"Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events"

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Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events

by Peter M. Sandman

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We usually think of emergency communication as communication about an event that is obviously horrific, and is happening right here, right now. That's the usual paradigm: The World Trade Center has fallen, and you're managing Manhattan. Or terrorists have just put poison into your local reservoir. Or the factory downtown just blew up, or the hurricane has wreaked havoc everywhere in the county, or an epidemic of unknown origin is running amuck. Whether it's terrorism, accident, or natural disaster, you're right smack in the middle of something awful. Your job is to manage the communication in mid-emergency.

In some ways this is the hardest sort of crisis communication:

- Logistics are probably going to be disrupted.
- Victims will need care; relatives will need support.
- Emergency responders may be victims themselves, or torn between professional responsibilities and worries about their own families.
- Media attention is bound to be intense, and burdensome.
- High-ranking politicians and interest groups of all sorts will inevitably want to put their oars in.

But in other ways, communication in mid-crisis can actually be easier to plan for and implement than some other sorts of emergency communication. You have everybody's attention. There are no conflicting priorities. No one (or almost no one) questions whether the problem is really serious, whether immediate action is really needed. Most people are too nervous about their own safety to be skeptical or rebellious; for the most part they try to do what they're told.

The main thrust of the ERC CDCynergy CD is to help you develop your plans for communicating in the middle of a crisis. That's important in its own right, of course. And in many ways it can serve as a model for other sorts of emergency communication.

But not in all ways. This chapter is devoted to some of the other paradigms: why they're important too; how they're different; and what you can do about them.

Look back at my first sentence: "...an event that is obviously horrific, and is happening right here, right now." This sentence introduces what I think are the three main variables you need to think about:

1.	obviously horrific	...	as opposed to a **suspected** emergency
2.	right here	...	as opposed to an emergency **elsewhere**
3.	right now	...	as opposed to a possible **future** emergency or one that is already **past**

Let's turn these three variables into a matrix. The first variable has two values, obvious and suspected; the second has two values, here and elsewhere; the third has three values, now and future and past. So there are 2 x 2 x 3 = 12 paradigms. The **obvious/here/now** emergency is the focus of most of ERC CDCynergy. Among the other 11, some aren't especially challenging. But six of the 11 are important to address:

1. **Obvious/here/future**. Bioterrorists may someday poison the water supply. Planning now what to say if it happens is planning for an **obvious/here/now** emergency — covered in detail elsewhere in ERC CDCynergy. But what do we say now about this future possibility?

2. **Obvious/here/past**. Emergencies end. When they end, the communication about them doesn't end — but it does change. What should the post-emergency public dialogue look like, and how can you get ready to conduct it?

3. **Obvious/elsewhere/now**. September 11 and the 2002 anthrax attacks soon afterwards were **obvious/here/now** for a few emergency managers in a few cities. Everywhere else they were **obvious/elsewhere/now** — and they required a lot of communication.

4. **Suspected/here/now**. Someone shows up at the airport with a weird fever. The nearest doctor thinks it might be Ebola. Various health-protective steps are initiated — and need to be communicated — pending a more definitive diagnosis.

5. **Suspected/here/future**. If you think you may someday face the fourth paradigm, then you face this one now. People are likelier to cope well with the cliffhanging tension of a **suspected/here/now** emergency if they were aware in advance that such a dilemma might well be on its way.

6. **Suspected/here/past**. You thought there were a lot of foreign nationals taking flying lessons, but you weren't sure the problem was real and you decided not to take action. Now you have to explain why you underreacted. Or you thought that weird chicken pox might be smallpox and you did take action ... and it was just a weird chicken pox. Now you have to explain why you overreacted.

These six are in an order that lets me build on early ones to help explain later ones. They're not necessarily in order of importance, mostly because order of importance depends on how you look at the problem. Two of the six paradigms — **obvious/here/future** and **suspected/here/future** — you face already. One other — **obvious/elsewhere/now** — you are bound to face eventually. So in terms of probability, those three are the biggest threats; they're all a lot likelier than the **obvious/here/now** emergency that is the central preoccupation of ERC CDCynergy. But in terms of how tough the communication challenges are, and how vital it is to get them right, **suspected/here/now** and **suspected/here/future** are probably the most important of the 12 paradigms.

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1. Obvious/Here/Future

Emergency planners compile lists of awful things that could happen. Then they try to figure out how to prepare to cope with everything on the list, trusting that their preparations will work also

for disasters they didn't think to list. And then they file their plans and hope they'll never have to use them.

Why communicate in advance about these possible future emergencies that may never happen? I see at least four reasons:

1. If the emergency actually happens, you need people to know what to do: whether and how to evacuate, where to tune their radio, etc. You have practical things to tell them in advance.

2. People's emotional reactions if the emergency actually happens will be more controlled if they had some forewarning. They need to be emotionally ready as much as they need to be practically ready.

3. You need their support now — support for emergency preparedness expenditures, for example. And you need their input — both because their ideas will improve your emergency planning and because giving you their ideas will increase their buy-in and make it likelier that they'll follow the plan when the time comes.

4. They have a right to know. Except for a few details that may need to be withheld for security reasons, the public is entitled to be told what emergencies you anticipate and how prepared you are. Once they might have preferred to be kept in the dark ... but no longer.

The only part of this rationale that's debatable is the second point. Some emergency communicators worry that telling people about possible future emergencies could do emotional damage. There is a decent case to be made for keeping mum about an emergency that the public is pretty much unaware of, assuming that you don't need to prepare them logistically, and you don't need their support or advice, and you're not worried that they'll find out from another source. Why not leave them blissfully unaware? But there are very few emergencies about which today's public is blissfully unaware. Pre-9/11, people may perhaps have been blissfully unaware of terrorism risks (I suspect even then it was more denial than apathy — see "Beyond Panic Prevention: Addressing Emotion in Emergency Communication" for the difference between the two). Today, certainly, most of us are worried even about the risks we don't understand. In fact, we are most worried about the risks we don't understand — which is part of why communication about **obvious/here/future** risks is more calming than terrifying.

