

The Three Kinds of Crisis Communication and Their Relationship to Risk Communication

Copyright © 1998 by Peter M. Sandman

1. Possible future crisis.

This isn't really crisis communication; there hasn't been a crisis (yet). What you need is a variety of risk communication. This particular sort of risk – catastrophic rather than chronic – was eclipsed by chronic risks (mostly cancer) for about a quarter-century, but came back into vogue in the late 1990s. The main outrage management issues: talking about what-ifs; worst case scenarios; the temptations and perils of over-optimism.

2. Low-hazard high-outrage reputation crisis.

Something really happened (a small spill, a near-miss, an activist attack, an announcement of last year's emission totals) that has outraged some stakeholders. It isn't a health/safety/environment crisis, but it is a reputation crisis. People mistakenly think their health or safety or environment is at great risk. How do you respond to them? Coping with this sort of crisis and preventing this sort of crisis are principal preoccupations of risk communication.

3. High-hazard crisis.

A real health/safety/environment crisis has occurred – with real casualties. Along with the ambulances and emergency responders come the journalists. What do you say? In this "purest" sort of crisis communication, outrage management is relevant but secondary:

- a. You are properly more focused on managing the hazard than on any sort of communication.
- b. To the extent that communication is a priority, warning people at risk takes precedence over reassuring people who are upset.
- c. Communication logistics are likely to be difficult, especially if advance preparation was insufficient.
- d. With what capacity you have left, you still need to manage the outrage. It can wait a few days ... but not a few months.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Crisis communication versus risk communication (Mar 2002) – www.psandman.com/gst2002.htm#aakko
- Obvious or Suspected, Here or Elsewhere, Now or Then: Paradigms of Emergency Events (Feb 2003) – www.psandman.com/articles/obvious.pdf
- Four Kinds of Risk Communication (Apr 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/4kind-1.htm

Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.

Brooklyn, NY

Email: peter@psandman.com Web: www.psandman.com (U.S.) Phone: 1-609-683-4073
Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication