well be overreacting.

This is not a problem only with emergencies. It is the core question behind the global warming controversy, among others.

It's not entirely fair to frame this as a choice between caution and taking chances, though that's the way it is typically framed. The real dilemma is that the "cautious" alternative has a high probability of doing modest damage, while the "risk-taking" alternative entails a much lower probability of much more serious damage. To oversimplify grossly, assume that the quarantine will do X amount of damage (expense, disruption, emotional trauma, even some deaths), whether or not it turns out to be needed. Assume that the smallpox, if it's smallpox, will do 10,000 times as much damage if you do not quarantine, and no damage at all if you do. Assume that we estimate the odds that this weird case of chicken pox is actually smallpox at one-in-ten-thousand. In quantitative risk assessment terms, it is a statistical toss-up: Do X

amount of damage for sure, or take a one-in-ten-thousand chance of doing 10,000 times that much damage. Which one is really more "cautious" than the other? Which one is wiser? What probability of killing thousands of people should we tolerate before we decide to inconvenience millions and, almost certainly, kill a few?

This is a very difficult question to answer, even in my oversimplified version. While technical information is central to framing the question, the answer is about values, not about science. In a democracy such decisions should be made by the public and their elected politicians, not by scientists, doctors, or other experts. Part of the emergency communication job is to frame the dilemma in advance, so the public can all struggle with it together and advise the politicians and experts about how to deal with it.

But beyond democratizing the dilemma, I think it is important to notice that we all tend toward what I am somewhat unfairly calling the risk-taking side. And I think it is also important to do what we can to lean more toward the cautious side. The hypothetical situation I just described is a statistical toss-up, but every practicing risk manager I know would choose to take the one-in-ten-thousand chance of a catastrophe. Suppose we change the odds and make it a one-in-ten-thousand chance of doing 100,000 times as much damage. Now it's not a toss-up any more. The quarantine is the better option, at least statistically. Most practicing risk managers would take the chance anyway.

There are several reasons why this is true:

- Unless outrage and drama are high, low probabilities tend to be neglected. People see a one-in-ten-thousand probability as essentially zero probability. That doesn't keep us from "investing" in lotteries, but it does keep us from choosing a small, certain loss over a very unlikely huge one. (This is why disaster insurance is a tough sell.)
- Low-probability events are highly uncertain. Precisely because they happen so seldom, we have poor data on which to estimate how seldom. Things that have never happened before do happen sometimes; in fact, things that have never happened before happen fairly frequently. Until they happen, they always seem exceedingly unlikely, and there is no good way to measure their likelihood.
- Risk assessors are accustomed to dealing with chronic risks, where there are standardized procedures for making sure risk estimates are conservative — that is, for systematically overestimating the risk in order to make sure not to underestimate it. The same conservative bias does not exist when it comes to catastrophic risks. An event tree of possible accidents, for example, is likely to be missing lots of limbs — accidents nobody thought could happen, and accidents nobody thought about at all. Calculating the total risk by adding up the estimated probabilities of all the limbs on the tree will yield an underestimate, not an overestimate. But a risk assessor habituated to chronic risks is likely to assume it's an overestimate, and act accordingly.
- Terrorism is a special case. Quantitative risk assessment is even more difficult for an intentional catastrophe than for an accidental one, and terrorism risks are even more likely to be underestimated. Assume that for your nearest industrial plant to blow up, X, Y, and Z would all have to happen. Assume that the probability of each is one-in-a-hundred. If there is no conceivable common cause (they're not on the same electrical power circuit, for example), the odds of all three happening at the same time are one-in-a-hundred cubed, or one-in-a-million. Now hypothesize an angry ex-employee who

decides to blow up the plant. Suddenly that one-in-a-million accident is an afternoon's agenda, and a whole lot likelier.

- Finally, factor in politics. A risk manager who imposes a quarantine had better turn out right. If it was just chicken pox after all, that risk manager's career will have taken a serious turn for the worse ... and the chances that the next risk manager will impose a quarantine in response to the next **suspected/here/now** emergency sink to about zero. This is not just unfair; it is profoundly unwise. It almost means that the probability your organization is facing a real emergency and not a false alarm needs to rise to 50 percent or so before the decision-makers will think it's a good career gamble to call for the quarantine.

There is a good case to be made that western society is excessively cautious about chronic risk. It's debatable, but it's a good case. However, we are not excessively cautious about accident risk, especially the risk of low-probability high-consequence accidents. And we are least cautious, even post-9/11, about very-low-probability very-high-consequence intentional acts of terrorism. I don't know how many times risk managers have faced a very-low-probability very-high-consequence possible catastrophe and decided not to take painful precautions. This is a decision that nearly always turns out right; that's what it means for a risk to be very-low-probability. It is brinkmanship nonetheless, and our luck can't hold forever.

The foregoing is more opinionated even than the rest of this chapter, and the opinions expressed aren't really in my field. But the dilemma is there.

At a minimum, communicators need to raise the dilemma:

- a. Try to provoke a dialogue within your organization, with stakeholders, and with the general public about the dilemma of erring on the side of caution versus taking chances. Focus especially on the choice between tolerating a low probability of a major catastrophe and imposing a painful, expensive, even deadly precaution that will probably turn out not to have been needed.
- b. Raise the issue of whether decision-making is biased against precaution-taking with respect to very-low-probability very-high-consequence risks, especially terrorism-related emergencies.
- c. Explore the data questions relevant to this dilemma. Among the key ones: (1) What do we know so far? (2) When will we know more, and how much more? (3) What's the likely cost of being wrong in the overprotective direction, of taking protective actions that turn out unnecessary? (4) What's the likely cost of being wrong in the underprotective direction, of waiting until we know more and then wishing we'd acted sooner? (5) What halfway interim measures are available? But emphasize that these data questions don't resolve the values question of how cautious or risk-taking to be. They just inform the values controversy.
- d. Consider using a seesaw approach to this dialogue. An organization that raises the issue in advance and says it dare not impose a quarantine until it's sure, even though that might be too late, will probably be told to think again. An organization that says it plans to impose the quarantine under such circumstances will encounter contrary resistance. Also consider dilemma-sharing: Say you don't know what to do; you can cope with the data questions but need advice from the public on the values questions.