

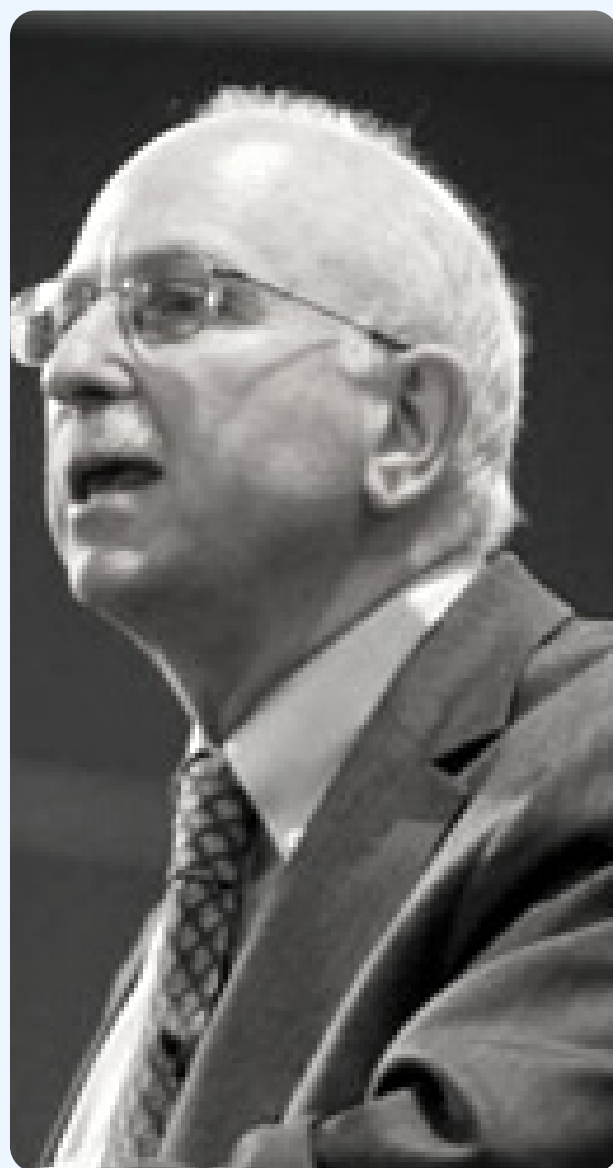
Why So Much COVID-19 Crisis Communication Has Failed

An Expert Explains

Introduction

As the creator of the “Risk = Hazard + Outrage” formula for risk communication, [Dr. Peter M. Sandman](#) is one of the preeminent risk communication speakers and consultants in the United States today. He has also worked extensively in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere.

He recently co-authored a paper entitled Effective COVID-19 Crisis Communication for the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) that focuses on lessons that can be learned not only for COVID-19 response, but for crisis communications in general. The following is an excerpt from a conversation Critical Mention was lucky enough to conduct with Dr. Sandman.



Q

The first two points in the recent CIDRAP paper on Crisis Communications discuss avoiding over-assurance and proclaiming uncertainty. These principles make sense but may go against people's natural instincts. What advice would you give to communications officers who are trying to get their organizations to embrace these principles even when their colleagues are hesitant to do it?

A

The [paper you're referencing](#) emphasizes that it's hard to resist the temptation to over-reassure when a crisis is ongoing. People are frightened. Communicators are worried about panic (pointlessly, since real panic is rare in crisis situations, though panicky feelings are common enough). The urge to calm the waters is extremely seductive.

During the pre-crisis phase, the temptation to over-reassure is similarly hard to resist for completely different reasons. People are complacent; they're either unaware of the possible crisis looming over them or they have shrugged it off as too unlikely to be worth worrying about. Instead of being worried about panicking people, you're worried that you'll be criticized, ignored, or even mocked if you try to warn them. Worse yet, the crisis may fizzle and prove your critics right.

