

# Crisis Communication: Guidelines for Action

Planning What to Say When Terrorists,  
Epidemics, or Other Emergencies Strike

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Handout from: [Crisis Communication: Guidelines for Action](#)  
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# Crisis Communication: Guidelines for Action

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# Crisis Communication: Guidelines for Action

## Course Outline

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### *Introduction*

- I. *How Bad Is It? How Sure Are You?*
  1. Don't over-reassure.
  2. Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses
  3. Err on the alarming side.
  4. Acknowledge uncertainty.
  5. Share dilemmas.
  6. Acknowledge opinion diversity
  7. Be willing to speculate.
  
- II. *Coping with the Emotional Side of the Crisis*
  8. Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic.
  9. Don't aim for zero fear.
  10. Don't forget emotions other than fear.
  11. Don't ridicule the public's emotions.
  12. Legitimize people's fears.
  13. Tolerate early over-reactions.
  14. Establish your own humanity.
  
- III. *Involving the Public*
  15. Tell people what to expect.
  16. Offer people things to do.
  17. Let people choose their own actions.
  18. Ask more of people.
  
- IV. *Errors, Misimpressions, and Half-Truths*
  19. Acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.
  20. Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.
  21. Be explicit about "anchoring frames."
  22. Be explicit about changes in official opinion, prediction, or policy.
  23. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths.
  24. Aim for total candor and transparency.
  25. Be careful with risk comparisons.

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# Crisis Communication I: How Bad Is It? How Sure Are You?

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1. *Don't over-reassure.* When people are unsure or ambivalent about how worried they should be, they often become (paradoxically) more alarmed if officials seem too reassuring. This can lead to anger and skepticism as well, and to loss of essential credibility if the truth turns out more serious than predicted. A potential crisis is a classic high-magnitude low-probability risk; if you keep assuring people how unlikely it is, they tend to focus all the more on how awful it would be.
2. *Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses.* When giving reassuring information to frightened or ambivalent people, it is helpful to de-emphasize the fact that it is reassuring. "Even though we haven't seen a new case in 18 days, it is too soon to say we're out of the woods yet." This is particularly important when the news is good so far, but there may be bad news coming. Practice converting onesided reassurances into two-sided good-news bad-news combinations until the technique comes naturally.
3. *Err on the alarming side.* While it is obviously ideal to estimate risk correctly, if you have to get it wrong, it is wiser to err on the alarming side. In a fluid situation, the first communications should be the most alarming. "It's better than we feared" is a far more tolerable day-two story than "it's worse than we thought."
4. *Acknowledge uncertainty.* Sounding more certain than you are rings false, sets you up to turn out wrong, and provokes adversarial debate with those who disagree. Say what you know, but emphasize what you don't know ... and the possibility that some of what you "know" may turn out wrong as the crisis evolves. Show you can bear your uncertainty and still take action.

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5. *Share dilemmas.* When it is not obvious what to do, say so. If you're still trying to decide, ask for help; if you have tentatively decided, seek feedback; if your decision is firm already, point out that it was a tough call – and explain the case for and against the major options. Acknowledge that difficult decisions can raise the anxiety level both inside and outside your organization, but insist that it is important for people to bear this reality. One dilemma that always needs explaining: the tradeoff between additional precautions and additional costs.

6. *Acknowledge opinion diversity.* Help the public learn that not all decisions are unanimous. Show that you can bear these differences of opinion, and that each side knows and respects the other side's arguments – that opinion diversity has not fractured your ability to cope with the crisis. Instead of muzzling advocates of differing positions, try to share information and even share the platform. Message consistency is still the ideal, but only if it reflects genuine unanimity.

7. *Be willing to speculate.* Speculation has had a bad press. But in a crisis you can't just say you'll have a report out next month; the information vacuum demands to be filled now. So take the risk of being quoted out of context or turning out wrong, and speculate ... but always tentatively rather than over-confidently, and with due focus on the worst case, the likeliest case, and the other possibilities you haven't ruled out. Notice how often your organization speculates about possible good outcomes (without even considering it speculation), compared to your reluctance to speculate about bad ones. For better results, reverse the proportions.

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## Crisis Communication II: Coping with the Emotional Side of the Crisis

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8. *Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic.* Panic is a relatively rare (though extremely damaging) response to crisis. Efforts to avoid panic – for example, by withholding bad news and making over-reassuring statements – can actually make panic likelier instead. Officials need to rethink their tendency to imagine that people are panicking or about to panic when they are merely worrying ... or perhaps disobeying or distrusting you.

9. *Don't aim for zero fear.* People are right to feel fearful in a crisis. A fearless public that leaves you alone to manage the problem is not achievable. Nor is it desirable; vigilance and precaution-taking depend on sufficient fear. Humans, moreover, are hard-wired to experience and tolerate fear, often becoming less fearful of one object as we become more fearful of another. The extremes of apathy, panic, terror, and denial are all harmful, but in a crisis proportionate fear is not a problem; it is part of the solution.

10. *Don't forget emotions other than fear.* When people are faced with a crisis, the “fear family” is only one possible set of responses. The empathy/misery/depression family” is also extremely common, and deserving of the crisis manager’s attention. Among the other responses: anger, hurt, and guilt. These emotional reactions to crisis are all normal, in emergency responders as well as in the public. But resilience is also normal; most people can cope.

11. *Don't ridicule the public's emotions.* Expressions of contempt for people’s fears and other emotions almost always backfire. Terms to avoid include “panic,” “hysteria,” and “irrational.” Even when they are accurate, these labels do not help and usually they are not accurate. Even when discouraging harmful behavior, such as stigmatization, it is important to do so with sympathy rather than ridicule. If you are frustrated with the public, express your frustration privately, so it doesn't leak out unless you want it to.

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12. *Legitimize people's fears.* Instead of leaving people alone with their fears, help them bear their fears by legitimizing them, and even sharing some of your own. Even technically inaccurate fears can be legitimized as natural, understandable, and widespread: "Despite the evidence that the health risk is very small, even I felt a little nervous this morning when I heard someone coughing on the bus."

13. *Tolerate early over-reactions.* One of the main ways people absorb new risks is by "over-reacting" at first. We stop doing things that suddenly seem dangerous; we become hyper-vigilant about the news and maybe even strangers on the street; we personalize the risk and take precautions that are unnecessary or premature. Psychiatrists call this an "adjustment reaction." It is a useful form of rehearsal, emotional and logistical, and it should be tolerated – if handled well by officials it is the teachable moment. People will settle soon enough into the New Normal.

14. *Establish your own humanity.* Professionals are understandably preoccupied with looking professional. But especially in a crisis, the best leaders reveal their humanity. Express your feelings about the crisis and show that you can bear them; that will help the rest of us bear our own feelings, and help us build a stronger alliance with you. Express your wishes and hopes as well. Tell a few stories about your past, your family, what you and your officemate said to each other this morning about the crisis.

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## Crisis Communication III: Involving the Public

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15. *Tell people what to expect.* “Anticipatory guidance” – telling people what to expect – does raise some anxiety, especially if you’re predicting bad news. But being forewarned helps us cope, it keeps us from feeling blindsided or misled, and it reduces the dispiriting impact of sudden negative events. Warning people to expect uncertainty and possible error is especially useful. So is warning people about their own likely future reactions, particularly the ones they may want to overrule: “You’ll probably feel like stopping the medicine before it’s all gone.”

16. *Offer people things to do.* Self-protective action helps mitigate fear; victim-aid action helps mitigate misery. All action helps us bear our emotions, and thus helps prevent them from escalating into panic, flipping into denial, or declining into hopeless apathy. Plan for this well in advance; mid-crisis is a harder time to start figuring out what to offer people to do – including the legions of volunteers who will want to help.

17. *Let people choose their own actions.* Offering people a choice of actions recruits not just their ability to act, but also their ability to decide. This makes it all the more empowering as a bulwark against panic or denial. Ideally, bracket your action recommendations with less and more extreme options, so people who are less concerned or more concerned than you wish they were do not need to define themselves as rebels; you have recommendations for them too.

18. *Ask more of people.* In a crisis, pro-social, resilient impulses vie for dominance with less desirable impulses: panic, passivity, selfishness. Ally with the former against the latter by asking more of people. Ask for people’s help before the crisis as well as during it. Ask them to help their community and their neighbors (and your organization), not just themselves – but do ask them to help themselves. Ask more of people emotionally too. Give us “permission” to find the situation unbearable, but make it clear that you expect we will be able to bear it.

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# Crisis Communication IV: Errors, Misimpressions, and Half-Truths

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19. *Acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.* People are more critical of authorities who don't talk about the things that have gone wrong than they are of authorities who acknowledge those things. It takes something like saintliness to acknowledge negatives that the public will never know unless you tell. At least acknowledge those that the public does know, or is likely to find out. Make these acknowledgments early, before the crisis is over and the recriminations begin.

20. *Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors.* Forgiveness requires more than acknowledgment; it requires apology, even frequent apology. "Wallowing" in your contrition about what went wrong is (paradoxically) a good way to persuade the rest of us to move on. Even if there is a case to be made that it wasn't really your fault (the tanker captain had been drinking, some madman put cyanide in the Tylenol), you still need to be apologetic.

21. *Be explicit about "anchoring frames."* People have trouble learning information that conflicts with their prior knowledge, experience, or intuition. The pre-existing beliefs and feelings provide an "anchoring frame" that impedes acquisition of the new information. It helps to be explicit about the discrepancy – first justify their starting position (why it was right, or seemed right; why it is widespread), then explain your alternative (what changed; what was learned; why their starting position turns out, surprisingly, to be mistaken).

22. *Be explicit about changes in official opinion, prediction, and policy.* In emerging crises, authorities are likely to learn things that justify changes in official opinions, predictions, or policies. With a new disease, for example, there are bound to be changes in the recommended precautions and the treatment protocol. Announcing the new doctrine without reminding the public that it deviates from the old, though tempting, slows learning and fosters confusion or even suspicion.

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23. *Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths.* It doesn't require an out-and-out lie to devastate the credibility of crisis managers, and thus their ability to manage the crisis. A carefully crafted misleading half-truth can do the same harm, and so can a cover-up of information people later feel they should have been told. Such strategies may work for a while, at least for those who aren't paying close attention. But in a serious crisis many people are paying close attention. They may smell a less-than-candid official line long before they can specify the half-truths and omissions. And the price is high.

24. *Aim for total candor and transparency.* There are always good reasons to withhold some information in a crisis – from fear of provoking panic to fear of turning out wrong. These valid rationales easily become excuses ... and too much gets withheld, rarely too little. People are at their best when collectively facing a difficult situation straight-on. Things get much more unstable when we begin to feel "handled," misled, not leveled with. Even so, you probably shouldn't achieve total candor and transparency, but you can safely aim for it.

25. *Be careful with risk comparisons.* Why are some risks more upsetting than others? The statistical seriousness of the risk is certainly relevant, but so are "outrage factors" like trust, dread, familiarity, and control. In addition, a risk that threatens health care systems, economies, and social stability is likely to be seen as threatening individual health as well, even when it does not. Efforts to reassure people by comparing improbable but upsetting risks to more probable but less upsetting ones feel patronizing and tend to backfire.

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# Four Kinds of Risk Communication

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## 1. Public Relations (also health education) – high-hazard, low-outrage

- Audience: Apathetic and inattentive; but undefended, uninterested in talking back. Huge – most people, most of the time, on most issues.
- Task: To produce brief messages that reinforce whatever appeals are most likely to predispose the audience toward your goals. For serious hazards, this usually means provoking more outrage.
- Medium: Monologue via the mass media
- Barriers: Audience inattention; audience size; media resistance; need to package everything into short sound bites; policy implications of trying to provoke outrage.
- “Silver lining”: There is little need to listen, or to address audience concerns, reservations, or objections; this audience has few if any.