A wonderful precedent is the experience of companies under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Risk Management Program" (RMP) regulation. Under RMP, industrial facilities that pose a significant risk to the community are required to model their worst case, then present it in detail to their neighbors. (Prior to 9/11, RMP reports were widely posted on web sites as well.) In other words, companies are legally obligated to talk about what might go wrong, how many might die if it were to happen, what steps they are taking to prevent it, what "precursor" events — smaller accidents — have already happened, etc.

Companies were initially convinced that RMP would force them to terrify their neighbors. Many struggled to find ways to meet the regulation's requirement without being candid ... for example, to focus on "alternative" scenarios that were likelier and less serious instead of the worst case. But most eventually figured out that these efforts backfired, and that candor worked better than they'd ever have expected.

The most common reaction when companies explained worst cases to their neighbors was a sense of relief. At last the other shoe had dropped. People explained to plant management that they had realized long ago that the plant was dangerous. It was a relief to have it on the table, where it could be discussed. And it was a relief to know management was taking the risk seriously.

Some of what goes on in RMP communication — and in any **obvious/here/future** emergency communication — is what I describe as the "seesaw of risk communication." When sources are visibly worried, audiences worry less. For more on the seesaw, see "The Seesaw of Risk Communication" at http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw.

The most important key to **obvious/here/future** communication is simply to do it, to do enough of it, and to do it in two-way rather than just one-way media. The more you talk to people about possible future emergencies, and the more you let them talk to you about possible future emergencies, the better shape you will be in if and when an actual emergency occurs. It's as simple as that.

Three additional issues are worth exploring: (1) How to talk about emergency planning; (2) How to talk about worst case scenarios; and (3) How to "speculate" appropriately.

How to talk about emergency planning:

a. Explain what could happen. That is, what is the range — the full range — of possibilities you are thinking about and planning for? If any risk is serious enough and plausible enough that your organization is working on it, the community deserves to be told and consulted.

b. Explain which possibilities you have decided not to think about and plan for, and why. Are they too unlikely? Too minor? Already planned for? Is there no way to cope, and so nothing to plan?

c. Explain which possibilities are highest priority, and why. Where is your time and money going? What difficult or controversial prioritization decisions have you already made? What ones are you considering now? If you want to diminish our concern about X, don't just reassure us about X; warn us about Y. Blanket reassurance is far less credible than a mix of reassurance and alarm.

d. Explain how prepared you are now. That is, what precautions have you already taken? Which of these are aimed at preventing emergencies, and which are aimed at coping with emergencies you couldn't prevent? That is, how has your effort been allocated between emergency prevention and emergency response?

e. Explain what additional precautions are in the works. When will they be in place? What precautions are you thinking about taking? How will you decide? Which of these additional precautions have to do with prevention, and which with response? That is, what allocation of effort between the two are you making?

f. Explain what precautions you have considered and decided not to take. Why did you decide against them? Don't neglect this key question. Part of the definition of "prepared" is that you have defined a boundary between the precautions you will take and the precautions you won't. Obviously you can't do everything. So if you can't list the things you've decided not to do, then you haven't prepared properly.

g. Explain what precautions you think *we* should take. What additional precautions can we take if we think you're underreacting? What's the least we should do if we think you're overreacting? What shouldn't we do because you think it's too much, or too little?

h. Explain how we can get involved in your emergency planning. What should we do if we want to help? What should we do if we want to disagree? And expect that stakeholder involvement will yield some changes in your plans. In fact, that's a good reason to frontload the communication. Since people are bound to want to see you change in response to their input, get their input before you think the plan is "done."

Note that for terrorism-related emergencies, completely candid answers to some of these questions might raise legitimate security concerns. It's not wise to tell terrorists which scenarios you've decided to ignore, for example, or exactly what precautions you are implementing. This is sometimes a real reason for saying less than you might, but it is often an excuse for saying less than you should. By all means pass your **obvious/here/future** communications through a security filter. But if security makes a meaningful answer impossible, rethink your security needs. You can't blindside or mislead the public and then expect it to cope well in an emergency.

How to talk about worst case scenarios:

a. Choose the actual worst case. Better for people to complain that you're worrying too much about vanishingly unlikely scenarios than for them to blame you for ignoring such scenarios. (This is the seesaw of risk communication; for more on the seesaw, go to http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw.) You're free to talk about likelier-but-less-awful scenarios too, of course, but don't neglect to talk about the most awful ones.

b. Don't understate the worst case. Having picked the worst case, in other words, make sure you don't seem to imply that it isn't so bad. We'll feel paradoxically more reassured if you sound like you're warning us ... not "calming" us (the seesaw again). This is about tone as much as content. For example, don't explain the worst case in hypertechnical or hyperneutral language. And don't hide it in an appendix somewhere.

c. Remember that consequence/probability tradeoffs are not linear. In risk assessment, a one-in-a-million chance of killing 100,000 people is the same as a one-in-ten chance of killing one person. Both are an expected death rate of 0.1. But psychologically, some people will see the unlikely disaster as much worse, because it's such a disaster; and some will see it as much better, because it's so unlikely. Nobody but a risk assessor will see the two as equivalent.

d. If you're worried about a public overreaction, emphasize the scenario's high consequence, not its low probability. Almost by definition, worst cases are high-consequence low-probability risks. So use the seesaw. Of course you need to let us know how unlikely it is — but you should stress how awful it is. Leave the too-unlikely-

to-worry-about seat on the seesaw vacant for us. (If you're worried about apathy rather than overreaction, reverse seats.)

e. Acknowledge that risk assessment of catastrophic risks is uncertain, and in key ways less conservative (less cautious, less risk-averse) than risk assessment of chronic risks. Accidents happen quite often that were missing from the accident "event tree." Hundred-year floods seem to materialize every decade or so. And there is virtually no way to estimate the probability of an intentional disaster (terrorism, industrial sabotage, etc.).

f. Pay more attention to improving your prevention and response efforts than to estimating risk consequence and probability. The right debate is over what you should be doing about **obvious/here/future** emergencies, not about whether you are quantifying them correctly. Of course risk quantification is an important tool for prioritizing among future emergency scenarios. But if you're stuck in a fight over your numbers, it's probably standing in for a more important discussion about your precautions.

g. Pay enough attention to emergency response. Most organizations tend to focus too much on prevention and too little on response preparedness. This is true of emergency planning itself, and even truer of communication about the planning. Of course you want to do all you can to keep awful things from happening. But don't let that make you neglect to plan — and discuss — what you will do if prevention fails.

h. Give credit to your critics. If critics were instrumental in getting your organization to improve its plans, or to talk about them more openly, say so. If you involved them in the planning (always a good idea), involve them in the communication as well.

i. Pay the most attention to the most concerned people, whether they are individual citizens or organized stakeholder groups. Even if you think they're not typical and not reasonable, take them seriously. Their calmer neighbors are watching to see how you respond to their concerns.