Some things I have said to clients to try to persuade them not to over-reassure the public - undoubtedly the commonest error in crisis communication:

1. I usually started by acknowledging that they're inevitably going to want to say reassuring things. "Just because it's tempting doesn't necessarily mean it's a mistake," I'd say. "But if it's a mistake, it's the sort of mistake leaders are prone to make unless they consciously resist the temptation and think hard about what's the smart thing to do."
2. I sometimes urged clients to think about famous instances of over-reassurance - from British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who signed a treaty with Hitler and predicted "peace in our time" to U.S. President Donald Trump who predicted COVID-19 would magically disappear on its own. I invited them to come up with an over-reassurance bad example or two of their own, maybe from their organization. "Do you want to join their number?" I'd ask.
3. Particularly with regard to pre-crisis over-reassurance, I often asked clients what they were telling their Boards of Directors. "Are you assuring them everything's going to be fine, or are you laying out the risks candidly?" Then I'd ask them to explain to me why it's wiser or more ethical to over-reassure employees or the public than to over-reassure the Board.

4. I often asked clients to imagine what they will say after the situation gets worse (if it does). “When that time comes, what will you wish you had said now? Consider saying those things now.”
5. Of course crisis situations are often extremely unpredictable. Over-reassuring your audience isn’t the only risk; there is also the risk of over-alarmed them. I always tried to acknowledge this forthrightly. Then I would note that the risks aren’t parallel. Over-reassurance is both more likely and more harmful than over-alarm. It’s not “damned if you do and damned if you don’t.” You’re damned if you over-reassure and merely darned if you over-alarm. “It’s worse than we thought” is a credibility-destroying thing to have to tell people. “It’s not as bad as we feared” is far more survivable.
6. And on top of it all, I would explain, over-reassurance doesn’t work. Some people buy it at first, relax, and don’t take precautions they ought to have taken. Later when the truth comes out, they rightly feel misled; their trust in you is gone – and they may very well boomerang to the opposite extreme, convinced that the risk is even bigger than it is. Other people smell a rat from the outset. They feel abandoned, alone with their fear. Their trust in you is gone too – and they’re all the more frightened as a result.

I’m not just talking theory here. We have all paid and are still paying an incredibly high price for the successful propagation of complacency in January and February about the looming COVID-19 pandemic. Over-reassurance worked ... until it didn’t. And then, after doing far too little to contain or at least manage the pandemic virus, I think we did indeed boomerang to the opposite extreme, with lockdowns far more widespread than necessary. We thus managed to achieve arguably the worst possible outcome: a devastating death toll and a devastating economic collapse – both attributable to over-reassurance.

The temptation to sound more confident than the situation justifies often keeps company with the temptation to over-reassure. Overconfident over-reassurance is the cardinal sin of crisis communication.

In my experience, clients were less fervently committed to overconfidence than to over-reassurance. True, everybody would rather sound confident than uncertain. And clients have sometimes been excessively preoccupied with “not looking weak” – one of our current president’s more obvious obsessions (though he has never been a client). But I was usually able to convince clients that when a situation is genuinely uncertain, saying so is both wiser and more honest than pretending you know all the answers.



**"OVERCONFIDENT OVER-REASSURANCE IS THE
CARDINAL SIN OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION."**

My two favorite arguments:

1. In highly uncertain situations, you will inevitably turn out wrong about some things. You'll have no choice but to alter what you're doing or recommending. That will be much easier and much less costly to your credibility if you didn't overstate your confidence in the first place. COVID-19 has provided endless examples of the downsides of overconfidence about conclusions that ought to be tentative: how often the virus is transmitted by asymptomatic people; whether we should wear masks in everyday life; the relative importance of droplets, aerosols, and surfaces as modes of transmission; etc.
2. Even in real time, before you have to say you changed your mind, tentativeness is paradoxically more convincing than confidence. I learned this early as a consultant. When I urged clients to trust me because I know I'm right, they became more skeptical. But when I emphasized that I thought the odds favored my recommendation but there were no guarantees, they were likelier to take my advice. The most effective combination is a confident tone with tentative content. The message of that combination: Making decisions under conditions of high uncertainty doesn't scare you; it's what you do.

The big problem vis-à-vis overconfidence wasn't usually convincing clients that it's wiser to acknowledge uncertainty. The big problem was convincing clients that acknowledging uncertainty isn't enough – you have to proclaim uncertainty. My clients' acknowledgments of their uncertainty tended to be a lot less vivid than their substantive claims. Their tentativeness got lost – and it was too late when they later turned out wrong and tried to point out, "but I said I wasn't sure!"