## 2. Stakeholder Relations – medium-hazard, medium-outrage

- Audience: Interested and attentive, but not too upset to listen: The ideal audience ... but a fairly unusual one.
- Task: To discuss the issues openly and rationally, explaining your views and responding to audience questions and concerns.
- Medium: Dialogue in person, supplemented by specialized media (website, newsletter, etc.).
- Barriers: None, except perhaps the inefficiency of one-on-one dialogue. And you have to be prepared to explain the technical details; this is the only audience that really wants to hear them.
- “Silver lining”: This is the easiest communication environment. Duplicating it is the goal of the other three kinds of risk communication.

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# Four Kinds of Risk Communication

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## 3. Outrage Management – low-hazard, high-outrage

Audience:	Outraged, largely at you. A small group of “fanatics” is usually accompanied by a larger, less outraged constituency watching to see how the controversy evolves.
Task:	To reduce audience outrage by listening, acknowledging, apologizing, sharing control and credit, etc. The controversy ends when the “fanatics” declare victory or their constituency thinks they have won enough.
Medium:	In-person dialogue ... in which the “audience” does most of the talking.
Barriers:	The audience’s outrage at you; your own outrage at the audience; accepting the need to focus on outrage when you’d really rather talk about substance
“Silver lining”:	At least you have their attention, though it is hostile (or at least highly skeptical) attention

## 4. Crisis Communication – high-hazard, high-outrage

Audience:	Huge and very upset. In a crisis, the outrage is mostly fear and misery rather than anger; if either is unbearable, it may flip into denial or escalate into terror or depression.
Task:	To help the audience bear its fear and misery. Key strategies include avoiding over-reassurance, sharing dilemmas, being human and empathic, and providing things to do.
Medium:	Monologue via the mass media, and dialogue in person to the extent possible. There is no “public” in a crisis; everyone’s a stakeholder.
Barriers:	The stress of the crisis itself; missing the difference between crisis communication and routine PR.
“Silver lining”:	Though outrage is very high, it is not directed at you. Any anger at you is put aside until the crisis is past.

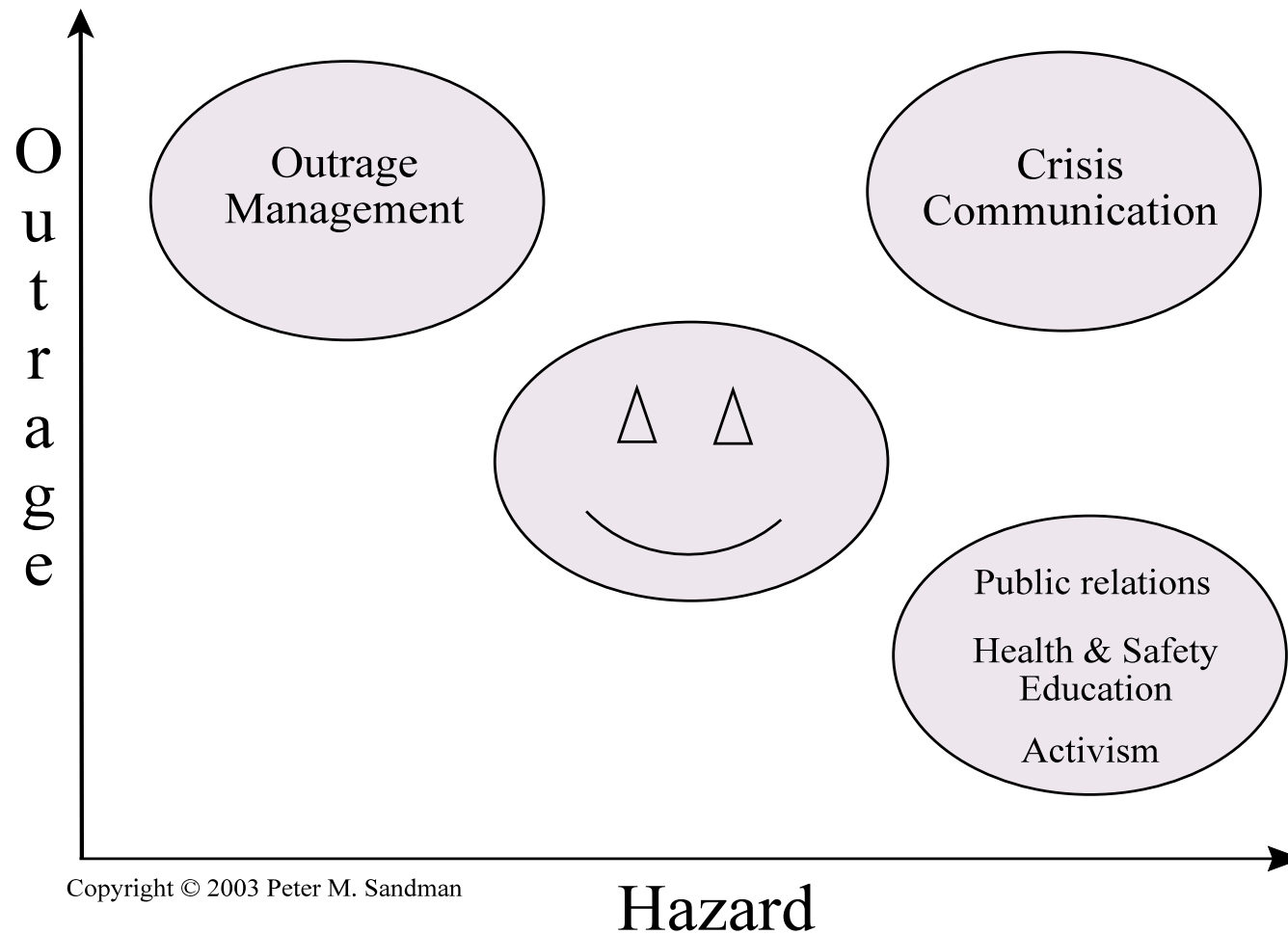
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# Six Focus Areas for Crisis Communication

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1. *Information content.* What do we know about this particular crisis? What do we want our audience to know? How do we communicate this content simply and effectively?
2. *Logistics and media.* How do we reach our audience with our information content? (This is everything from the choice between advertising and free media to the decision about how much photocopy paper to stockpile.)
3. *Audience assessment.* Who do we need to reach? What do they know, think, and feel already? How should this affect the way we communicate our information content?
4. *Audience involvement.* How do we solicit suggestions and feedback from our audience? How do we provide opportunities for people to be active rather than passive?
5. *Metamessaging.* How do we manage the non-information content of our messages (how reassuring to be, how confident to sound, how to address emotion, etc.)?
6. *Self-assessment.* How will our own values, emotions, and political problems affect our communications? What are we likely to get wrong? How can we overcome the internal barriers to good crisis communication?

**The Presentation covers the last four areas only, and focuses especially on Number Five.**

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# The Seesaw of Risk Communication

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Whenever people are ambivalent, seeing merit on both sides of some issue, they tend to focus on the side others are ignoring. When addressing an ambivalent audience, therefore, it is often useful to stress the side that does you harm, leaving the other side – your preferred side – for your audience to stress instead. Thus:

- **Responsibility/blame.** If you emphasize the sense in which a problem is not your fault, we will emphasize the sense in which it is. But if you blame yourself more, we will blame you less.
- **Catastrophic potential.** If you emphasize that a catastrophic possibility is low-probability, we will emphasize that it is high-magnitude. But if you keep saying how bad it would be, we will point out how unlikely it is.
- **Tradeoffs against cost or benefit.** If you emphasize that a risk is “worth it” compared to the alternatives, we will emphasize that it is horrific considered on its own. But if you insist on ignoring the tradeoffs, we will insist that they are crucial to a sound decision.

A longer-term strategy is to move to the fulcrum of the seesaw, forcing your publics to come to terms with their ambivalence, to recognize that there are good arguments on both sides. The worst strategy – and the most common one – is to preempt the position you wish your audience were adopting, as if the game were follow-the-leader instead of seesaw.

*Remember, the seesaw applies only when people are ambivalent.* If they are firmly on one side and you express that side, they won't move to the other side; they'll just tell you it's about time you saw the light.

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# How to Reassure Without Over-Reassuring

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1. *Ride the risk communication seesaw.* Emphasize the ways in which the situation is understandably alarming, and let your audience focus on the ways it is reassuring.
2. *Remember that over-reassurance backfires.* People sense that you're withholding alarming information, and become all the more fearful. Or they learn later that you withheld alarming information, and never trust you again.
3. *Remember that an over-reassured public isn't your goal anyhow.* You want people to be concerned and vigilant, not apathetic.
4. *Recognize that you will be tempted to over-reassure.* So over-compensate. Aim for the alarming seat on the seesaw, and you might wind up closer to the middle.
5. *Don't neglect worst case scenarios.* When talking about the future, be sure to discuss the worst that could happen – as well as less disastrous, more likely possibilities.
6. *Make your first communication on a topic your most discouraging communication on that topic.* “It's not as bad as we feared” is a less damaging day-two story than “it's worse than we thought.”
7. *Never say anything is “safe.”* X may be safer than Y, or pretty safe, or safer than it used to be, or safer than the regulatory standard. But it isn't “safe” – and it certainly isn't “absolutely safe.”

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# How to Reassure Without Over-Reassuring

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8. *Expect criticism for “over-reacting.”* Those who prefer a more reassuring official line will criticize you for scaring people. This is far preferable to being criticized for over-reassuring people.

9. *Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses.* Give people the information they need to feel reassured, but make this information subordinate to the reasons why you are still concerned.

Subordinated reassurance: “Even though we have seen no new West Nile Virus cases in the past month...

Alarming main clause: ... we are still testing dead birds and recommending long-sleeved shirts at night.”

10. *Be careful to warn about possible future risk.* This is the classic opportunity to use subordination: Even though the news is good so far, there may be bad news coming, and it is too soon to relax our precautions or our vigilance. Help people hold onto both sides of the situation at the same time: low present risk and higher potential future risk.

11. *Distinguish risk probability from risk magnitude.* A possible crisis or an emerging crisis is frequently a low-probability high-magnitude risk: The feared outcomes are unlikely but awful. Never say “unlikely” without “awful”; never say “awful” without “unlikely.”

12. *When in doubt, err on the alarming side.* This is the bottom line of reassurance: Be as reassuring as you can be so long as you are virtually certain that reality won't turn out worse than your reassurances. That's less reassuring than you're normally tempted to be.

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# Talking about Worst Case Scenarios

## Eight Principal Strategies

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1. Open your emergency planning files. It may be debatable whether a risk is likely enough that management should be planning for it. What isn't debatable is that if management is in fact planning for it, the community deserves to be told and consulted – plume maps and all.
2. Choose the actual "worst case," not a likelier-but-less-catastrophic "worst plausible case." Better for the community to complain that you're worrying too much about vanishingly unlikely scenarios than for the community to blame you for ignoring such scenarios.
3. Don't understate your worst case, in content or in tone. If you stress the scenario's low probability, the community will stress its high magnitude. Better to stress its high magnitude, and let the community stress its low probability.
4. Acknowledge that risk assessment of catastrophic risks is extremely uncertain, and in key ways less conservative than risk assessment of chronic risks. Accidents happen quite often that were missing from the "event tree."
5. Don't neglect risks attributable to low employee morale – or to sabotage at the hands of a disgruntled employee. These are often the likeliest catastrophic risks, and almost always the most memorable ones.
6. Pay more attention to improving mitigation and prevention than to estimating magnitude and probability. The "right" debate is over what you should be doing about disaster risks, not whether you are quantifying them correctly.
7. If activists have played an important role in getting you to open up your disaster planning, give them the credit they are due, and involve them in the planning and the communication.
8. Some of the regulations for communicating about worst case scenarios may turn out foolish. Don't use foolish regulations as an excuse for doing foolish communication. Do what's required *and* what's sensible.