How to "speculate" appropriately:

You will see advice never to speculate. But speculation is the very core of communicating about **obvious/here/future** emergencies. It's all about what-ifs. So go ahead and speculate.

For a more detailed argument on behalf of speculation, and a list of specific recommendations for speculating appropriately, see "3. Speculation versus refusal to speculate" in "Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy." But the essence of speculating appropriately can be summarized in a few words: Make sure your audience knows when you are speculating. You don't have to avoid talking about things that are uncertain, even highly uncertain. But you do have to avoid *sounding* certain when you do so.

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2. Obvious/Here/Past

The **obvious/here/past** paradigm is discussed in ERC CDCynergy in terms of "post-event" communication (see the Post-Event phase of ERC CDCynergy). The focus there is on providing ongoing services to those victimized or traumatized by the event, debriefing staff about what went well and not so well, and revising your emergency communication plan based on lessons learned. These are all important post-event communication activities.

I want to emphasize another aspect of the post-event period: recrimination. This is so normal, and so inevitable, that it in fact defines the boundary between event and post-event. In mid-crisis, people do not look to assess blame; they are too busy worrying about safety. In particular, people in mid-crisis are hesitant to blame those in authority — that is, you — because they are relying on your good will and good judgment to manage the emergency, to keep them safe. The end of the crisis is defined by the shared judgment that we are safe enough now to ask what went wrong ... and safe enough to focus on your mistakes. The more dependent on you we felt ourselves to be during the crisis, of course, the more strongly we will feel the need now to declare our independence (and our aliveness!) by vigorous recriminations.

In other words, post-emergency recriminations are not only natural. They're healthy. (For those on the receiving end, I grant you, recriminations are not fun, and often not fair either.)

*Some advice on managing the **obvious/here/past** emergency:*

a. Don't be in a hurry to declare the emergency to be over. Even when the evidence suggests the worst is past, keep subordinating that evidence to warnings that you may be wrong: "Although we haven't seen a new anthrax case for ten days now, we're still on high alert for possible new cases." This is yet another risk communication seesaw (see http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw). Let us tell you to stand down ... not the other way around.

b. Put a lot of emphasis on recovery needs: help for victims and their families, treatment for post-traumatic stress reactions (watch for depression as well as fearfulness), etc. Don't neglect the recovery needs of your staff. Focusing on recovery is valuable for its own sake, of course. It will also help soften the inevitable recriminations; if you're still worried about us, we'll go easier on you.

c. Don't over-stress "closure." Some people (those who are finding recovery pretty easy) will want to identify and promote symbols of closure. That's healthy for them. But it's probably premature for their more distressed neighbors. Post-emergency recovery takes time, and urging premature closure will only delay it ... and attract resentment and blame.

d. Be generous with credit and thanks. Like attending to recovery, this is valuable for its own sake; lots of people helped, and they deserve credit and thanks. It will also help soften the recriminations. It's hard to criticize you harshly while you're thanking me. It follows that giving credit to your critics is especially worthwhile.

e. Blame yourself. This is by far the most important recommendation on the list. It is yet another instance of the risk communication seesaw

(http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw). Someone is going to focus on your deficiencies. Better that it be you. Make sure to cover the three main bases: preparedness, prevention, and management.

f. Ride the preparedness seesaw. That is, blame yourself for not having been better prepared. Even if it is really the public that was insufficiently prepared, or insufficiently supportive of preparedness, take the blame for that too: "We should have worked harder to warn the public that something like this could happen."

g. Ride the prevention seesaw. "If only we had noticed X." "If only we had taken Y more seriously." "If only we had realized...." The public's most profound wish is that bad things could be prevented. We know the wish is fundamentally unachievable; bad things happen. But we don't want to be told we are childish for wishing we (or you) could prevent them. Articulate the wish for us instead.

h. Ride the management seesaw. Inevitably, there were emergency management missteps, decisions that in hindsight could have been better. Well, now is the time for hindsight. Tell us what could have been better. And make sure you do so emphatically enough. You'll probably need a lawyer's permission before you call a bad decision a tragic mistake — but "tragic mistake" or even "bad decision" is preferable to "could have been better."

i. Don't segue too quickly from recriminations to lessons learned. Obviously it is important to harvest the lessons for the future from these mistakes of the past. Don't forget to do that, and to revise your plan accordingly. But there's a real difference between talking about what you did wrong this time and talking about what you should do next time. Make sure we're finished doing the first before you hustle on to the second.

j. Avoid defensiveness at all costs. For example, don't get caught up in a debate over whether some unfortunate decision was a "mistake" or "the right decision given what we knew at the time." If it turned out badly, focus more on regretting it than on explaining why it wasn't your fault. Of course your critics' factual misstatements may need to be corrected, but try not to correct anything minor or anything that's a matter of interpretation. And don't try to "correct" the overall sense that there were deficiencies worth examining. That's got to be true, and you should show you think so too.

k. Express wishes and feelings. "I wish we had...." "If only...." "I can't believe we didn't realize that...." "We feel so stupid about...." This is an excellent way to dramatize your understanding that there were deficiencies worth examining without taking a stand on whether they were mistakes or not. It also humanizes your organization. And as the seesaw predicts, your articulation of our shared wishes and feelings will make it much easier for us to see the other side — the reasons why you couldn't have known, the things you did well, etc.

