

Crisis Communication: Six "Harder" Strategies (p. 1)

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1. Share dilemmas.

Acknowledging that you're not sure what to do is even harder than acknowledging that you're not sure what happened. It is especially useful when you have decided what to do: "This was a tough decision, and we're still not sure it was the right call."

2. Acknowledge opinion diversity.

If the decision was a tough one, almost by definition some of your advisors or colleagues favored other options. Now that the decision has been made, they are still the people who favored other options. Say so, and let them say so too.

3. Apologize for misbehavior.

Blame has a seesaw; focus on the ways it's your fault, and others will focus on the ways it wasn't. Even if there is no seesaw (it was just your fault), apology is a prerequisite to forgiveness. Get a head start apologizing mid-crisis, while we're too busy depending on you to blame you; it'll help post-crisis when the recriminations start.

4. Aim for absolute candor.

There are always good reasons to withhold information – from fear of provoking panic to fear of helping terrorists. These valid rationales become excuses ... and too much gets withheld, rarely too little (who gets into trouble for being too forthright?). You probably shouldn't achieve absolute candor, but you can safely aim for it.

5. Do anticipatory guidance.

Anticipatory guidance – telling people what to expect – is especially useful when it's about uncertainty: "We will learn things in the coming weeks that everyone will wish we had known when we started." Even tougher is pre-crisis anticipatory guidance. As you get ready for possible emergencies, tell people so they can get ready too.

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6. Be willing to speculate.

Refusing to speculate is better than speculating over-confidently and over-optimistically. 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 misquoted, and speculate ... but always tentatively, and with due focus on the worst case.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- Dilemmas in Emergency Communication Policy (Feb 2003) – www.psandman.com/articles/dilemmas.pdf
- Duct Tape Risk Communication (Feb 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/ducttape.htm
- “Fear Is Spreading Faster than SARS” – And So It Should! (Apr 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/SARS-1.htm

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