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# Avoiding Overconfidence in Uncertain Situations

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1. *Ride the risk communication seesaw.* Someone is going to point out that the experts and authorities are feeling their way through unmapped territory. Ideally, that someone should be the experts and authorities themselves, instead of their critics or their publics.
2. *Recognize that you will be tempted to sound over-confident.* The more uncertain and vulnerable you feel, the more you will be tempted to hide those feelings in overconfidence. Anticipate the temptation and compensate for it.
3. *Be especially careful about over-confident reassurances.* Over-confident warnings can also be a problem (remember the Bush Administration's warnings about WMD in Iraq), but the most common double-barrelled mistake is over-confident overreassurance.
4. *Try to replicate in your audience your own level of uncertainty.* Tell people what you know for sure, what you think is almost but not quite certain, what you think is probable, what you think is a toss-up, what you think is possible but unlikely.
5. *Avoid explicit claims of confidence.* Reserve the word "confident" for things you'd bet your mortgage on. "Hopeful" is a better word for desirable outcomes that are likely but not certain.
6. *Don't imagine hedge words let you off the hook.* "At this point in time we are 100% sure the milk is safe to drink" is still unacceptably overconfident, despite the introductory phrase.
7. *Where appropriate, point out explicitly that you are not confident.* Even better, predict that some of what you now think is true will turn out wrong as the crisis evolves. This is the best way to keep changing circumstances from being seen as earlier mistakes.
7. *Make your content more tentative than your tone.* Calmly and even confidently telling us you could well be wrong inspires trust while it alerts us to the genuine uncertainties of the situation. The reverse combination, claiming to be sure in a tone that sounds very unsure, is disastrous.

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# Avoiding Overconfidence in Uncertain Situations

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8. *Show your distress at having to be tentative – and show you can bear it.* You wish you could be sure; you know you can't; you fully intend to make all necessary decisions even though you must do so without being sure. This models the reaction you want us to have.
9. *Show you are aware of the public's distress at how tentative you must be.* And show you expect the public to be able to bear it too.
10. *Expect some criticism for your lack of confidence.* The only alternative is criticism for over-confidence, often from the same critics. That's worse.
11. *Don't go too far.* You could come across as bumbling, timid, indecisive, or terminally self-deprecating. But this problem is rare. Coming across as arrogant and over-confident is far likelier – unless you over-compensate.

**Why acknowledge uncertainty?** Because over-confidence:

- Rings false, undermining the public's confidence (even if you turn out right).
- Provokes acrimony, making those who disagree much more contentious than they would be if you sounded less cocksure.
- Devastates your credibility and your ability to lead if you turn out wrong.

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# Dealing with Uncertainty

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1. Don't wait to be confronted. Acknowledge uncertainty up-front.
2. Put bounds on uncertainty. What range of possibilities is credible?
3. Clarify that you are more certain about some things than others.
4. Explain what you have done or are doing to reduce the uncertainty.
5. If the remaining uncertainty is very small or very difficult to reduce further, say so. Don't overpromise.
6. Explain conservativeness.
7. Report everyone's estimates – even environmentalists' – not just yours.
8. Don't hide behind uncertainty. If it's more than likely that the problem is real, despite lingering QA/QC problems, say so.
9. Don't perpetuate uncertainty. If there are ways to answer the question that you should be pursuing, say so.
10. Never say “there is no evidence of X” when you haven't done the study that tests the possibility.
10. Stress that finding out for sure may be less important than taking appropriate precautions now.
11. Acknowledge that people disagree about what to do in the face of uncertainty.
12. Get people involved in reducing uncertainty themselves.

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## Dilemma Sharing – When Should You Do It?

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1. *When the situation is a toss-up.*

There is no basis for a decision, even a tentative one. If it's your call, you're waiting for more evidence or flipping a coin. If it's our call, you have no advice for us – just the information that we're not being foolish whichever way we go.

2. *When you haven't decided yet.*

You are trying to decide what you're going to do or what you think we should do. It's a tough call. You would welcome our help – our experience, information, opinions, and feelings.

3. *When you have made a tentative decision.*

There is still time to change your mind; your decision (or your recommendation) is tentative and preliminary. Now is the time to explain both your rationale and your doubts, and seek our feedback.

4. *When your decision is firm ... but could still be wrong.*

Make it clear that you have made your choice, at least for now. But it was a close call. Outline your reasons for deciding as you did. But respectfully explain the case for the “losing” position(s) too. You may turn out wrong; say so.

**So when *shouldn't* you do dilemma sharing? When the decision is genuinely a no-brainer. The rest of the time – most of the time – share the dilemma.**

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# The Risk-versus-Cost Dilemma

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**Risk management cannot avoid cost-risk tradeoffs.** And risk communication cannot avoid talking about them. The dilemma is especially acute in crisis communication, when cost considerations are likeliest to seem inappropriate. Here's how to discuss the issue.

1. *Discuss cost-risk tradeoffs as a dilemma, not a no-brainer.* Arguing cost as a reason not to take precautions is offensive. Arguing that you will take "all possible precautions" regardless of cost is dishonest and incoherent. The only intellectually respectable position is that you must make difficult decisions about which precautions are cost-effective ... and which ones you can afford.
2. *Share the dilemma.* In considering tradeoffs between safety and money, bear in mind that when it is the public's safety and the public's money, it should therefore be the public's decision. (The question is more complicated when it is one group's safety and a different group's money.) You may have special expertise on the shape of the cost-risk curve. But how much to spend for how much additional protection is a values question, on which you have no special expertise at all.
3. *Raise the issue before the crisis.* Post-crisis discussions of what precautions should have been taken are a kind of Monday-morning quarterbacking. After bad things have happened, then obviously in hindsight we should have done more to prevent them. The more useful discussion comes before the crisis, when the answer is far less obvious.
4. *Remember that "cost" isn't just money.* Precautions against terrorism, for example, have costs in freedom, privacy, and convenience. A thorough consideration of cost-risk tradeoffs must consider all the costs, not just the financial ones. And don't neglect opportunity costs – the things you won't be able to do if you do this instead.

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# The Risk-versus-Cost Dilemma

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5. *Help people anticipate how they will feel if they guess wrong.* Aside from getting the benefit of their wisdom, your goal in sharing the cost-risk dilemma is to get buy-in, so people feel part of the decision – and keep feeling that way even after a crisis materializes. This works only if you help them anticipate how it will feel if we buy a hundred million vaccine doses and the disease peters out ... or if we decide not to vaccinate and the epidemic strikes.
  
6. *Show you know this is hard stuff to bear, but expect people to bear it.* People like to pretend they don't have to make hard choices – and then blame officials for making them secretly and (in hindsight) badly. When sharing hard choices, it is important to do so with compassion. But remember that we all make emotionally difficult cost-risk tradeoffs in our own lives. Parents, for example, balance their children's safety against other priorities. We do it with considerable angst. But we do it. If we don't do it much on policy issues, it's not because we can't; it's because we're not usually asked to.

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# How to Let Opinion Diversity Show

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1. *Don't muzzle anyone.* In a crisis, the media will find sources with a wide range of views. Individuals similarly mobilize their own information networks of friends and neighbors. It is usually futile to try to muzzle potential sources. They'll probably end up talking anyway; even if they don't, their reticence will give the impression of cover-up, while outliers who are willing to comment will have that much more impact.
2. *Instead, let everyone tell what they know and what they think.* Devote substantial effort to briefing everyone you can. Include even your critics on the briefing list. Instead of trying to keep people muzzled, try to keep them up-to-speed.
3. *Let the internal decision-making process show.* If the decision was obvious and everyone agreed, say so. If the decision was tough and reached only after robust debate, say that. Don't just permit the dissent to show. Go out of your way to make it show, to demonstrate that your organization considered all the options. While this can raise some anxiety, it helps build a more mature alliance with the public.
4. *Let the range of opinion show.* Typically, there is near-consensus on some issues. On other issues there is considerable debate. "Most people thought either A or B, a few argued C, but there was virtually no support for D or E or F." Try to communicate both what was debated and what was not.
5. *Don't require revisionist history.* If the decision was made after robust debate, some of those on the losing side probably still think they were right. Don't make them pretend otherwise. They must be willing to explain the final decision and its rationale. But showing that they understand, respect, and will implement the decision doesn't have to mean pretending that they supported it. (Those who do not respect and cannot implement the decision may need to quit or go public.)

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# Guidelines for Responsible Speculation (even though you don't like the word!)

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1. *Don't speculate over-confidently.* If it's speculation, by definition you're not sure. Don't sound sure. Keep insisting that you're not sure.
2. *Don't speculate over-optimistically.* Over-pessimistic speculation is also a mistake, but a much rarer one. Over-optimistic speculation is so common it isn't even seen as speculation ... but it is.
3. *Don't refuse to speculate.* Saying nothing until you are sure what will happen (or what has happened) leaves an information vacuum for less responsible sources. You can't do risk communication without speculating.
4. *Clarify what you know as well as what you don't.* Distinguish your speculations from your more definite information.
5. *Clarify the extent of your uncertainty.* Distinguish the likely hypotheses from the unlikely ones. But make clear that even the likely ones are still only hypotheses.
6. *Acknowledge discrepant opinions.* If you are aware of others' speculations, summarize them – and what you think about them. Distinguish consensus speculations from hotly debated ones from off-the-wall ones.
7. *Don't neglect worst case scenarios.* “What's the worst that could happen?” is always on people's minds. Answer the question, even if the worst case is extremely unlikely, and even though some people wish you wouldn't talk about it.
8. *Acknowledge everyone's discomfort.* You wish you knew what was going to happen and didn't have to speculate. You know we wish that too.
9. *Explain what you are doing to find out more.* Also explain when you expect to know more. And if some questions may stay unsettled forever, tell us that too.

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# “Panic Panic” and Fear of Fear

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## “Panic Panic”

1. *Don't expect panic when it's unlikely.* Panic is relatively rare. People may feel panicky in a crisis, but they usually act in calm and orderly ways.
2. *Don't think it's panic when it isn't.* Disobedience, mistrust, worry, and even excessive caution are not panic. And be careful not to project your own panic (or your performance anxiety) onto the public.
3. *Don't try to “allay” panic by misleading, blindsiding, or over-reassuring people.* These strategies, paradoxically, might even provoke panic.

## Fear of Fear

1. *Don't overestimate the harm done by fear.* This error includes the false expectation that fear will inevitably escalate into panic and the mistaken belief that people cannot tolerate their fear. It also includes the failure to notice that fearful people often rise to resilient and even heroic behavior, and seldom stay fearful for long before settling into the New Normal.
2. *Don't underestimate the good done by fear.* Fearful people are more vigilant, more likely to take precautions, more tolerant of preparedness inconvenience and expense.
3. *Don't imagine that fear can be avoided.* Fear is inevitable in response to new and frightening risks. Even more fundamentally, fear is ever-present; mostly, it is reallocated rather than created to accommodate a new object.
4. *Don't do harmful things to avoid frightening people.* Withholding information, making over-reassuring statements, and expressing contempt for people's fears tend to backfire, frightening the public all the more.
5. *Don't forget to do things to help people bear their fear.* Offer people things to do; legitimize their fear; show that you also are fearful, and can bear it; show that you think they can bear it too.

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# “Panic Panic” and Fear of Fear

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## What Roosevelt Really Said

When U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned Americans in 1933 that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” he wasn’t telling people not to be frightened of the Great Depression. He was telling them not to allow their understandable, justified fears to keep them from doing what needed to be done. The fear he feared was excessive, extreme, over-the-top fear – not normal fear, as the quotation is usually (mis)interpreted.

The exact quote is instructive:

*“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”*

Too much fear – terror, panic, or denial – gets in the way of action. So does too little fear. To aim for the optimal level of public fear conducive to our ability to cope with the crisis, officials must first overcome their “panic panic” and their fear of fear.