l. Explain but de-emphasize the other side. For the seesaw to work properly, we need to know the reasons why you couldn't have known, the things you did well, etc. If you stress them too much, of course, you will occupy the "defense" seat on the seesaw, and we'll have no choice but to sit in the "prosecution" seat. You want us to defend you, so you need to prosecute yourself. But you still need to give us the data with which to defend you! Just put the exculpatory information in a subordinate clause, and keep your main focus on those deficiencies.

m. Get a head start on self-blame. In mid-crisis, the public is too preoccupied with its own safety to spend much time on recriminations. That makes mid-crisis an excellent time for you to identify your deficiencies and blame yourself. Of course you shouldn't focus too much too early on your own missteps; we want you managing the emergency, not licking your wounds. But a little self-blame during the **obvious/here/now** emergency can make the issue old news during the **obvious/here/past** phase.

n. Forewarn your staff, your allies, and your higher-ups. The more you blame yourself for things you mishandled, the more the public tends to forgive you, focus on the things you handled well, and insist on moving on. But that's the public. Your staff, allies, and bosses won't respond so well. They may feel betrayed by your admissions of error. Don't do it without forewarning them.

o. Remember that you shouldn't try to prevent criticism, which is natural, inevitable, and useful. But there's nothing wrong with softening it.

For more on blaming yourself — why it's a good idea and how to do it — see "6. Being apologetic versus being defensive" in "Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy."

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3. Obvious/Elsewhere/Now

Every time there is an **obvious/here/now** emergency somewhere, there is an **obvious/elsewhere/now** emergency everywhere else. This is self-evident. And yet very little systematic attention is paid to the communication demands of emergencies in other places.

Of course these communication demands can be more or less onerous, depending on how distant "elsewhere" is in the particular situation — geographically, logistically, and psychologically. It makes sense to distinguish three zones. In order from least demanding to most demanding, let's call them (1) the "not our problem" zone, (2) the "we could be next" zone, and (3) the "right next door" zone.

Obviously these "zones" have fuzzy borders. In fact, they don't have borders at all. The key question isn't how near or distant the emergency elsewhere actually is. The question is how relevant or irrelevant it feels to your public.

Emergency communication in the "not our problem" zone:

a. Don't just assume that everyone agrees you're in the "not our problem" zone. You may think so, but others out there may be thinking in terms of "we could be next" or even "right next door." Convincing the public that an **obvious/elsewhere/now** emergency really doesn't endanger them may be an important communication task.

b. If people need convincing that the emergency is "not our problem," start by acknowledging and legitimating their concerns ... before explaining why those concerns are misplaced. If your credibility on the matter is shaky, look for more credible third party endorsers who share your judgment. It will help to talk about other emergencies that

you think your public should be worrying about, so it is clear that your reassurances are situation-specific.

c. If everyone agrees that the emergency is "not our problem," then communication is more an opportunity than an obligation. People feel unthreatened and uninvolved; that's what defines the zone. But they're interested, and so this is the teachable moment. Could it happen here? If it did happen here, are we prepared enough? What else should we do? What similar sorts of emergencies are we likely to face some day? What can we learn from this distant emergency? Raising these issues turns an **obvious/elsewhere/now** emergency into an **obvious/here/future** conversation.

d. Expect empathy, and think about providing opportunities for empathic action. People will have all sorts of reasons to want to help, from straightforward generosity to "survivor guilt." It's important to avoid "help" that doesn't help, such as giving blood that isn't needed and can't be stored. But try not to let people stew in their own futile empathy. Facilitating genuinely helpful action will make your own public feel better. It will counter the tendency to get depressed by others' misfortune. And it will set the stage for further discussions of local preparedness.

Emergency communication in the "we could be next" zone:

a. This is really the teachable moment! People are worried that they could be next, and so they are much more interested in emergency preparedness, prevention, and management than ever before. Talk about what your plans and preparations are. Talk about what additional gearing up you are doing. If the emergency is moving slowly enough, use it as an opportunity for a dialogue about what more you could do. Be open to suggestions.

b. Don't over-reassure. (See "4. Being alarming versus being reassuring" in "Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy" for more on this topic.) The defining characteristic of this zone is that people feel at risk, and you can't simply tell them they're wrong. The statistical risk needn't be high for people to feel this way. In the anthrax attacks of 2001, for example, many Americans felt that their mail, too, could be anthrax-contaminated. And any one of them might have been right.

c. Legitimate the fear. Telling people they shouldn't be afraid only leaves them alone with their fear, and increases the probability that the fear will morph into denial or even panic. Instead, explain why the fear is natural, appropriate, and even functional (because it leads to self-protective action). For more on this, see "9. Acknowledge and legitimate people's fears" in "Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action" (http://www.psandman.com/col/part2.htm#9).

d. Provide all the data and rationale you can to explain how serious the local risk actually is. If you think the risk is genuinely pretty high, be matter-of-fact about saying so, and focus on what is to be done. If you think the risk is pretty low, explain why this is so ... but still emphasize that the risk is non-zero, that the data are far from certain, that people's concern or even fear is justified, and that there are precautions to be taken.

e. Address both sources of local fear: the fear that it could spread from where it is now to here, and the fear that it could happen here independently. In the case of terrorism, the

latter fear itself has two parts: the fear that the terrorists could strike here too, and the fear that a local copycat could strike here. Don't worry that raising these possibilities will frighten people all the more. They're already in people's minds. You're not raising them, you're addressing them.

f. Focus on the precautions people can take now. Ideally, offer three levels of precaution: "At least do X" — the minimum level that you think everyone should achieve, worried or not. "We recommend Y" — a higher level that you consider justified, though people who think you're overreacting are free to stop at X. "Feel free to do Z" — a still higher level of precaution for people who feel especially vulnerable and think you are underreacting.

g. Harness people's fearful hypervigilance by describing "warning signs" in as much detail as possible. That is, tell us how to tell whether or not we're in the soup! The warning signs may be individual (such as symptoms to watch for) or societal (such as the current terrorism alert color scale). The goal is to tell people as explicitly as you can what evidence will justify heightened or relaxed vigilance. Note that it is profoundly reassuring to know what the signs of danger are; until they materialize, I'm okay.

h. If possible, offer different precautions — or a different range of precautions — for each level of warning. "For now, we recommend at least X, better Y, and Z if you're worried. But if A or B or C happens, then everyone should do Z, and some will want to take these additional steps as well." Don't wait for A or B or C to happen before you talk about what to do if they happen.

i. Address real local impacts. An emergency elsewhere may have impacts here: on travel, on manufacturing, on the economy, etc. People may feel reluctant to complain about these relatively minor inconveniences and hassles in the face of other people's disasters. But the minor inconveniences and hassles are very much on their minds. Take them seriously, even as you acknowledge that you, too, are embarrassed to be so focused on them.

j. Provide opportunities for empathic action. The fact that people are worried on their own behalf won't keep them from wanting to help those who have already fallen victim. Help them help.

