

**Lessons Learned From the Front Lines of Risk and Crisis Communication:  
21 Guidelines for Effective Communication by Leaders Addressing  
High Anxiety, High Stress, or Threatening Situations**

Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D.,  
Center for Risk Communication  
New York, New York

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**Listening/Caring**

1. Listen to, acknowledge and respect the fears, anxieties and uncertainties of others: when people are upset they want to know that you care before they care what you know.
2. Appear calm and in control, even in the face of public fear, anxiety, and uncertainty; provide others with ways to participate, be constructive, channel their energy, and regain control.
3. Offer authentic statements of caring, empathy, compassion and listening; back up these statements with actions.

**Presentation**

4. Be honest, ethical, frank and open, recognizing that there are limits on what needs to be disclosed.
5. Avoid using humor; if humor is needed, plan, test and use it carefully.
6. Recognize that people are risk adverse and when upset will often fixate on negatives; be extremely careful in offering up the five "N" words -- no, not, never, nothing none -- and words with negative connotations.
7. When providing information or sharing bad news, be the first to share the news; formulate messages according to the formula: three positives are necessary to balance one negative.
8. Avoid mixed or inconsistent verbal and non-verbal messages.
9. Practice and hone media verbal and non-verbal skills: avoid major media traps and pitfalls (for example, offering or not offering guarantees, speculating on worst case scenarios, repeating allegations or accusations).

**Message Development**

10. Develop and offer a central message with three elements; stay on message, repeat the message, do not speculate, and avoid the comment, "no comment."
11. Be concise; use clear non-technical language free of jargon and acronyms

12. Make extensive use of visual material (for example, through graphics, tours, demonstrations, animation, analogies, and anecdotes with a clear point).
13. Check and double-check the accuracy of facts.

### **Organization**

14. Do advance scenario planning: identify important stakeholders, anticipate questions and concerns, prepare messages, test messages, anticipate follow-up questions, rehearse responses (for example, through practice sessions and simulations).
15. Provide information on a continuous, frequent basis; prevent information vacuums that can be filled by others.
16. Coordinate all inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications; speak with one voice.
17. Avoid town meetings, which, unless carefully controlled and skillfully implemented, often fail to convey information and can increase public frustration; encourage open houses, information exchanges, and face to face contact.

### **Leadership**

18. Be highly visible.
19. Inform colleagues and family of expected behavior and the need to strictly conform with official policy or recommendations; perceptions equal reality, and what is perceived as real is real in its consequences.
20. Avoid attacking the credibility of those with higher perceived credibility; join hands, as appropriate, with old adversaries; seek, engage and make extensive use of endorsements, audits, and support from credible third parties.
21. "Walk the talk"; go the extra mile; lead the way.

Vincent T, Covello, Ph.D.  
Director  
Center for Risk Communication  
(Applied Science for Critical Issues Management)  
29 Washington Square West, Suite 2A  
New York, New York 10011  
Email: [vincentcovello@ix.netcom.com](mailto:vincentcovello@ix.netcom.com)  
Web site: [www.centerforriskcommunication.org](http://www.centerforriskcommunication.org)  
Tel.: 646-654-1679; Fax: 646-654-1683