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# Levels of Fear – Which Is the Goal?

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- Panic** Panic is horrific when it happens. But it is rare. Although you should have a contingency plan for coping with it, don't neglect other priorities.
- Apathy** Apathy is the most common response to risk, and even to crisis. Most people's attention may be riveted, but some are sitting the crisis out, and therefore
- Denial** Denial is a much more common problem than panic. People in denial act apathetic – that is, they don't take precautions. But frightening them more would only push them more deeply into denial. Legitimize their fear instead, and help them bear it, so they can withstand the temptations of denial.
- Interest** Interest is too close to apathy to be appropriate for a genuine crisis. Interested people watch passively; you need people to act.
- Concern** Still too mild. People are concerned about inflation and crime rates and their children's grades. Crisis demands something more.
- Terror** Terror is the goal of terrorists. Terror is too close to panic; it is incapacitating.
- High Concern** High concern is what we settle into when the crisis has passed and we are adjusting to the New Normal. It is the highest level people may be able to sustain (though over the long haul we tend to retreat to mere concern). But for the crisis itself it's not quite high enough.
- Fear** Fear is the right response to crisis. It is high enough on the scale to ensure that people are putting aside their routine concerns. It is low enough on the scale to ensure that most people can cope. In a crisis, in short, proportionate fear isn't the problem. It is part of the solution.

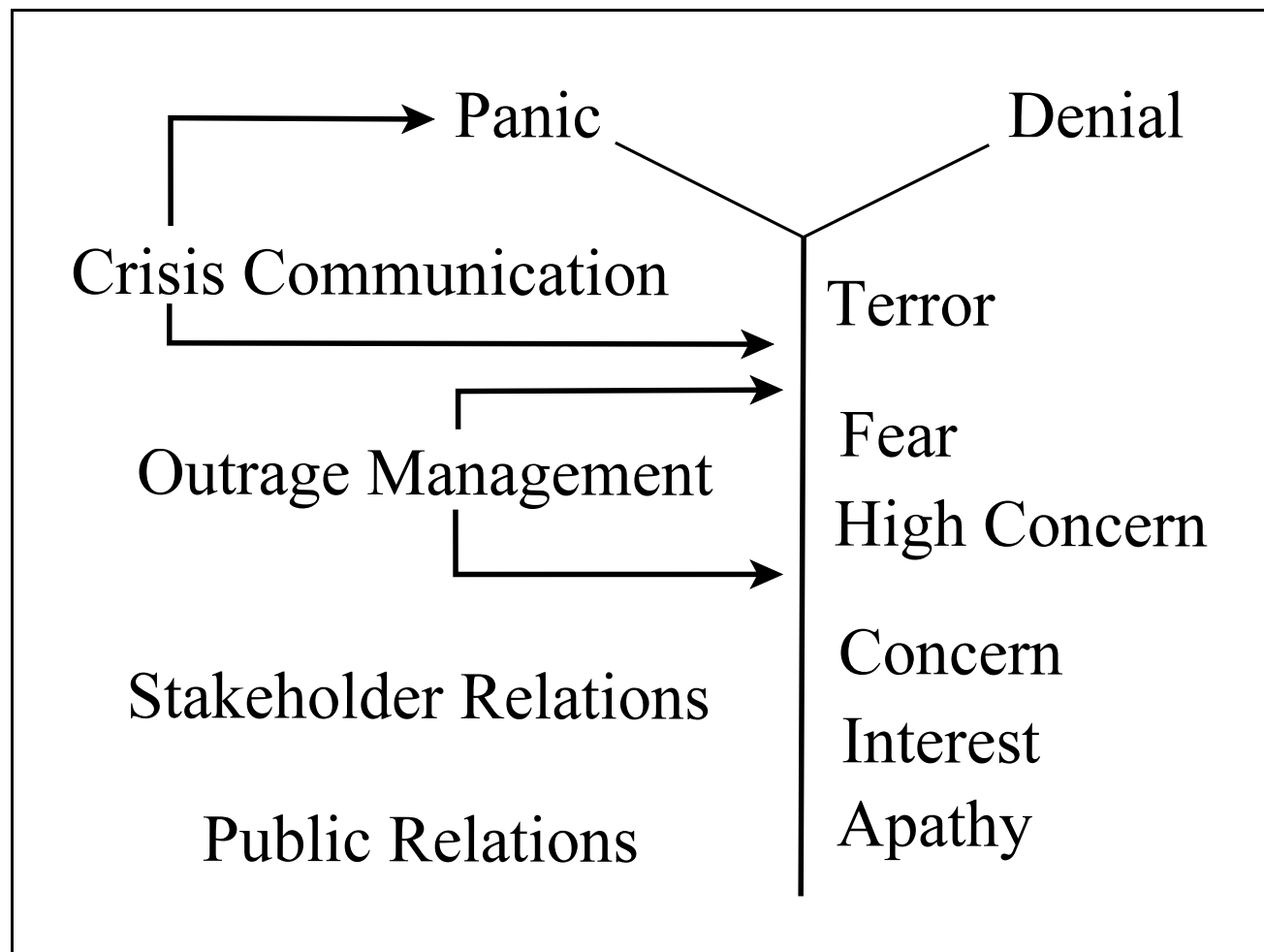
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## Levels of Fear – Which Is the Goal?

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# Beyond Panic Prevention: Addressing Emotion in Emergency Communication

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(Based on work done for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

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1. **Fear, Panic, and Denial**
  - a. Panic is relatively rare. People usually don't panic in emergencies.
  - b. Denial is much more common. To reduce denial, provide action opportunities, and accept fear as natural and appropriate.
  - c. Over-reassurance is the wrong response to all levels of fear. Be candid – but gently candid for those in denial.
  
2. **Vigilance, Hypervigilance, and Paranoia**
  - a. Hypervigilance is a normal response to emergencies. Harness it by telling people what “warning signs” to look for.
  - b. To disentangle hypervigilance from paranoia, validate the hypervigilance.
  
3. **Empathy, Misery, and Depression**
  - a. Empathy for victims causes sadness; extreme or prolonged sadness turns into misery or even depression.
  - b. Treat the misery as legitimate. Expect people to bear it, and help them bear it by offering them ways to aid victims.
  
4. **Anger, Hurt, and Guilt**
  - a. Validate anger and provide socially acceptable ways to express it.
  - b. Injured self-esteem (hurt) is a natural response to intentional attacks. Validate it and help people bear it.
  - c. People often feel guilty in an emergency – guilty that they survived, that they can't adequately protect their families, that they are still worried about routine hassles. Once again, help them bear it.
  
5. **Resilience.** Expect people to recover from emergencies, though perhaps not immediately or easily. “Post-traumatic growth” is real.
  
6. **You Too.** Emergency responders have all these responses also. Take care of yourself and your people.

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# Adjustment Reactions

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**When someone first learns about a new and potentially serious risk, the natural, healthy, and useful reaction is, in a limited sense, an “over-reaction”:**

1. *You pause.* You stop (or try to stop) doing things that suddenly look like they might be dangerous (eating hamburgers, spending time in tall buildings) while you wait to see what’s going to happen.
2. *You become hyper-vigilant.* You watch CNN for hours. You check Google News periodically. You may even scrutinize suspicious-looking people in nearby cars, restaurant booths, and airplane seats.
3. *You personalize the risk.* You imagine what it would be like if a risk that is already hurting others, and may be coming your way, were actually here now.
4. *You take extra precautions* – precautions that are probably unnecessary, at least so far. You go out for Mexican food instead of Chinese food (SARS) or Chinese food instead of Mexican food (hepatitis).

**These responses are what psychiatrists call an adjustment reaction. Characteristics of the adjustment reaction:**

1. *It comes early in the crisis.* This may be the start of a crisis that hasn’t yet gotten here or gotten big. Or it may be a precursor event, a potential crisis that doesn’t turn into an actual crisis this time.

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# Adjustment Reactions

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2. *It is temporary.* The adjustment reaction is a short-term phenomenon that eases the transition to the New Normal. Very few people get stuck in a long-term overreaction (those that do get stuck may need professional help). Most people “overreact” briefly.
3. *It serves as a rehearsal.* The adjustment reaction is an emotional rehearsal, getting you psychologically ready to cope if you have to. And it is a logistical rehearsal, getting you ready logistically as well.
4. *It is a “small” over-reaction.* The adjustment reaction is excessive only because it is technically premature. If and when the actual crisis arrives, this level of reaction and more may well become entirely appropriate.
5. *It reduces the damage done by later events.* People who have gone through a successful adjustment reaction are less likely to over-react to an actual crisis that follows, and they tend to recover from it faster. They also recover more quickly from a crisis threat that does not materialize.

**This is the teachable moment. Instead of criticizing or ridiculing the public’s adjustment reactions, officials should legitimize and guide them.**

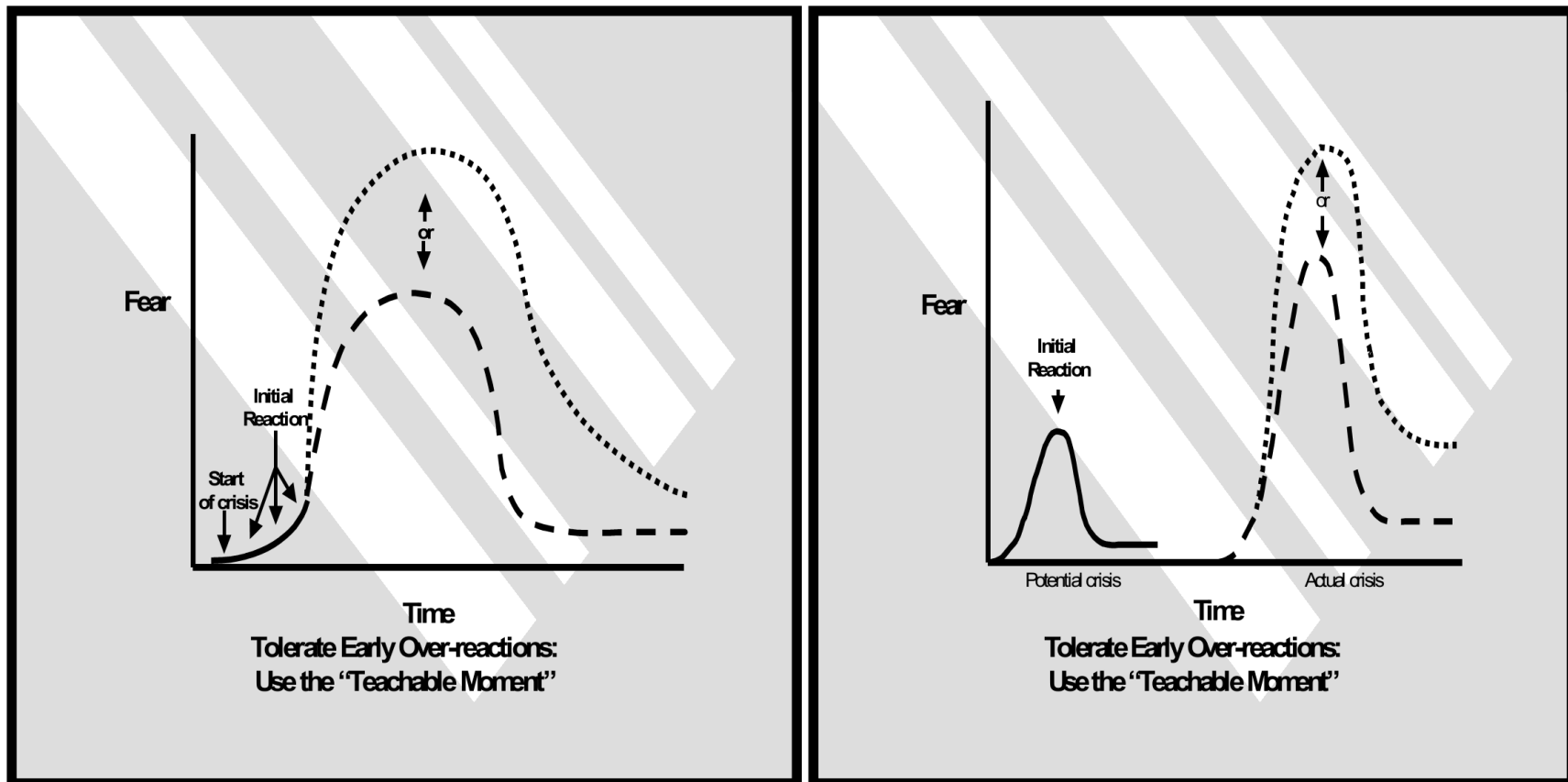
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# How to Establish Your Own Humanity in a Crisis