Emergency communication in the "right next door" zone:

a. Everything that applies in the "we could be next" zone applies all the more in the "right next door" zone. Consider the previous list part of this one.

b. Worry about denial ... and possibly even panic. (See "1. Fear, Panic, and Denial" in "Beyond Panic Prevention: Addressing Emotion in Emergency Communication" for a discussion of these responses to emergencies.) People in the middle of the emergency are usually kept too busy to experience these overreactions; people far from the emergency can usually see that they would be overreactions. People "right next door" are the most vulnerable. So legitimating their fear is all the more important. "Permission" to be afraid is a bulwark against panic or denial.

c. Precautions and warning signs are especially relevant. People very near the scene of the emergency are desperate to know what they can do now to protect themselves, how

they'll know if the emergency spreads to them, and what they should do if it does. By giving people things to do, precautions "bind the anxiety" and thus help prevent denial or panic. By giving people things to look for ("we're okay until A or B or C happens"), warning signs do the same thing.

d. Worry about survivor guilt. If anyone is going to feel it, the people "right next door" are the ones. If you sense that's what's going on, don't keep telling them they're lucky to be alive. (That's the problem!) Instead, organize them to help their less fortunate neighbors. Empathic action is a good antidote to survivor guilt.

e. Apart from their fears and possibly their guilt, people "right next door" tend to suffer from neglect. All that attention and sympathy is being lavished on the victims, and there's too little left for them. So don't just warn them or reassure them. Sympathize with them. Tell them you realize this is a hard time for them too. And once again, help them help their neighbors; empathic action is a good antidote to feeling neglected.

f. Expect some people "right next door" to want to be treated as if they were in the middle of the emergency, at least for some purposes. Protective action is a good example: "Why does she get bottled water and I don't?" If possible, it helps to have a fuzzy area where the protection is voluntary, so you don't have to defend an arbitrary boundary between "you must" and "you can't." This isn't always possible; compensation, for example, invariably raises an **obvious/elsewhere/past** boundary problem.

g. Expect some people "right next door" to want to be treated as if they were far from the scene. This is the other half of the boundary problem: "Why do I have to take Cipro and he doesn't?" Again it helps to have a "voluntary" area between the "compulsory" area and the "forbidden" area.

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4. Suspected/Here/Now

This is the most difficult of all the twelve paradigms. Something is happening, right here, right now. It might be serious — and if it is, there are all sorts of steps you should be taking as quickly as possible to mitigate the damage; waiting will make things much, much worse. Or it might be a false alarm — and if it is, all those steps won't just be wasted; they will do damage of their own, and waiting is absolutely the right thing to do.

It won't be communication people deciding whether to act or not. You can thank your lucky stars for that.

Actually, "act or not" is probably an inaccurate way to describe the choice. There is usually a range of management options, with "assume the worst" at one edge, "watch and wait" at the other edge, and various halfway measures in between. Still, some decisions really are dichotomous. You either quarantine people or you don't, for example. Nor is the middle course (when it's available) free of risk. Whatever precautions you decide to take while waiting to see if the emergency is real, they may turn out in hindsight to have been too much or too little.

The emergency communication decisions here are almost independent of the emergency management decisions. Certainly if the managers decide to "watch and wait," you must now

figure out whether to let the public watch and wait with you, or to watch and wait in secret — postponing any public alert until you know more and are about to act. At the other extreme, some protective actions (though not a quarantine, obviously) can be done either quietly or with bugles blaring, depending on the communication decision. If you do decide to go public, you can do so acknowledging the uncertainty and the gamble, or you can keep that part to yourself.

The temptation is always to say too little. Precisely because the situation is uncertain, your organization will want to make its management decision without fanfare, then implement it without fanfare. That will be especially true if the decision is to do nothing, or very little, until you know more. Here is how your organization is likely to assess the situation. (Let me warn you in advance that I think it's a mis-assessment.) "We think the odds are good it's just a weird case of chicken pox, not the start of a smallpox epidemic. We've already decided not to take action until the lab results come back. So what's the point of telling people they might be facing an imminent disaster ... but probably not? Mightn't this unnecessarily frighten people, provoking all sorts of unorganized and inappropriate efforts at self-protection, maybe even a spontaneous, panicky evacuation? Time enough to tell people when we've decided to act and have things we want them to do. With luck, we'll turn out right to wait, and we'll never have to tell. And if the problem turns out to be serious and we have a real emergency to deal with, even then maybe our earlier decision to wait will get lost in the shuffle and never have to be defended."

To decide whether you actually approve of this logic, it may help you to displace it from a possible emergency managed by a governmental body to a possible chronic risk managed by a corporation. My corporate clients frequently come across preliminary, anecdotal suggestions that a product or a factory emission might be harmful. If it is, of course, they want to take action, lest they continue to hurt people (and face the inevitable lawsuits later on). But if the preliminary evidence turns out to be misleading, they'd prefer not to have blown the whistle on themselves for nothing. So they typically decide to watch and wait — that is, to collect further evidence but in the meantime to do nothing and say nothing. I call this the "yellow flag" problem. The company doesn't have a definitive red flag establishing that the product or emission is dangerous, but it certainly doesn't have a green flag either. But what happens when the company decides to watch and wait? Eventually we the public find out that a yellow flag was kept secret. That in itself makes the yellow flag look red to us! We exaggerate the risk and punish the company. (For a fuller description of the yellow flag problem, see "Yellow Flags: The Acid Test of Transparency" at http://www.psandman.com/col/yellow.htm.)

