5 Steps to Better Risk Communication



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Years ago, a boss confided in me about a personal issue that would impact her work schedule. She asked me to briefly tell each of the team members I managed about the issue, so they'd know why she was out of the office.

I took this responsibility seriously, so when I shared my boss's news with the first team member, I prefaced it with statements like "This may be hard to hear." Dread appeared on his face. When I told him about the personal issue our boss was dealing with, he paused a moment, then said, "I'm very sorry to hear that, but honestly, I'm a little relieved. From the way you built up to it, I thought she had a terminal illness."

That taught me a lesson in risk communication: How you deliver a message matters as much as the content. I got caught up in the emotion of the moment, which distracted me from sharing what my team needed to hear: You might see less of our boss in the office for a while, but it's not because of a lack of support, it's just because she's going through a challenging time.

Communication can make any risk program or effort soar—or falter. Many risk management efforts suffer from communication problems, even if the underlying plan is sound. When nonprofits come to NRMC seeking advice on risk challenges, we often find opportunities to improve communication with teams around risk issues. Here are some ways to improve your risk communication.

Know your audience.

Who do you need to communicate with? The public? Your staff? The board?

- How will the risk impact your audience?
- What does your audience value?
- How can you appeal to those values?
- Question your assumptions. What don't you know about the audience?
- Respect the audience's intelligence. Use direct, concise language.

Know your goal.

If you're asking your audience to take an action, make that request clear, and tell them how to do it.

- Do you want to urge someone to take action to steer clear of a risk? To prepare for the consequences of a risk?
- Do you want to warn employees and visitors about a danger or potential hazard?
- Do you want to encourage all staff to report anything concerning or suspicious during an event?
- Something else?

Craft your message.

- Define a need: Why do you need to communicate this message to this audience at this time? What information is the audience likely to need OR want?
- Focus on benefits: How will taking the action you are requesting or information you are sharing help your audience?
- Anticipate objections: For example, if employees fear they will be penalized for reporting a safety incident, explain how you will make sure that doesn't happen. And if you expect people to be confused by the information, simplify it! Build credibility: Share information on the expertise behind the recommendation. For example, if a notice about health precautions follows information from your local health department, credit that source.
- Acknowledge what you don't know: Start with what you do know. Be open and honest about what you don't. If you're working to find out something, say so, and say how you're doing it.
- 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. Silence can erode trust.

Communicate on multiple platforms.

Plan a campaign that will reach your audience in the key places where they might seek information on this topic.

- Tailor your message for each platform.
- Be consistent.
- If you're creating a safety campaign, set up a regular cadence.

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?

Humans are wired to resist, even fear, the unknown. Communicating effectively about risk requires talking about things many people might prefer not to discuss. It requires understanding and addressing a variety of perspectives and knowing your audience's needs and potential wants. If communicating about risk feels hard, that's because it is! But taking the time to communicate about risk issues is always worth the effort. You won't get your risk communications exactly right every time, but if you're paying attention, you will always learn something you can use to improve them in the future.

Rachel Sams is Lead Consultant and Editor at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Open-ended questions are her favorite communications tool. Reach out with thoughts and questions about risk communication at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.