This is an inevitable problem. At every stage in the communication process, audiences tend to tune out acknowledgments of uncertainty. What you say sounds more confident than you meant it to sound; what reporters write sounds more confident than what you said; what editors publish sounds more confident than what the reporters wrote; what the public remembers sounds more confident than what the editors published.

Proclaiming uncertainty helps only a little, but it does help. In the early days of the SARS outbreak, David Heymann of the World Health Organization said, "We are building our boat and sailing it at the same time." In the early days of the anthrax attacks, Jeff Koplan of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, "We will learn things in the coming weeks that we will then wish we had known when we started." These are both elegant ways of proclaiming that your organization is not confident about what it's doing and you are inevitably going to make some mistakes.



"IF YOU'RE UNDER FIRE IN ANY WAY, KEEPING QUIET IS A BAD RISK."

Q

The paper also mentions the WHO declining to embrace the principle of "admitting errors" in 2005. Obviously, this is another difficult ask for organizations especially when the stakes are so high. Can you provide a historical example when an organization did this and it was beneficial long term?

A

Your question says that admitting errors is "obviously ... another difficult task for organizations." You're totally right about how difficult it is to convince companies and other organizations to acknowledge their screw-ups. And yet it shouldn't be. **Consider the three possibilities.**

Possibility one: when everyone already knows you screwed up. I'll give you three among many COVID-19 examples:

- The CDC distributing a contaminated, defective test for the virus; failing to adopt another country's test instead; and failing to push the FDA to allow states, hospitals, and private labs to develop their own tests.
- New York State forcing nursing homes to accept recovering COVID-19 patients who no longer needed hospital care but were still infectious – contributing substantially to the state's horrific nursing home death toll.
- The entire public health establishment underestimating the importance of asymptomatic and presymptomatic transmission even after the evidence was already pretty persuasive, and therefore insisting that masks and other face coverings were useless against COVID-19 in everyday life.

Here there is simply no downside to acknowledging and apologizing for your screw-up. It's not a secret. It's already fodder for endless news analyses. Everyone knows what you did. Refusing to admit you did it merely prolongs the pile-on. It postpones forgiveness; the forgiveness process begins with confession. And, incidentally, it makes it harder for you to point out any mitigating factors.

Possibility two: It's not a secret that you did it, but it's not widely known. In places where hospitals were overcrowded or feared becoming overcrowded, many health departments urged people with mild respiratory symptoms that were probably COVID-19 to stay home. Some people took this advice too much to heart, became suddenly much sicker (the suddenness being another belatedly learned aspect of COVID-19), and died at home – even though a hospital might have saved them. Health departments revised their advice to stress the importance of getting to an emergency department as soon as you feel short of breath. But as

far as I know, none of them issued statements apologizing for their prior advice that had sometimes turned out deadly.

Here the case for admitting what happened is a bit tougher. Ethics aside, you're playing the odds. It might make sense to keep quiet in a low-profile situation where there's not much media attention; or even in a high-profile situation if you have no critics, nobody interested in digging up the dirt on you. But if you're under fire in any way, keeping quiet is a bad risk. I always urged clients not to take that risk, though I often failed to convince them.

Possibility three: It's a real secret. It takes a saint to acknowledge a misbehavior or mistake that you're confident will never come out unless you acknowledge it. But most misbehaviors and mistakes do come out sooner or later. And when somebody else gets the goods on you, the story does far more harm to your reputation and credibility than if you'd acknowledged the misbehavior or mistake yourself. This is so widely understood that it's a political aphorism: The coverup is worse than the crime.

"Do the math," I used to tell clients. "Let's guesstimate that the truth will do your reputation 20 times as much harm if someone else blows the whistle on you than if you blow the whistle on yourself. That means secrecy makes sense only if you have a better-than-95% chance of success in keeping the secret. If it's only, say, 90%, you're better off revealing all your own secrets, rather than letting one-in-ten get exposed by your critics and do 20 times as much harm."