Now the comparison isn't entirely fair. Your organization probably has less conflict of interest than the typical company when it decides to keep its yellow flags to itself. And a **suspected/here/now** emergency turns into either an **obvious/here/now** emergency or a false alarm fairly quickly ... in hours or days or at most weeks, not decades.

Still, when you're on the receiving end you know well that you do not want information about possible risks kept secret. You want to be told. You feel entitled to be told. And if you ever find out that an organization has kept such information secret, you will see to it that that organization is punished. Of course organizations that issue endless warnings that turn out to be false alarms also pay a price, especially if they haven't stressed enough that the warning may be a false alarm. (Think about the guff we've all given the FBI for those frequent, vague terrorism alerts.) But this is nothing compared to the outrage we feel when we learn that warnings have been withheld.

There are at least four reasons for telling the public what you know about a **suspected/here/now** emergency, even if your organization has decided to watch and wait:

1. Your credibility is at stake. It's not just that you'll be punished if you're found to have kept such information secret (though you will). Worse yet, your management of this and other emergencies will be compromised. (See "1. Candor versus secrecy" in "Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy" for more on this candor issue.)

2. The risk of excessive fear, denial, and even panic is at stake. People who feel they know what's going on are far likelier to be able to cope than people who feel they are at the mercy of wild rumors and secretive authorities.

3. Preparedness is at stake. Early information about a **suspected/here/now** emergency enables people to get ready — whatever getting ready means to them: pack a bag, talk to their children, renew their prescriptions, read up on the Internet, pray.

4. Democracy is at stake. Choosing between the risk of excessive precautions and the risk of insufficient precautions is as much a values decision as a technical decision. People feel entitled to contribute to the decision — and what they have to say may very well prove helpful.

There's a fifth reason worth mentioning as well. During the anthrax attacks of 2001, health and law enforcement officials around the country coped with literally thousands of false alarms, powdery residues that someone thought might be anthrax spores. Most health departments wisely let the media and public watch as they dutifully responded to every call. What we learned is that most powdery residues aren't anthrax, that it makes sense to check but not to freak out. Even if they could have successfully kept these false alarms secret — which in most cases they couldn't — it wouldn't have been smart for health departments to do so. I don't know how many smallpox false alarms there have been so far. A few, anyway. In each case, so far, watch and wait turned out to be the right decision. But I question the wisdom of keeping the lid on such decisions. Let us learn that **suspected/here/now** risks exist, that they usually turn out to be nothing, that they just might turn out to be grave, and that how aggressively to respond is a tough, tough call.

A **suspected/here/now** emergency is, among other things, an **obvious/here/future** emergency. What's happening now may or may not be an emergency. By definition, then, we may face an obvious emergency soon. Everything in the section on **obvious/here/future** emergencies applies here as well, especially the advice on addressing worst case scenarios.

The difference is that the **obvious/here/future** emergency is more theoretical. Nothing special is happening now. We're talking about what might, theoretically, happen at any time. By contrast, the **suspected/here/now** emergency is acute. Potentially awful things are already happening; we just don't know yet how awful, or trivial, they might turn out to be in the end.

Once you decide to communicate about a **suspected/here/now** risk, there are two major issues to consider: (1) What questions need to be answered; and (2) How to discuss uncertainty. (I'm assuming you're wise enough not to claim certainty.) For more on sounding tentative, see "3. Tentativeness versus confidence" in "Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy."

*Questions that need to be answered in a **suspected/here/now** emergency:*

a. What happened?

b. Why is it a source of concern? That is, why do you think this might be an emergency? Why do you think it might not?

c. What is the worst case? This is key, and controversial: My clients tend to understate the worst case, and then lose all credibility if and when reality turns out worse than their worst case. Examples range from Three Mile Island to *E. coli* 0157:H7 meat recalls. All sorts of conventional advice not to address what-ifs, not to speculate, need to be modified if you're really going to answer this question. (See the section on managing **obvious/here/future** emergencies.)

d. What is the likeliest case? The distinction between the likeliest case and the worst case goes to the heart of the situation. You do the public a disservice if you don't plan for the worst case; you do the public (and yourself) a disservice if you aren't candid about the worst case. But you also do the public (and yourself) a disservice if you leave the impression that the worst case is the likeliest, when usually the likeliest is orders of magnitude less serious.

e. What is the full range of possibilities, and the estimated probability of each? This doesn't have to be quantitative: "We pray it isn't X, our worst case, and we think it probably isn't — but we're preparing for the worst anyhow. We're still hoping it'll turn out to be Y, which will make it pretty trivial and will make our warnings and precautions seem silly in retrospect. We're actually guessing the likeliest outcome is Z, not as bad as X but a lot more serious than Y."

f. How do you know, and how sure are you? One of the critical issues here is that most of what we know about risk probabilities comes from accidents and illnesses ... unmotivated and therefore basically random events. The probabilities change radically when we're talking about terrorism. Consider the Bhopal chemical plant "accident" — which most experts think was probably industrial sabotage. The likelihood of the things that went wrong at Bhopal all going wrong at the same time by accident was vanishingly low. But hypothesize an angry employee or ex-employee determined to ruin a batch of methyl isocyanate, and exactly what happened begins to look like a few hours' work instead of a wildly improbable accident. Habits of thought that come from decades of working on natural epidemics are likely to be way off base — and not in the conservative direction! — if there is an intelligence masterminding the epidemic.

g. On balance, how worried are you, and how worried do you think we should be? Is this a just-to-be-on-the-safe-side precaution and your intuition (not guaranteed) is that it'll be okay? Or is your intuition (not guaranteed) that we're at the start of a major crisis? Who feels the other way? These are questions that agencies are rarely willing to answer, though I believe they are worth answering. We need to be able to distinguish a for-the-record warning from a clear-the-decks warning; both are grounded in uncertainty, but the odds (at least the qualitative odds) are different.

h. When will you know more? What evidence are you looking for? What would it take for you to decide that it's a false alarm? What would it take for you to decide that it's a major crisis?