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1. *Let your emotions show.* Don't fake them – just stop faking not having them. Whatever you are feeling in response to the crisis, unless there is a good reason not to do so, let it show. Mute it a bit if you think you should, but don't hide it altogether.
2. *Model bearing your emotions.* Leaders who seem to be cold and emotionless are useless as role models for a public trying to cope with its emotions. Show that your feelings don't keep you from doing your job.
3. *Don't just describe your emotions; emote.* You may need to modulate a little, but your language, demeanor, and nonverbal communication should match the situation. Too calm is as bad as too emotional, and a lot likelier.
4. *Focus on fear and misery.* These two are the most universal emotions in crisis situations. If that's not what you're feeling, just keep in mind that your response is unusual. If it is what you're feeling, let some of it show.
5. *Express wishes.* "I wish we knew more." "If only we had stockpiled more vaccine before the epidemic began."
6. *Talk about yourself.* You have a life, a family, a professional history. Tell us a little about them.
7. *Use personal pronouns.* "I," "me," and "my" are intrinsically personal. So are "we," "us," and "our" ... and "you" and "your." Compare "the department wishes to express its sympathy" with "my heart goes out to...."
8. *Look the way you feel.* If you're sleepless and a little haggard, let that show too.
9. Don't always stop to shave or put on makeup or change into fresh clothing before appearing on camera.
10. *Don't worry too much about looking professional.* Looking professional is important – but you won't forget to look professional. You are at risk of forgetting to look human.

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# Giving People Anticipatory Guidance

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**“Anticipatory guidance” is a term-of-art for telling people what to expect.**

## **The benefits of anticipatory guidance:**

- People don't feel blindsided. Trust in you increases.
- People can prepare themselves emotionally and logistically, and therefore can cope better when the time comes.
- People don't feel so alarmed. Advance warning does raise some anxiety of its own if it's about possible bad outcomes – but not nearly as much as uncertain waiting or surprising bad news.

## **Why you won't want to do it:**

- Why make people worry before you have to?
- Why put foolish ideas into their heads?
- What if you turn out wrong?

## **Three situations where anticipatory guidance is especially useful:**

1. *When it's about bad news to come.* “We think there will probably be some secondary infections soon.” “Some of the patients now hospitalized can be expected to die.” “Most experts expect more attacks.”
2. *When it's about uncertainty and possible error.* “We will learn things in the coming weeks that everyone will wish we had known when we started.”
3. *When it's about our own likely reactions.* “A lot of patients have trouble not scratching the vaccination scab.” “By next week people may be experiencing feelings of anger and helplessness.” “You will probably be tempted to go off the antibiotic after a week or two of these side-effects.”

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# Encouraging an Active Rather than Passive Public

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## Why to encourage people to act:

- Action binds anxiety. People who are doing things to protect themselves can bear their fear better and are less likely to flip into denial.
- Action reduces misery. People who are doing things to help others are less likely to sink into depression or hopeless apathy.
- Action teaches lessons. People who are doing things seek out information to make sense of what they are doing. They teach themselves that the danger is real (otherwise action would be unnecessary) and that it is manageable (otherwise action would be futile). This is exactly what we want them to learn.
- Action is useful for the situation itself. At every stage of the crisis – before, during, and after – people can be of genuine service to themselves, their families, their neighbors ... and you.

## How to encourage people to act:

1. *Offer people things to do.* People are more likely to take action when the action opportunities are clear.
2. *Ask people to do things.* Some people respond better to the offer (“here’s what you can do if you want”), some to the request (“here’s what we hope you will agree to do”). Provide both.
3. *Let people do things.* If many people are settling on some action of their own that helps them feel safer or less miserable, think twice before you criticize their choice. Unless it is really dangerous, you would be wiser to tolerate it.

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# Encouraging an Active Rather than Passive Public

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4. *Support symbolic actions too.* Symbolic action is a poor substitute for genuinely useful action. But almost any action is greatly preferable to no action at all. And sometimes symbolic action (flying flags, wearing buttons, etc.) can be a moralebuilder and a path out of paralysis.
5. *Model the actions you recommend.* If you want people to give blood, give blood. If you want them to wear face masks, wear a face mask. Make your go-kit and your three-day supply of food into a photo-op.
6. *Tell people how.* “Mobilizing information” is information that helps people implement a course of action: the telephone number of the volunteer center, the instructions for storing the antibiotic. People often make a tentative decision to act, then stop because they are not sure how to begin. Mobilizing information gets them over the hump.
7. *Offer a choice of actions.* Giving people a menu of actions to choose from recruits not just their ability to act, but also their ability to decide. It is therefore even more effective in helping people bear their fear and misery.
8. *Bracket recommended precautions.* X is the minimum precaution you consider acceptable. Y is your recommended precaution. Z is an additional precaution for people who feel especially vulnerable. Surrounding your Y with an X and a Z yields more compliance with Y. And it defines those who prefer X or Z as still part of the plan, not rebels.
9. *Leave some decisions to the individual.* Many crisis management decisions really need to be collective. But voluntary choice gives people a greater sense of control, which reduces the probability of denial or panic. Frame some individual decisions without any recommendation.

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# Encouraging an Active Rather than Passive Public

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10. *Seek people's advice.* On decisions that need to be collective, seek public input on what the collective decision should be, sharing the dilemma and empowering the community. Go beyond pro forma public involvement to encourage public debate on difficult decisions before the decision is made.
11. *Plan to use volunteers wisely.* In a crisis, many people will volunteer to help. Turning them away is a lose-lose. Work on legal and logistical issues in advance, so when the crisis comes you will be ready to manage a volunteer workforce.
12. *Ask more of people.* In a crisis, pro-social, resilient impulses vie for dominance with fear, passivity, and selfishness. Ally with the former against the latter by asking more of people at every crisis stage – before, during, and after. People do more, and feel better, when they are asked to do more.
13. *Ask more of people emotionally too.* People cope better when asked and expected to cope. (Of course some people also need “permission” to be unable to cope, at least for a while.) Even while validating how frightened or powerless people may feel, communicate that you know they will mostly be able to get through it and act appropriately despite their feelings.
14. *Tap into the social structure.* Reach out now to existing organizations, from social clubs to tenants associations to service groups. Involve them in pre-crisis decisionmaking. Ask them to organize their own networks – to help people get ready for the crisis, and to get ready to help people if the crisis materializes. Nurture people's autonomy and interdependence, rather than their dependence on you.
15. *Notice and publicize examples of empowered action.* Look for role models – acts of resilience and creativity and altruism. Acknowledge and validate them. Spread the word.

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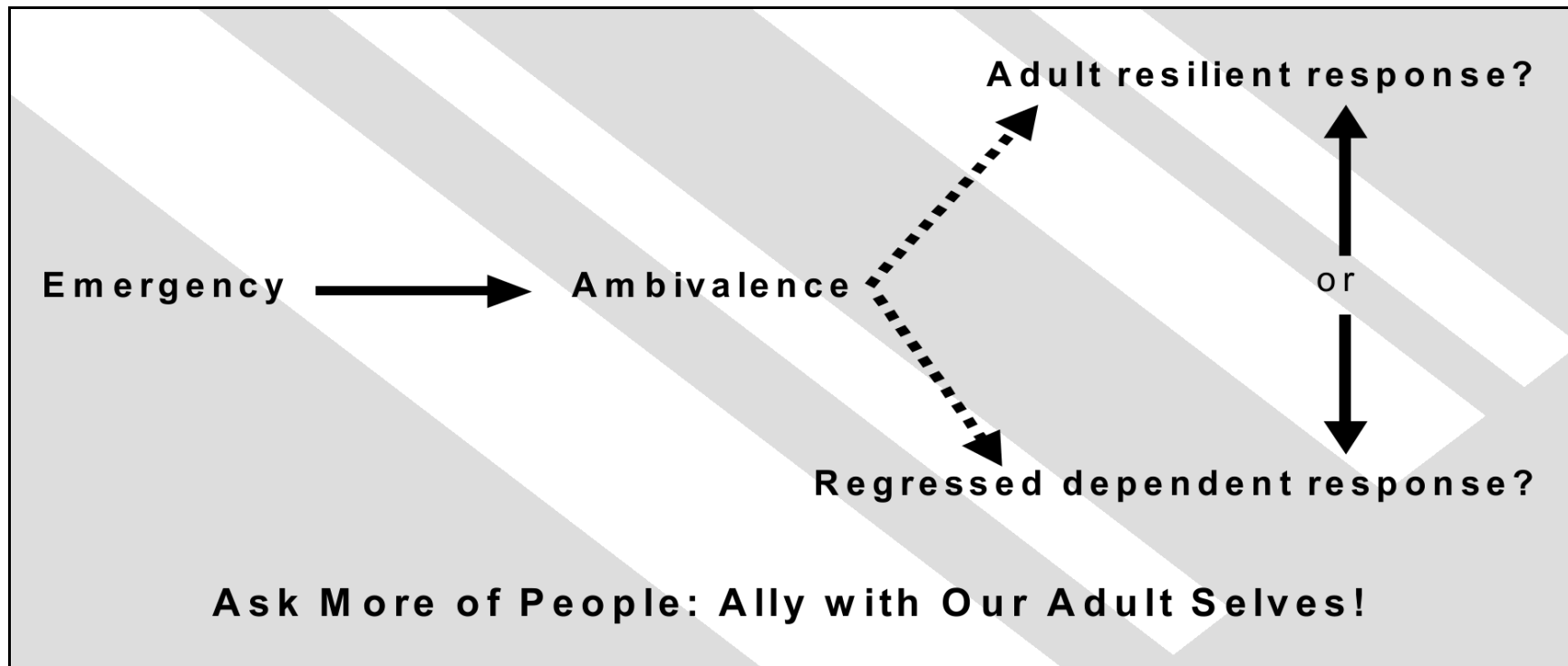
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## Encouraging an Active Rather than Passive Public

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# Acknowledgment, Blame, and Forgiveness

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## Part I: Acknowledging errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors:

1. *Acknowledge known or knowable negatives.* People are paying attention in a crisis. They are unlikely to miss the embarrassing news. So you want to be the one to tell them.
2. *Wallow in the bad news.* Don't just talk about it – talk about it endlessly, until they're sick of hearing about it ... which is long after you are sick of talking about it.
3. *Get your acknowledgments in early.* Mid-crisis is the best time to acknowledge negatives. People are counting on you to protect them, so they don't want to dwell on your inadequacies. Your real-time acknowledgments will make the issue less newsworthy later, when the crisis is over and the recriminations begin.
4. *"Acknowledge" false accusations too.* Explain what the critics have said and why it is understandable that they feel that way before you argue that they are mistaken. "I know there are people who think that..."
5. *Think about revealing secrets.* Whether to acknowledge negatives that nobody knows and nobody is likely to find out – to blow the whistle on yourself – is a tougher call. But remember that most secrets do come out eventually, and then they do far more harm than if you'd revealed them yourself earlier.