We all know from life experience that it's usually wiser to own up to our misdeeds than to keep silent and hope they won't come out. But you asked for an example of an organization that benefited from telling a difficult truth. Here's a stunning one. A large copper smelter in a small southern city belatedly discovered that it had been emitting sizable amounts of dioxin from its stacks for years. The privately owned company could have known all along, and could have taken steps to capture the dioxin instead of emitting it – but it never thought to test its stack emissions for dioxin. Then one year dioxin was added to the federal list of toxic chemicals that companies were required to test for and report. The company dutifully tested, found to its surprise that it was emitting a lot of dioxin, filed an honest report ... and called me.

The company's dioxin emissions would probably have come to the attention of activists or regulators eventually. We didn't wait to find out. The company announced the bad news itself, apologizing profusely for its mistake. It spent the next several years in intensive discussions with the community, aimed at figuring out together how best to address the situation. Experts were brought in at company expense to advise the community. Eventually a mitigation plan



**"PEOPLE WHO DO OR STUDY CRISIS
COMMUNICATION ARE LARGELY IN AGREEMENT ON
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was developed, agreed upon, and implemented.

Regulators looked on and ultimately blessed the mitigation plan, with no need for regulatory action. Plaintiff attorneys knocked on doors seeking to launch class action litigation, found few if any takers, and left town. A local activist group was launched to keep the company honest, was accepted by the company as an important accountability mechanism, and became a key source of credibility for the mitigation process.

I checked online this morning. The company is doing fine, very much at peace with its community. One of the many benefits of coming clean that this example illustrates is this: Admitting error is by far the best way to keep people from concluding that you misbehaved on purpose. If in fact your misbehavior was a mistake, it is wise to say so very early and very aggressively.

I have sometimes called this “the stupidity defense.” Misbehaviors fall into two broad categories, stupid and evil. In my experience, companies are stupid a lot more often than they’re evil. But the public generally considers corporations to be highly competent – and therefore judges their misbehaviors to be evil rather than stupid. And of course evil gets (and deserves) much more severe punishment than stupidity. Since evil is the public’s default explanation for all corporate misbehavior, a company’s only opportunity to plead stupidity is to come clean of its own accord. Once a critic has revealed misbehavior that the company tried to keep secret, the stupidity defense is no longer viable.

Q

The CIDRAP paper includes work from a number of experts with fairly diverse expertise. But there is so much information out there, much of it conflicting, even coming from people whose credentials suggest they might have some expertise. How would you suggest communications professionals filter out the bad advice from the good?

A

Crisis communication is a field of study and practice. People in the field don’t necessarily agree on everything. For example, conventional crisis communication advice is to “speak with one voice,” whereas I believe that if differences of opinion exist within an organization, it’s ultimately wiser to let them show. But people who do or study crisis communication are largely in agreement on most of the basic principles. The divergences among us are trivial compared to the huge gulf between what we (all) advise and what our clients are inclined to do.

When I talk about “crisis communication” here, I emphatically do not mean public relations. I will return to that distinction shortly.

I think my advice and the advice of any crisis communication expert is likelier to be right than the intuitions of a client who knows nothing about crisis communication. I think people who may be called upon to manage a pandemic or any crisis should make sure someone on their staff has mastered the basics of crisis communication – and should be prepared to listen to that person when the time comes, even if that person’s advice runs contrary to management intuitions. Much of crisis communication is counterintuitive. Someone has to learn it and know it and be empowered to take charge of it, or the organization is setting itself up to mismanage the crisis.

Still, crisis communication is far from a definitive science. I could never tell clients with certainty that my advice would work and their intuitions would backfire. I think the odds are better my way. But I’ve certainly had clients take my advice to their eventual regret, while others ignored my advice and came out well.

And as your question implies, there are crisis communication advisors out there who aren’t crisis communication experts (in my judgment, at least).

A big piece of the problem is that a lot of practitioners and consultants who call themselves crisis communication experts come from public relations. And the very core of public relations is the assumption that most people aren't necessarily paying close attention. **PR people have two core paradigms:**

- ☛ It’s too bad people aren’t paying attention because you’re trying to grab their attention about something positive your client wants them to know. (This is essentially PR as a tool of marketing.)
- ☛ It’s a good thing people aren’t paying attention because something negative has happened that your client hopes they’ll ignore. You have no choice but to mention it, just for the record, but ideally without getting any attention.