i. What are you doing in the meantime to protect public health and/or to get ready to move if it turns out to be the real thing? What have you considered doing but decided not to

do, at least until you know more? Why did you decide these matters as you did? In particular, what precautions did you reject, for now, because they are themselves dangerous or costly or otherwise damaging?

j. What will you do if you learn X or Y or Z?

k. What should we be doing in the meantime? What more can we do if that doesn't feel like enough? What's the minimum we must do if we think you're overreacting?

l. What will we have to do if you learn X or Y or Z?

m. What if you're wrong? Suppose this turns out to be nothing, and you frightened and inconvenienced us (and cost the economy lots of money) unnecessarily? Suppose this turns out to be a major catastrophe, and you hesitated to bring out the big guns? This is anticipatory guidance, and it is crucial to good communication in an uncertain situation. Explain that it would be possible to respond more or less than you have decided to respond; explain why you've chosen the response you've chosen; discuss what sort of debate went into the decision, and the extent to which opinion among the decision-makers is or isn't homogeneous; explain that your decision might turn out wrong in either direction; acknowledge (if it's true) that hindsight is going to make it clear eventually what you should have done, and everyone (you too) will wish that's what you'd done; apologize in advance for the high probability that you won't have got it exactly right; express the fervent hope that you come close, and that you err on the side of over-protectiveness rather than underprotectiveness.

How to discuss uncertainty:

a. Do more than acknowledge uncertainty. Insist on it repeatedly. Explain that it is crucial to talk about this **suspected/here/now** emergency, but just as crucial to remember how much uncertainty is intrinsic to the topic.

b. Discuss degrees of uncertainty. You may be able to use error bars, confidence limits, and other quantitative indicators. But probably not. You can still distinguish the things you're "pretty sure" about from the ones you think are "likelier than not, but still uncertain" from the ones you think are "possible, but a long shot" from the ones you think are "very, very unlikely, but not impossible."

c. Explain what you have done or are doing to reduce the uncertainty, when you will know more and how much more you will know. But don't overpromise. If it'll take a long time to find out, say so. If we may never know for sure, say that.

d. Explain conservativeness. (But don't feel obliged to use the word, which people tend to misunderstand.) In general, the appropriate response to uncertainty is over-protectiveness. That is, policy is grounded in a "better safe than sorry" posture designed to err on the side of caution. But explain, also, that precautions also have risks and costs. Medications have side-effects; evacuations cause traffic fatalities; quarantines can paralyze an economy and traumatize a population. It can be hard to decide which is the more protective response to a **suspected/here/now** emergency, to assume the worst or to watch and wait. Often an intermediate strategy is the wisest one.

e. Report dissenting opinions, both from within your organization (documenting that robust debate is alive and well) and from the outside. Critics' opinions are especially helpful. "Here's what we think. Here's what our critics think. The truth is almost certainly somewhere in that range." Of course everyone would prefer unanimity. But acknowledging dissent is better than trying (and almost inevitably failing) to hide it. Moreover, acknowledging dissent allows you to describe its limits: Some issues are hotly contested, but some opinions are real outliers, and some opinions nobody holds.

f. Don't hide behind uncertainty. If it's more than likely that the crisis is real, despite lingering quality control problems, say so.

g. Don't perpetuate uncertainty. If there are ways to answer the question that you should be pursuing, say so. And do it!

h. Never say "There is no evidence of X" when you haven't done the study that tests the possibility.

i. Stress that finding out for sure may be less important than taking appropriate precautions now. Inexpensive and safe precautions may be appropriate even for very unlikely risks.

j. Acknowledge that there is room for disagreement about what to do in the face of uncertainty. The probability and consequence of various possible scenarios are technical questions; so are the benefits and risks of various ways of coping with those scenarios. But the final decision is grounded as much in values as in science — and on values questions, laypeople's answers are as valid as experts' answers. Remember this when people try to influence your organization's decisions about how to cope with a **suspected/here/now** emergency. Listen.

k. As much as possible, leave people free to craft their own individual responses to uncertainty. Some will want to take more precautions than you recommend, while others will be more casual about the risk; try to legitimate and permit both responses.

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5. Suspected/Here/Future

Communicating about a **suspected/here/future** emergency is a lot like communicating about a **suspected/here/now** emergency — except that since the problem hasn't actually arisen yet, the communication is entirely hypothetical. That means you can't say much about the details of the situation, since there is no situation yet. But you still have to talk about uncertainty, and you still have to address the kind of choice you may someday face, and the kinds of questions you'll be looking at as you try to decide.

Since there is no pending emergency, you have all the time you need to design and implement your communication strategy — a rare luxury.

But since there is no pending emergency, it is enormously tempting not to communicate at all. I'll once again use my favorite example, the idiosyncratic case of chicken pox that might or might not be smallpox. If it's smallpox, you need to impose a quarantine and start vaccinating, the

sooner the better. If it's not smallpox, a quarantine/vaccination program will cause a lot of unnecessary suffering and probably some deaths. It's hard enough to persuade health agencies to go public when they actually face the problem. Why on earth go public when you don't, and maybe never will?

The answer in a nutshell: How well a community copes with the **suspected/here/now** emergency depends very largely on whether the community was forewarned, whether there was a dialogue about the possibility when it was **suspected/here/future**. What you want to achieve with such a dialogue:

- You want to get advice — our (the public's) input on the nontechnical aspects of the problem. Consider this question: Which do we prefer, a one-in-a-thousand chance of 5,000 deaths (watch and wait) or a one-in-ten chance of 50 deaths (start the ring vaccination now)? I realize the question grossly oversimplifies and misrepresents the choice. But it captures part of what the choice is about. And you don't know our answer.

- You want to get acceptance — to make sure we understand that suspected emergencies require tough decisions, and that it is impossible to guarantee the "right" decision. And you want to make sure we understand that suspected emergencies aren't that unlikely, that you could face that idiosyncratic chicken pox case tomorrow. Above all, you want to make sure we understand that we will wish desperately for the comforts of certainty, that we'll be tempted to blame you for being unsure.