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# Acknowledgment, Blame, and Forgiveness

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## Part II: The seesaw of blame:

1. *Make it clear that you're sorry.* You'll get no credit for acknowledging negatives if people can't tell you know they're negatives. You've got to sound sorry.
2. *Take your share of the blame.* Typically, there is a sense in which it's your fault and a sense in which it isn't. If you blame yourself more, we will blame you less. "If only I had realized...." is your line. "How could you have known?" is ours.
3. *Do not blame others.* Scapegoating backfires, even when there is some truth to it. The more you try to put the blame on someone else, the more we blame you. This is especially true when the "someone else" is the public itself. Instead, take the blame for the public's mistakes: "I wish I had found a way to convince people that...."
4. *Give people the exculpatory information.* Give us the information that shows you did your best, you couldn't have helped it, it was really someone else's mistake, etc. But slip this information in without too much emphasis (put it in a subordinate clause, for example). Let us use it to conclude that you're being too hard on yourself.
5. *Think about legal repercussions.* You may need your attorney's help to find ways of taking your share of the (moral) blame without increasing your legal vulnerability more than the situation justifies. But don't let your attorney talk you out of taking any blame at all.
6. *Don't let others take you on a seesaw ride.* Beware the tendency to become defensive about a problem, simply because others are criticizing you for it. Before 9/11, most terrorism experts argued strenuously that the U.S. was inadequately prepared. After 9/11, critics took up the same argument – and many experts found themselves insisting it wasn't so.

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# Acknowledgment, Blame, and Forgiveness

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## Part III: The dynamics of forgiveness:

When it's flat-out your fault, there is no seesaw, only repentance and forgiveness. You must go through all the following steps in the right order:

1. *Admit what you did.* There is no credit for hypothetical apologies: "Whatever I might have done that might have offended some people, I'm sorry."
2. *Be quiet while we berate you.* As all couples know, preemptive apologies don't work. We need to express our outrage before we're willing to hear your apology.
3. *Say you're sorry.* Being sorry has three elements: (a) Regret – you wish it hadn't happened; (b) Sympathy – you feel bad for the victims; and (c) Responsibility – you know you had something to do with making it happen.
4. *Learn your lesson.* Explain what you have changed so it won't happen again – or if that's too much to promise, so it will happen less often.
5. *Make us whole.* Compensation can't replace apology, or people feel bribed and all the more outraged. But part of forgiveness is doing something for the people who were damaged.
6. *Do a penance.* The last stage of forgiveness is the penance. We need to see how bad you feel, how chastened or even humiliated you are. Only then are we ready to move on.

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# Anchoring Frame Fundamentals

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1. *Remember that people are not blank slates.* People have pre-existing knowledge, opinions, values, and emotions that they bring to the crisis situation. They listen to your communications through the filter of all this pre-existing content – their anchoring frames. You need to adjust your message to match.
2. *Study your publics.* Good crisis communication requires knowing the anchoring frames of your various publics. That may mean surveys and focus groups – periodically in normal times and even nightly in mid-crisis. If you can't do formal research, you can still ask some people what they think. Even guessing is better than not even considering what people's anchoring frames might be.
3. *Hook your message to anchoring frames that support it.* Where possible, build your case on the foundation of our pre-existing supportive opinions, values, and feelings. Whatever predisposes your publics to respond the way you want us to respond, appeal to it often.
4. *Explicitly address anchoring frames that run counter to your message.* You cannot correct misimpressions by ignoring them. You need to address them explicitly, acknowledging that they are widespread and why they seem convincing. Only then is it useful to explain why they are, surprisingly, mistaken. Take us with you from X to Y. Don't ignore that we think X and just keep insisting Y-Y-Y-Y.
5. *Watch out for your own anchoring frames.* You too will see the crisis through the filter of your own preconceptions. Among the anchoring frames to watch out for: that people are prone to panic; that all fear is bad; that leaders can never admit doubt or error; that crisis communication is no different from ordinary public relations; that it's easier to manage the crisis if the public leaves you alone.

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# Some Important Anchoring Frames in Crisis Situations

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1. *People are frightened and you're trying to reassure them.* Start by explaining why it makes sense that they are frightened, before saying why you think the risk is low.
2. *People are apathetic and you're trying to alert them.* Start by acknowledging that it must seem like you are over-reacting, before saying why you think the risk is serious.
3. *People want to take a precaution you think is unwise.* Start by agreeing that the precaution is tempting and seems like it ought to be helpful, and that it is natural to want to find some precautions to take.
4. *People are shocked or disgusted or put off their normal behavior.* Start by conceding that, technical risk aside, the revulsion is natural.
5. *People are responding as if a distant risk were here already.* Start by validating that it really is potentially very serious and worth getting ready for, even though it's still far away and precautions aren't needed yet.
6. *People are responding as if a distant risk were guaranteed not to get here.* Start by validating that it really is far away and precautions aren't needed yet, even though it's potentially very serious and worth getting ready for.
7. *People know what you predicted would happen, and now something different has happened.* Start by reminding them of your original prediction and describing how it turned out wrong.
8. *People know what your policy has been, and you're about to change the policy.* Start by reviewing the old policy and the reasons for it, before getting to what changed that led you to revise the policy.
9. *People don't trust you.* Start by admitting that many people don't trust you and going back over what happened to cause the mistrust.

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# Candor about Candor

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1. *Outright lying is comparatively rare.* Most organizations – government and corporate alike – try hard not to flat-out lie.
2. *Misleading half-truths are extremely common.* Carefully crafting what you say in order to mislead without lying is the norm (though not a good idea).
3. *Secrecy and cover-up are also extremely common.* Withholding or downplaying information you would prefer people not to know is also the norm.
4. *It doesn't feel like what it is.* You know your intentions are good, so your distortions and secrets don't feel misleading to you. They feel like leading.
5. *There are many "good reasons" to mislead.* The information hasn't been quality controlled; critics will take it out of context; the public might panic; your reputation and ability to manage the crisis would suffer. And so forth.
6. *There are many good reasons not to mislead.* Candor is at the core of credibility.
7. The truth usually comes out in the end. People are at their best when collectively facing a difficult situation straight-on; things get much more unstable when we begin to feel "handled," not leveled with, misled.
8. *You probably mislead too often.* Excessive candor exists, but it is not a common problem. Insufficient candor is a very common problem.

## **An off-the-wall recommendation:**

Keep a written list of every time you decide to be less than completely candid about a crisis. Write down why you thought it was important to do that. Keep being candid with yourself about how often you are not quite candid with the public. Periodically imagine your list on the local newspaper's front page; if your reasons won't look persuasive there, perhaps you should reconsider them now.

Try to view each item on your list as a crisis of conscience. An occasional crisis of conscience is to be expected. If you have them often, and without thinking of them as crises of conscience, you're headed for trouble.

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# How to Do Risk Comparisons

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## Why risk comparisons are problematic:

1. *Risks vary on many dimensions at the same time.* Three are particularly important in crisis communication:
  - How dangerous is it to the individual member of the public right now?
  - How dangerous is it in other ways? Does it threaten health care systems, economies, or social stability? Is it wreaking havoc somewhere else? Is it potentially devastating in the future?
  - Even if not dangerous, how upsetting, terrifying, or infuriating is it? Does it run afoul of “outrage factors” such as dread, familiarity, trust, control, responsiveness, and memorability?
2. *Risk comparisons normally focus on only one of these dimensions.* Most common is the “reassuring” comparison that insists X is less dangerous to the individual right now than Y ... so we are foolish to ignore Y and obsess over X. This ignores the other two dimensions of risk, on which X may actually be far worse than Y.
3. *Risk comparisons of this sort tend to backfire.* Even if the comparison is accurate as far as it goes, it is likely to feel patronizing and deceitful to the public. Instead of reassuring people, it leaves them alone with their fears.

## Two ways to make risk comparisons work better:

1. *Compare risks on multiple dimensions.* X is less serious as Y in this way. But it is more serious than Y in that way.
2. *Bracket the risk.* X is less serious than Y (on the dimension we’re discussing now), but it is more serious than Z.

These approaches work better because they feel like efforts to inform our judgment, not coerce it; to enlighten us, not corner us.

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# Is This a Good Risk Comparison?

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1. Are you really sure of the data about both risks in the comparison?
2. Is the comparison risk lower in outrage than the risk under discussion? Is it, for example, natural, voluntary, or familiar?
3. Are you really trying to make the size of the risk clear, or are you trying to “show up” opponents? (For example, are you making any comparisons to risks *smaller* than the one under discussion?)
4. If you were on the receiving end of this risk comparison – for a risk that concerned you – would you find the comparison useful or irritating?
5. Does your comparison seem to be trying to preempt the decision about the acceptability of the risk? Are you acknowledging that risk acceptability is not a technical question?
6. Is your comparison “homey,” snide, or slightly humorous – rolls of toilet paper stretching around the world, etc.?
7. Is your comparison likely to seem self-serving? If so, have you acknowledged that you have a stake in convincing people?
8. What is the relationship between you and your audience? How sensitive is the situation, and how cautious do you have to be in choosing a comparison?
9. On balance, do you suspect in advance that your the audience may reject or resent this comparison? Is your goal to be “right,” or is it to communicate effectively?

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# Avian Flu Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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The early 2004 outbreak of avian flu in Asia was a catastrophe for Asian poultry farmers. There was also some risk of a human influenza pandemic, if the virus mutated to a form as dangerous as the H5N1 bird flu virus and as infectious as ordinary human flu.

The following quotations come from early 2004, when the issue was in doubt. For each quotation, try to identify which of our 25 recommendations the speaker is following or not following. Most are examples of several recommendations at once.

As you complete the exercise, notice that the good examples sound fairly normal ... as normal as the bad examples. Good crisis communication can feel wooden at first. But to the audience it sounds fine.

1. When World Health Organization spokesman Bob Dietz confirmed the good news that a Vietnamese woman's bird flu virus contained no human influenza genes, he said:  
*The results are encouraging, but unfortunately, they are still not the conclusive proof we need to fully discount the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the H5N1 virus.*
2. Earlier in the Asian outbreaks, WHO's Peter Cordingley said:  
*If it latches onto the normal human flu virus, which is very contagious, then it could go around the world very quickly and cause widespread damage – many, many deaths.... This is a doomsday scenario which we hope is not going to happen, but WHO obviously has to take this very seriously ... because the flu virus is incredibly unstable and we don't know how to predict its movement.*

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# Avian Flu Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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3. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had denied rumors that bird flu had spread to Thailand. When he finally admitted the truth, he said:  
*It's not a big deal. If it's bird flu, it's bird flu. We can handle it.... There has been a lot of talk that the government has been trying to cover this up. That we didn't say anything doesn't mean we weren't working. We've been working very hard.... Please trust the government. It did not make an announcement in the very beginning because it did not want the public to panic.*
  
4. Later, a senior Thai public health official said:  
*The first wave of the bird flu outbreak has passed ... but we don't know when the second wave will come, and we don't trust the situation.... So the Public Health Ministry is being as careful as possible.*
  
5. When China's central government confirmed that Chaoan, in southern Guangdong province, had an avian flu outbreak, a senior Guangdong official denied it, saying:  
*According to whom is there an outbreak in Chaoan? The chickens could have died from car accidents or could have died from food poisoning.... Many farmers use excessive insect killers in their fields.*
  
6. Discussing the potential for bird flu to combine with human flu and cause a pandemic, the chief of microbiology and parasitology at the University of the Philippines Medical School said:  
*We should worry. It kills. It kills.*
  
7. As pneumonia patients in Vietnam started being tested for bird flu, Hanoi's hospitals were filling with patients. WHO's Bob Dietz explained:  
*This doesn't necessarily mean we are seeing more [bird flu] cases. They are being tested.... But this is not a valid indication of what is going on in the countryside. It is a very narrow window. The situation could be far worse elsewhere or it could be better.*

