

Get Your Risk Management Message Heard



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Did you ever log out of a presentation, or step off the stage, and feel your heart sink? Did you know in your gut that your audience heard a lot of messages in your talk, but not the one you wanted to deliver?

Of course we've all delivered a risk communication (or two, or three) that missed the mark. Failure is part of the learning process. Thankfully, it's not the only part. Here's a guide to help increase the likelihood that your risk communication messages will resonate with your audience.

Know Your Audience

Consider:

- Do you need to communicate with the public? Your staff? The board?
- How will the risk you're discussing impact your audience?
- What does your audience value?
- How can you appeal to those values in your communication?

You may find you need to better understand your audience to communicate effectively. If you're not in a crisis, consider a focus group, survey, or conversation with people from your audience to understand their fears, concerns, and needs.

Know Your Goal

Do you want to warn someone to take action on a risk—for example, to avoid an active construction site at your nonprofit's facility? Do you want to persuade staff members to report incidents—including near misses? Something else? If you're asking your audience to take an action, make that request clear, and tell them how to do it. Use direct, concise language. Avoid jargon and terminology that only long-time insiders will understand.

Craft Your Message

- Establish a need. Why do you need to communicate your message to this group? What information do they need from you?
- Focus on benefits. How will taking the action you are requesting benefit your audience?
- Anticipate objections. If employees fear they will be penalized for reporting a safety incident, explain how you will avoid that.

- Build credibility. Give your audience a sense of your expertise on the topic.
- Consider emotion. Many people have an emotional response to risk. Do you expect your audience to be fearful? Angry? Shape your communication around possible reactions.
- Consider timing. Gather enough facts to be informative, but don't wait until you know everything.

Communicate on Multiple Platforms

Plan a campaign that will reach your audience in all the places they might seek information on this topic. Tailor your message for each platform.

Evaluate and Iterate

Listen to your audience. If they don't volunteer feedback, seek it out. How was your message received? What do you want to repeat and avoid for the future?

Okay! We have a plan! Now we sit back, pour a cold beverage, and wait for great risk communication to happen, right?

Not so fast. The real world, with its frustrations, roadblocks, and resource constraints, will likely assert itself at some point on your risk communication journey. Give yourself plenty of time: time to ask members of your audience to give your draft a thorough review, time to polish it from good to really good, time to sleep on it before you send. Never underestimate how many missteps can be avoided if you give yourself and others the time it takes to do something well.

Of course, it won't matter how much time you allow if everyone's afraid to tell you that your message will likely blow up in your face. Invest time with your team to create psychological safety, a belief that it's okay to take risks at work and you won't be punished for it. Welcome honest mistakes and listen thoughtfully to all feedback, especially feedback you don't agree with. The more you demonstrate that you can handle bad news, the more likely you'll hear it when you can still do something about it.

Now you're ready to craft that important briefing deck, staff email, or team announcement. You've got this. Let me know how it goes.

Rachel Sams is a Consultant and Staff Writer with the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. A former journalist, she aims to craft communications that are precise, concise, and tell the audience something they need to know in a way they're willing to hear. Reach her with thoughts or questions about risk communication at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.