- You want to build consensus — to work toward a community that has a shared idea of how it will respond to suspected emergencies, who will make the decision and what criteria will be used to make it.

It isn't easy to get a widespread community dialogue on a hypothetical problem. But by the time the problem isn't hypothetical, it is far too late for dialogue. So you do what you can. You alert as many people as you can to the possibility of facing a suspected emergency and needing to act without knowing enough. Your stakeholders — by definition, the people who care — participate in the dialogue. As for the rest of us, at least we had our chance, and if the problem actually arises we may remember that we had our chance.

Although talking about a **suspected/here/future** emergency isn't that different from talking about a **suspected/here/now** emergency, there is one communication technique that is especially likely to be needed for this paradigm: Dilemma-sharing.

How to do dilemma-sharing:

a. Say you're not sure what to do. That is the essence of dilemma-sharing. Dilemma-sharing is to the future what acknowledging uncertainty is to the past and present.

b. Don't give the impression of total ignorance. Saying you're not sure what to do is not the same as claiming to have no idea what to do, or claiming not to have considered what to do. Of course you've worked on the problem, and of course you have some ideas. But if you're not sure, say you're not sure — and say why. "We're trying to decide between X and Y. X has these advantages and disadvantages. Y has those advantages and

disadvantages. We ruled out Z easily for the following reasons — but the choice between X and Y is a tough choice."

c. Use dilemma-sharing when you really haven't decided — and ask for guidance from your stakeholders and the public. Use dilemma-sharing also when you have decided — to make it clear that it was a tough decision, that you know the choice you didn't make has merit. This has several advantages: (a) Those who favor the losing choice feel respected; their preferred option got its due consideration. (b) Those who favor the losing choice can't easily pretend that they are obviously right, when you're saying it's not obvious at all who's right. (c) Those who want to depend entirely on your judgment now and blame you later if you were wrong are forced to recognize that you're not God and not claiming to be God; that you're not sure.

d. Above all, use dilemma-sharing when you have made some preliminary decisions but the issue is far from closed, when you are open to influence. That makes it ideal for a **suspected/here/future** emergency.

e. Predict that you will make some mistakes: "We're going to do X rather than Y for the following reasons. We may turn out wrong." Better yet: "We will have to choose between X and Y. Whichever one we choose, we may turn out wrong." It is precisely the impossibility of being sure, and the need to decide without being sure, that constitutes the dilemma.

f. Remember the seesaw (see "The Seesaw of Risk Communication" in "Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action," http://www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm#seesaw). Whichever side of a difficult choice you endorse, ambivalent listeners will be inclined toward the other side, the vacant seat on the seesaw. (This is especially true for a **suspected/here/future** emergency; in mid-crisis, by contrast, people become more dependent, and the game may change from seesaw to follow-the-leader.) Dilemma sharing is moving toward the fulcrum, weakening your endorsement of one side so that our impulse toward the other side becomes comparably tentative. Moving all the way to the fulcrum would mean describing the choice as a toss-up and taking no position. This is the purest form of dilemma-sharing; it is also the most painful to your audience.

g. Consider yet another seesaw option: Moving past the fulcrum to the other side. "Recommending" a solution you actually don't much like raises ethical concerns, of course. It's almost out of the question in mid-crisis. But for a **suspected/here/future** emergency — that is, a hypothetical situation — this "devil's advocate" strategy isn't crazy. Suppose a health department expressed the view that quarantining would never work until the medical diagnosis was firm because the public just wouldn't accept such a disruptive response to an uncertain risk. Mightn't the public climb onto the other seat and insist on a "when in doubt, quarantine" policy?

h. Expect the public to resent your indecisiveness. This is a seesaw of its own: When the authorities exercise their power, the public demands a voice; when the authorities consult openly and express uncertainty, the public asks whatever happened to leadership. Choose the latter problem over the former. Resist the temptation to decide unilaterally, to sound confident, to pretend that there is no dilemma. Better to irritate your audience now by acknowledging uncertainty and sharing the dilemma than to claim omniscience now and risk paying a far higher price later in outrage and lost credibility.

i. Tell people that you know how miserable all this uncertainty makes them; that it makes you miserable too. Tell them that you will resist the temptation to sound confident when you are not, and you hope they will resist the temptation to blame you for not being sure. This is another example of anticipatory guidance. People respond better to bad things if they haven't been blindsided, if they've been forewarned not just about what is likely to happen but also about how they are likely to react.

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6. Suspected/Here/Past

I can cover this one in just a few paragraphs.

The challenge of communicating about a **suspected/here/past** emergency depends entirely on what sort of job you have done when it was a **suspected/here/future** emergency and then a **suspected/here/now** emergency.

If you shared the dilemma of how to cope with **suspected/here/future** emergencies, and then when you actually faced a **suspected/here/now** emergency you were candid about the situation and the uncertainty, you should be in good shape for the post-event recriminations. Of course there will still be post-event recriminations, especially if you "guessed wrong." You waited too long to act, or you acted precipitously. People will want to Monday-morning-quarterback your decision. Let them. In fact, do it yourself, as aggressively and self-critically as you can. For more guidance on how to manage the situation, see the section on **obvious/here/past** emergencies.

The recriminations will be magnified many times over if the uncertainty came as a surprise, if you "guessed wrong" unilaterally and secretly. (And of course the fact that you acted unilaterally and secretly will make us far likelier to conclude, after the fact, that you acted incorrectly as well.) The recovery strategy is still the same: Lead the attack on yourself, providing ameliorating information (what you did right) but focusing far more on the damning information. But you have a lot more to apologize for — not just how you managed the emergency and how it turned out, but also your failure to consult or even to warn.

Of course you could get lucky. If you decide not to share the dilemma of **suspected/here/future** emergencies, you can still hope you never face one. If you do face one — that is, if **suspected/here/future** turns into **suspected/here/now** — and you keep your decision-making to yourself, you can still hope you "guess right" and we never find out.

If this strikes you as defeatist and depressing, reread the sections on **suspected/here/future** and **suspected/here/now** emergencies. Maybe the advice to be found there will seem more tolerable now that you have considered the alternative.