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8. Bob Dietz again on the risk of human-to-human transmission:  
*Although we have seen no evidence of human-to-human transmission the next step would be for that to occur.... It is impossible to predict a time or date for this but there are mounting opportunities for the virus to alter its form and begin affecting the human population.*
  
9. Although Singapore was still free of bird flu, the government announced a practice drill that would include the actual culling [killing] of 5,000 chickens. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained that Singapore would:  
*...overreact rather than underreact.*
  
10. Although India had no confirmed avian flu outbreaks so far, neighboring Pakistan had the disease. Rumors were widespread that India had it too. Chicken consumption plummeted, and some farmers decided to cull their own flocks. A government official said:  
*We might implement the state Prevention of Cruelty Against Animals Act against any poultry farmer who would kill large number of birds, which is capable of sending a wrong message to the people.*
  
11. In the U.S., Delaware faced a simultaneous outbreak of a different avian flu virus. After it struck a second Delaware flock, Agriculture Secretary Michael Scuse said:  
*The source of the infection to the second farm is unknown at this time.... This development is completely unexpected given the precautions we took, the investigation we made and the industry's expectations of this disease's behavior. We will be taking immediate actions to contain this disease, but this is now a serious situation for the Delmarva poultry industry.*

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12. Discussing the agonizing impossibility of quickly culling millions of chickens without compromising worker safety and humane treatment of animals, Hans Wagner of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization said:  
*There's such tremendous pressure to control the disease and slaughter as many birds as possible, some concessions are being made for the sake of speeding up the culling process.*
  
13. When U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization officials in Vietnam reported that pig nasal swabs had revealed exposure (but not necessarily infection) to avian flu, Peter Roeder at FAO headquarters in Rome commented:  
*So what?... We've known for many years that these viruses infect pigs.... Let's just try and be a little bit rational about this.... Let's not be alarmist.... At this time we have seen no data that would indicate that pigs are in any way involved in spreading the current strain of H5N1 influenza virus.*
  
14. After unconfirmed reports that several house cats had died of avian flu in Thailand, WHO's Dick Thompson said this would probably not pose a high risk of spread to humans, explaining:  
*It isn't the kind of animal we would be worried about as a mixing vessel – like we would be if we saw the infection in pigs, for instance.*
  
15. Canada's Richard Schabas told the Canadian Broadcasting Company that WHO was over-reacting to a virus that had only infected 14 humans so far. He said paranoia was more pandemic than knowledge, adding:  
*We understand so little about real interaction between bird virus and human virus that we're not in a position to comment intelligently on the possibility of [human-to-human] transmission happening.*
  
16. After a multinational Bangkok conference on the avian flu situation, WHO spokesman Peter Cordingley told the media:  
*Officials appeared shaken.*

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# Avian Flu Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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## Answers:

1. Acknowledge uncertainty; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [good example].
2. Be willing to speculate; err on the alarming side; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
3. Don't over-reassure; aim for total candor and transparency; don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic [bad example].
4. Tell people what to expect; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses; acknowledge uncertainty [good example].
5. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths [bad example]. Note that this is also an example of speculating and letting official disagreement show – but the speculation is over-reassuring and the disagreement isn't respectful or credible.
6. Legitimate people's fears; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
7. Acknowledge uncertainty; tell people what to expect [good example].
8. Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses; tell people what to expect; acknowledge uncertainty [good example].
9. Err on the alarming side [good example].
10. Tolerate early over-reactions; don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic; don't ridicule the public's emotions [bad example].
11. Acknowledge uncertainty; acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; be explicit about "anchoring frames"; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [good example].
12. Share dilemmas [good example].
13. Don't ridicule the public's emotions; acknowledge opinion diversity; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [bad example].
14. Be careful with risk comparisons [good example].
15. Be willing to speculate; don't aim for zero fear [bad example].
16. Legitimize people's fears; establish your own humanity [good example].

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# SARS Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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In March 2003, the World Health Organization declared an unprecedented global alert about an unnamed disease that would soon be called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Here are some highlights from the ensuing months. For each numbered item, try to identify which of our 25 recommendations is being followed or not followed. Most are examples of several recommendations at once.

As you complete the exercise, notice that the good examples sound fairly normal ... as normal as the bad examples. Good crisis communication can feel wooden at first. But to the audience it sounds fine.

*March 2003: The first few days after the global alert:*

1. Dick Thompson of the World Health Organization told reporters that because there had been so few deaths so far, “one might think we are overreacting to the cases. But when you do not know the cause, when it strikes hospital staff, and it certainly is moving at the speed of a jet, we are taking this very seriously.”
2. The WHO’s David Heymann said: “It is not clear what is going on and it is not clear what the extent of the spread will be.... It is a very difficult disease to figure out.” Heymann added that the global alert “was a pretty radical decision, and I didn’t sleep that night because I knew that what we were doing was going to have a lot of different repercussions.”
3. Hong Kong Secretary for Health E.K. Yeoh said: “Hong Kong is absolutely safe and no different from any other big city in the world.... Hong Kong does not have an outbreak, okay? We have not said that we have an outbreak. Don’t let the rest of the world think that there is an atypical pneumonia outbreak in Hong Kong.”
4. Reporters asked Julie Gerberding of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention if the mysterious outbreaks could be related to bioterrorism. “While we have lots of reasons to think that the SARS outbreaks are not due to terrorism, we’re keeping an open mind and being vigilant.”

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# SARS Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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5. Canadian customs officers in Toronto wanted to wear face masks and gloves, but Canada's federal government refused. Ron Moran, president of the Customs and Excise Union, said: "They don't want to create – in their words – 'panic' by officers wearing a mask. But there is a lot of uncertainty around this ... and our people are concerned." The Customs and Revenue Department said that since health guidelines did not require airport staff to wear masks, no masks would be provided. Toronto taxi drivers and Air Canada flight attendants also wanted the option of wearing masks, but were either highly discouraged or forbidden to do so.

*Late March through mid-year 2003: The outbreaks worsen, peak, begin to fade:*

6. When several Asian countries warned against travel to SARS-afflicted Singapore, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong responded: "We can understand that, because we also give travel advisories to Singaporeans not to go to the affected places. So we must expect other countries to advise their travellers not to come to Singapore.... If we are open about it and all Singaporeans cooperate by being as careful as they can, we may be able to break this cycle early, and if we do then of course people outside will have confidence in Singapore and the way we manage the problem."
7. When the WHO instituted a travel advisory for Toronto, Ontario Health Commissioner Colin D'Cunha said: "We believe this decision was made without consulting the province – we believe it was an over-reaction." Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman said: "The medical evidence before us does not support this advisory." The WHO conceded that Canada had not had proper advance warning. "There was a breakdown in communications," said the WHO's Dick Thompson. "I think that we're willing to acknowledge that there was some kind of mistake, that they didn't receive the message.... And I think we're ready to accept some blame here."

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# SARS Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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8. The WHO had estimated the maximum SARS incubation period (on which quarantines are based) at ten days. But then previously withheld information from Guangdong, China, was released to the WHO. The WHO's Dick Thompson updated the press, stating: "The longest possible incubation period that we've seen [in Guangdong] is 14 days." When a reporter asked about the previous 10-day figure, Thompson added: "That's what I would have told you before we had access to the Guangdong data."
  
9. Asked if Ontario (Canada) health officials were going to increase the required quarantine period in light of the WHO's new information on incubation, Public Safety Commissioner James Young said: "We have to weigh our experience with what happens in regards to obvious public safety but also people's needs to get on with their lives.... We're not saying that we wouldn't change. If our experience began to show everyone developing symptoms in Day 9 and 10, we would likely expand the isolation period. But that's not been our experience to date."
  
10. Singapore officials sought citizen input at many public meetings on SARS policy. Among the issues debated: whether to make public the names of people under Home Quarantine Orders; whether to use volunteers, public servants, or contractors to tend (and monitor) people who were quarantined at home; whether to close the schools for a while. All Singapore schoolchildren were given thermometers and asked to keep temperature logs twice a day. The Prime Minister, well-known for shaking hands with everyone, recommended instead the namaste bow for the duration of SARS.
  
11. North Carolina State Epidemiologist Jeff Engel held regular media briefings about the state's one confirmed SARS case. A reporter asked if his press conferences had the potential to cause more hysteria and fear. Dr. Engel replied: "Certainly a disease like SARS, so new, so frightening, should instill fear. Fear is an appropriate response – for me as a public health physician, for everyone in the community. We need to transfer that fear into positive energy.... This is a new disease, it spreads person to person, it can kill, it has a high case-fatality rate. That is newsworthy!"

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## SARS Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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12. When the WHO's David Heymann said it seemed that SARS had peaked in Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Vietnam, a reporter asked if he was confident that SARS' worldwide spread could be stopped. "No, we are not," he answered. "We are hoping." Singapore health ministry spokeswoman Eunice Teo commented: "The WHO said the peak is over in Singapore, but our minister has said it is too early to tell." Health Minister Lim Hng Kiang said the WHO's encouraging words were premature, adding: "Our basic tone must be to be extra careful, extra vigilant and if anything to err on the safe side."

*Late 2003 and early 2004: A few isolated cases but no new outbreak (yet):*

13. When a virology graduate student in Singapore was diagnosed with SARS, reporters and the public wondered if he caught it at his lab (it turned out he did). A medical official and a WHO expert said a lab exposure was the likeliest hypothesis. But the Singapore Health Ministry would not comment. A spokesman said: "A full investigation is currently under way. Let's await the result." A laboratory official offered his own "speculation": "There is absolutely no way he could have been given the wrong virus."
14. When a Taiwanese lab worker also contracted SARS on the job, SARS anxiety resurfaced in Asia. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra told his people not to worry: "Thailand was even safe from SARS in the previous spread in the region earlier this year, as we cooperated closely with the World Health Organization and strictly followed WHO's suggestions on SARS prevention. We've gained experiences from that. So, we'll be safe from SARS again, given the government's awareness and preparations."

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## SARS Exercise: What Are They Doing?

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15. When China had the first confirmed 2004 case, anxiety increased among both health officials and the public. The WHO's Beijing spokesman, Bob Dietz, said: "Everyone's getting edgy." Added the WHO's Dick Thompson: "Nobody really knows if there will be another epidemic. Many people say so and there are some reasons to suspect that there will be another round, but we just don't know. As we have seen in Singapore and Taiwan, it is clear that a single case doesn't necessarily mean another round."
  
16. When the WHO had recommended against unnecessary travel to Toronto, the U.S. CDC had advised only avoiding Toronto health care settings. Now that the outbreaks were over, the U.S. urged the WHO to "harmonize" its standards with those of the U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson argued that harmonization "would be much better, instead of the United States having a travel advisory and the WHO having a travel advisory – people wouldn't know which one to follow."

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## Answers:

1. Be explicit about “anchoring frames”; err on the alarming side; don’t aim for zero fear [good example].
2. Acknowledge uncertainty; establish your own humanity [good example].
3. Don’t over-reassure; aim for total candor and transparency [bad example].
4. Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses [good example].
5. Tolerate early over-reactions; don’t overplan or overdiagnose for panic; let people choose their own actions [bad example].
6. Legitimize people’s fears; tolerate early over-reactions; ask more of people; aim for total candor and transparency [good example].
7. Don’t over-reassure [bad example – Canada].
8. Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors [good example – WHO].
9. Be explicit about changes in official prediction, opinion, or policy [good example – though it would have been better still if Thompson had described the change as a change before being asked].
10. Share dilemmas; tell people what to expect [good example]. Err on the alarming side [bad example].
11. Share dilemmas; offer people things to do; ask more of people [good example].

