

PART 1

Talking about

“What Happened”

Post-event risk communication

Think hard about what information really needs to be suppressed after an incident.

There are sometimes persuasive reasons (such as litigation) to keep word of an accident more closely confined than communicators think wise. But often the only reasons are bad reasons — embarrassment, custom, and the press of time. Whatever your rea-

sons, when the information leaks it's usually the fact that you withheld it that gets you into trouble, not the information itself. And “withheld” here doesn't have to mean you lied or kept secrets; it's enough that you weren't forthcoming. Being tight-lipped about what happened makes you look dishonest, and makes what happened look worse than it was.

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BY PETER M. SANDMAN

Although risk communication may theoretically be about the future (what might go wrong), many organizations also make serious errors talking about the past — in the aftermath of an accident, say, or a near-miss, or an OSHA decision to impose a fine. So a post-event communication protocol, grounded in the lessons of risk communication, is worth having. Here is my first draft of such a protocol. Part 2, with five additional recommendations, will appear in the June issue of *ISHN*. Comments and suggested additions are welcome at peter@psandman.com.

Tell everyone who should know.

Obviously this includes federal, state, and local regulators that you are legally obligated to notify. It also includes people in your own chain of command, and very likely your attorneys and insurers. Now add some

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less obvious people to your list. Are there lessons here for colleagues at other facilities? Are there suppliers or equipment manufacturers that ought to be warned about the problem? What union reps or employee health and safety committee members should be briefed? Who else might have some good advice for you? Who else will feel blindsided if you neglect to brief them?



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Tell everyone who knows already or is likely to hear.

We all judge the credibility of a communication largely by how it addresses what we know already. So be sure to give the people who were involved (and their families) a full accounting. And don't just tell them how it looked from your side. Use quotations and narrative to tell them how it looked — and felt — to them. Your description of what happened, in other words, shouldn't just be technically accurate; it

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should be emotionally accurate as it retells the experience of those who were there. “Neighbors were awakened by the blast and many watched anxiously from their windows as plant firefighters confronted the 20-foot flames.”

As for those who don't know yet: If people are going to hear about the accident at all, you want them to hear about it from you. So think through who is likely to hear, and include them all on your list of people to tell. Yes, that includes the media.

Don't ever minimize what happened.

At a small airport near where I live, a 14-year-old boy was injured while “helping” a mechanic inspect a plane. Leave aside the safety implications of letting children work on airplanes. The local newspaper reported that the boy was airlifted to a hospital burn center, and then quoted the airport owner as follows: “His burns are not severe. He's okay, in good spirits. Everybody's fine.” The paper added that “the airport owner's report of the boy's injuries contrasted sharply with that of police.” The owner seemed to be mini-

mizing the accident, when he should have been apologizing and hoping for a full recovery.

Include damaging or embarrassing information.

Post-event communication isn't about telling your side of the story. It's about telling the whole story. The most important information to include is the information that reflects badly on your organization or yourself. Of course if you think you can get away with keeping such information permanently secret, and if you're under no legal obligation to tell, you'd have to be something of a saint to blow the whistle voluntarily. But suppose the cat is out of the bag. Lots of people know already, and the rest are bound to find out. Then it should be a no-brainer to tell them yourself — at least you can get a little credit for candor.

You'll have to mention the damaging information more than once. Before writing a post-event communication, make a list of all the things you wish hadn't happened and you'd rather people didn't know. Then put an “S” (for secret) next to any you feel it's okay and feasible to suppress, and a “W” (for wallow) next to the rest. Those are your only two options. If you're not going to try to keep it secret, you'd better wallow in it, repeatedly.

Say you're sorry.

The purpose of telling people damaging information isn't so you can spin it your way. Of course it makes sense to include any facts that show why we should blame you less, if you can

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do so without sounding like you're scapegoating others. But trying to make damaging information look less damaging doesn't usually help much. What helps is showing you know how damaging it is. Blame works like a seesaw. The more you blame yourself, the less we blame you.

Assuming some of your actions or inactions are blameworthy, the key is to blame yourself — and to do so without opening up the floodgates of liability. Apologies can accomplish this. How do you apologize without flat-out saying “it's the company's fault”? “I feel terrible about what happened. If only the company had found a way to prevent it. We are so sorry!” Odds are you dare not say that either without getting an okay from the lawyers. But push hard for that okay. Remind the lawyers that acknowledging and apologizing for information that can't be hidden anyway might even reduce people's urge to sue... and juries' urge to impose punitive damages. Try to come up with a way to apologize that the lawyers reluctantly agree doesn't damage the company's legal position.

Perhaps the toughest sort of apology is called for when some employees were worried about a safety issue but management decided no action was needed. Post-accident, “we were wrong and you were right” is probably more than your lawyers will let you say. But an apologetic acknowledgment of what happened is worth fighting for: “I wish we had implemented some of the precautions employees were urging last March. Maybe they could have averted this accident.” | **ISHN**

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