Put even more baldly: The two PR paradigms are good news you have to sell hard and bad news you try to sneak in. This is an unfair oversimplification, of course – a 1950s stereotype that modern public relations professionals will tell you they outgrew long ago. But like many stereotypes, this one captures some truth.

Here’s the problem: Whereas PR is all about people who may not be paying attention, crisis communication is all about people who are riveted. Getting their attention isn’t a problem.



**"MUCH OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION IS
COUNTERINTUITIVE. SOMEONE HAS TO LEARN IT
AND KNOW IT..."**

Avoiding their attention isn't an option.

"Good news you have to sell hard" doesn't apply. Neither does "bad news you try to sneak in." The crisis communication paradigm is helping your intensely attentive audience bear the unavoidable bad news, and helping them make wise rather than unwise decisions regarding what to do about it.

There are of course PR people who can reorient to crisis communication. There are PR people who have reoriented so thoroughly they're excellent crisis communication counselors. I have three or four specific individuals in mind as I write this, people with public relations backgrounds whom I would unhesitatingly recommend to help an organization through a pandemic or other crisis.

But it took a reorientation. Traditional PR is horrible crisis communication.

And beware of terminological confusion. When a traditional PR person talks about a crisis, s/he means a reputational crisis for the client. Some group of stakeholders is raising hell in a way that threatens the client's reputation, and therefore its profitability. The goal is to end the crisis – maybe by meeting the needs of the dissatisfied stakeholders, maybe by convincing them their dissatisfactions were misguided in the first place, maybe by isolating them or disparaging them so other stakeholders don't join in. For PR people, "crisis communication" is a way to manage a threat to the client's reputation.

In a real crisis, the threat is to the stakeholders – typically to their health or safety. The client's reputation may be threatened too, but that's secondary.

Suppose a small group of neighbors are anxious and angry because they mistakenly believe the factory down the street could explode at any moment and devastate the whole neighborhood. This is a crisis for factory management because the neighborhood group might organize, attract media and regulatory attention, win over other neighbors, and ultimately damage the factory's reputation and thus its profitability – maybe even get it shut down altogether. The situation is a genuine reputational crisis for the factory. But it is not a crisis for the neighborhood, even though the group members wrongly think it is.

Three strategies are available to address this controversy:

🌀 Support mobilization: Aim your communications at your supporters, trying to mobilize them



**"IN A REAL CRISIS, THE THREAT IS TO THE
STAKEHOLDERS"**

to defeat the neighborhood group.

- **Outrage management:** Aim your communications at the anxious and angry neighbors, the group's members and supporters, trying to ameliorate their outrage and ultimately looking for ways to help them see that they're mistaken about the explosion hazard.
- **Public relations:** Aim your communications at the rest of the neighborhood, bystanders who are on neither side and not very interested, trying to inculcate a little information on how safe the factory is so they'll be less open to joining that group of troublemakers.

None of these is crisis communication. Crisis communication is when the whole neighborhood already knows the factory genuinely could explode at any moment. A lot of people are rightly upset. The crisis communication task is to help them bear this frightening situation, and help them figure out what to do about it – move out, fight for a safer factory, build a basement shelter, figure the factory's management will take care of it, or what?

Note that I consider myself an expert in both outrage management and crisis communication – two different toolkits for two different risk communication challenges. So there's no reason why somebody can't be an expert in both public relations and crisis communication. It's just that most PR people aren't, and don't necessarily know they aren't.

Bottom line: My crisis communication advice differs in some particulars from what other crisis communication experts might advise. It differs a great deal more from what public relations professionals might advise, especially if they are focusing on the client's reputational crisis instead of the public's real crisis. And it differs enormously from what the client's intuitions are likely to suggest if the client hasn't taken the time to learn some crisis communication basics.

I've tried to put everything I know about risk communication on my website, www.psandman.com, so that with me or without me, people can learn how to do it better. See especially the website's [Crisis Communication Index](#). Or for what I've written about [COVID-19](#), see the COVID-19 section of the website's [Infectious Diseases Index](#).



"CRISIS COMMUNICATION IS WHEN THE WHOLE NEIGHBORHOOD ALREADY KNOWS THE FACTORY GENUINELY COULD EXPLODE AT ANY MOMENT."