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12. Legitimize people's fears; establish your own humanity; err on the alarming side; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
13. Acknowledge uncertainty; put reassuring information in subordinate clauses; err on the alarming side [good example].
14. Be willing to speculate [good example of responsible speculation; bad examples of refusing to speculate and over-confident, over-optimistic speculation].
15. Don't over-reassure; acknowledge uncertainty [bad example].
16. Legitimize people's fears; don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic; establish your own humanity; acknowledge uncertainty; acknowledge opinion diversity [good example].
17. Acknowledge opinion diversity [bad example].

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# “*Plus Ça Change*” Exercise: What Were They Doing?

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If you look back at crises of the past, you find plenty of bad examples – and some good examples – of crisis communication principles at work. The principles don’t change, and obeying them doesn’t come naturally; it has to be learned.

For each numbered item, try to identify which of our 25 recommendations is being followed or not followed. Most are examples of several recommendations at once. As you complete the exercise, notice that the good examples sound fairly normal ... as normal as the bad examples. Good crisis communication can feel wooden at first. But to the audience it sounds fine.

## *The flu pandemic of 1918:*

1. In 1918, after a devastating influenza outbreak at Fort Reilly, Kansas, there was another horrific outbreak at Ford Devens, Massachusetts. Civilians in Boston started dying of the flu. But in New York City, Health Commissioner Royal Copeland said: “The city is in no danger of an epidemic. No need for our people to worry.” Officials everywhere were slow to take steps to discourage war rallies, parades, and other large gatherings. In San Francisco, health official William Hassler expressed optimism that the flu would not reach the west coast. Medical historians write that officials like Copeland and Hassler downplayed alarming news to avoid scaring people.
2. Eventually the epidemic reached – and overwhelmed – San Francisco. Schools were closed and large public gatherings were banned. Retirees, housewives, and other members of the public were called on to volunteer to help the sick. Searching for a way to reassure the public, officials grossly oversold such ineffective preventive measures as gauze masks. San Francisco’s mayor proclaimed: “A Mask Is 99% Proof Against Influenza.”

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3. “Influenza 1918,” a PBS TV program, describes a false “end” of San Francisco’s flu epidemic: “Siren wails on November 21, 1918 signaled to San Franciscans that it was safe, and legal, to remove their masks. All signs indicated that the flu had abated. Schools re-opened, and theaters sought to make back the \$400,000 they had lost during each of the six weeks they were closed.” Two weeks later another flu wave broke out.

### *The Perrier contamination crisis of 1990*

4. In February 1990, an environmental testing laboratory in North Carolina found benzene in a bottle of Perrier water purchased at a local grocery store. (The lab had been using Perrier as a test standard for analyzing the local water supply.) Within a day, company spokespeople announced that French officials had assured them the benzene wasn’t from contamination of the underground spring from which Perrier water was drawn. They said they suspected the contamination came from the bottling, packaging, or distribution process, but they weren’t certain; “we think we know, but we are not going to say unless we are 100 percent sure.” The problem was confined to a small number of samples, they said, and the recall of Perrier was limited to the U.S. and Canada.
5. Within another day, company spokespeople had told the New York Times that new tests showed the underground spring was pure and unpolluted. The benzene, they said, probably came from a cleanser mistakenly used to clean machinery connected to bottles sent only to North America. Perrier had dealt with the problem. “We have no fear.... The source plant is working normally.... All tests are fine.... This is a freak accident.” Perrier stated that it expected its balance sheet would not be affected. Over and over, spokespeople repeated that the Perrier spring in southern France was not tainted.

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6. On day three of the story, the New York Times ran an editorial praising Perrier’s aggressive and open response, contrasting it with Exxon’s arrogant response to public concern after the Valdez spill. But the next day the Times reported that the company’s story had changed. It now said the contamination was caused “when company employees failed to replace charcoal filters that screen out benzene, a chemical impurity in the natural gas present in the company’s famous spring in southern France.”
  
7. On day five benzene was found in Perrier bottles in Europe. Company officials began to reveal that it used natural gas to add carbonation to water from its underground source, that benzene was a naturally occurring contaminant in the gas, and that the filters that were supposed to screen out the benzene hadn’t been changed for months. They did not acknowledge the discrepancy between this and its previous explanations, or between this and the public’s previous understanding of what “natural spring water” was supposed to be. Announcing a worldwide recall of all Perrier water, Chairman Gustave Leven said this was why: “I don’t want the least doubt, however small, to tarnish our product’s image of quality and purity.”

### *The Belgian dioxin contamination of 1999:*

8. Early in 1999, officials in Belgium discovered that dioxin-contaminated industrial oil had been mixed with animal fat and used in 80,000 kilograms of animal feed. It kept the story secret for over a month, on the grounds that it wanted to find out if the feed had gotten into the human food supply before telling the public anything. Presumably the government was hoping to find that there was no food supply contamination, so that when the public heard about the feed contamination there would be very little alarm. If so, the strategy boomeranged. Even after the story broke, the extent of the cover-up emerged only gradually; it eventually brought down the government.

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9. At the end of May, Belgian officials revealed part of the story, the contamination of chickenfeed. Belgian citizens were outraged at the delay in telling them about the problem. So were trading partners; the EU discussed imposing some kind of sanctions against Belgium. But the German minister of agriculture defended the long time lag, saying “The Belgians weren’t sure about the impact of the case.”
  
10. The Belgian government said Belgians should not eat chickens or eggs until further notice, but insisted: “This matter only affects chickens and eggs.” A few days later, it was revealed that dioxin-contaminated feed had been sold and fed to cattle as well, in countries beyond Belgium. Belgian authorities said they had informed the French agriculture minister about the cattle feed contamination five weeks earlier. The French minister retorted that the message he had received from the Belgians had been “reassuring and banal.” The public, of course, had received no message at all. The controversy over the cover-up continued to escalate. Aside from toppling the Government of Belgium, it led to massive recalls, culls, and import bans as people translated the cover-up into a higher level of health concern, necessitating a higher level of precaution-taking.

### *And miscellaneous other crises:*

11. In 1865-67, a cattle plague was spreading across western Europe. Taking the issue more seriously than other countries, Belgium closed its borders to imported cattle and restricted trade fairs. It lost very few cattle compared with England and Holland. Rather than trumpeting its success, Belgium instead insisted on the need for extreme vigilance in the face of continuing uncertainty. Interior minister Van Denpeereboom said: “It is not impossible that some isolated cases may still appear [in our country]. Those fears are only too much by the experience of the past; they must make us persistent in the measures of precaution and vigilance which have enabled us to escape until now ... the ravages of a pestilence whose victims are counted elsewhere by thousands.”

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12. In 1939, with Germany threatening to invade Great Britain, the Ministry of Home Security put up posters headlined, “If the Invader comes – what to do and how to do it.” The posters asserted that “the invaders will be driven out by our Navy, our Army, and our Air Force,” but also insisted that “the ordinary men and women of the civilian population will also have their part to play.” Included in the instructions: “In factories and shops, all managers and workmen should organise some system now by which a sudden attack can be resisted.
  
13. In 1979, the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in central Pennsylvania suffered a serious accident. In mid-crisis, while many things were still going wrong, the utility put out a news release claiming that the reactor was “cooling according to design.” Months later, a company official was asked 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 – and even though at the time of the news release many of the mistakes had not yet been acknowledged – he said it was therefore truthful to say that the plant was cooling according to design
  
14. In 1982, several people died in Chicago after taking cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules. Johnson & Johnson recalled all Tylenol in the U.S., not just in the Chicago area. It pulled its ads and urged people not to take Tylenol. The CEO went on television to warn people, and to apologize – taking responsibility for having packaging that was insufficiently tamper-proof.

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15. In 1989, the Exxon Valdez tanker ran aground on Bligh Reef in Alaska, spilling huge quantities of oil into the ocean. As the oil found its way onto shore (and into animals and fish), reactions of anger and disgust were widespread. Exxon officials were slow to visit the site, and slower to take the blame. Exxon statements pointed to the company’s excellent safety record, blamed the accident on employees, and argued strenuously that the long-term damage would be minimal, a point hotly debated among experts. Several years later an elaborate Exxon environmental exhibit at the Disney World Epcot Center still made no mention of the Valdez spill.
  
16. In 1994, India suffered an outbreak of plague in southern Gujarat state. In less than a week, about 500,000 residents of the Gujarat city of Surat fled their homes. The “Surat panic” is widely cited as a rare but impressive example of the evils of panics. But the plague had begun not in Surat but in Beed, a rural part of Maharashtra state. Officials had downplayed the Beed epidemic, telling journalists that everything was under control and rumors of plague were “wildly exaggerated.” They were trying to prevent panic; instead, they helped cause a wider plague and a wider panic.

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### Answers:

1. Don't over-reassure; acknowledge uncertainty; don't aim for zero fear; err on the alarming side; tell people what to expect [bad example].
2. Ask more of people; offer people things to do [good example]. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; don't over-reassure [bad example].
3. Err on the alarming side [bad example].
4. Don't over-reassure; don't lie, and don't tell half-truths [bad example]. Acknowledge uncertainty [good example]. Note that this is not a good example of being willing to speculate, because the speculation is over-optimistic.
5. Err on the alarming side; don't over-reassure; establish your own humanity; don't lie, and don't tell half-truths [bad example]. Once again, the speculation is over-optimistic.
6. Acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; be explicit about “anchoring frames” [bad example].
7. Be explicit about changes in official opinion, prediction, or policy; be explicit about “anchoring frames”; acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; legitimize people's fears [bad example].
8. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; aim for total candor and transparency [bad example].

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9. Aim for total candor and transparency; be willing to speculate [bad example].
10. Don't over-reassure; don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors [bad example].
11. Err on the alarming side; acknowledge uncertainty; don't aim for zero fear [good example].
12. Ask more of people; let people choose their own actions; offer people things to do [good example].
13. Don't lie, and don't tell half-truths; don't over-reassure [bad example].
14. Err on the alarming side; legitimize people's fears; apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors [good example].
15. Apologize often for errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; acknowledge errors, deficiencies, and misbehaviors; acknowledge opinion diversity; don't forget emotions other than fear.
16. Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic; don't over-reassure; don't aim for zero fear; tolerate people's fears; aim for total candor and transparency [bad example].

**“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”**

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## Presenter Information

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### *Peter M. Sandman, PhD*



Creator of the “Risk = Hazard + Outrage” formula for risk communication, Dr. Peter M. Sandman is a preeminent risk communication speaker and consultant in the United States and around the world. Dr. Sandman founded the Environmental Communication Research Program at Rutgers University in 1986, and was its Director until 1992, when he left academia to become a full-time consultant. After 9/11, Dr. Sandman reoriented his work to focus more on the crises of terrorism, bioterrorism, and natural epidemics. He was key in developing a new emergency risk communication CD-ROM with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Sandman has addressed a wide range of government entities and emergency response agencies on Chemical/Biological Terrorism and Crisis Communication. He has published over 80 articles and books on various aspects of risk communication. For more information about Dr. Sandman’s approach to risk communication and crisis communication, visit [www.psandman.com](http://www.psandman.com)

### *Jody Lanard, MD*



Jody Lanard, MD, a psychiatrist by training, is a risk communication consultant and writer who, since 9/11, increasingly specializes in public health crisis communication. She has spoken at homeland security, science communication, bioterrorism, and environmental public health tracking conferences in the U.S. and Europe. Since the 2003 SARS outbreaks began, Dr. Lanard has advised the World Health Organization on communicating with the public. Dr. Lanard has worked on a wide range of risk communication issues with her husband and colleague, Peter Sandman, for almost twenty years. Dr. Lanard received her MD from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, and did her psychiatric residency at Harvard. Dr. Lanard’s writing on crisis communication can also be found on Dr. Sandman’s website, [www.psandman.com](http://www.psandman.com).

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