

# 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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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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