

# **RISK-BASED DECISION-MAKING GUIDELINES**

## **Volume 2**

### **Introduction to Risk-based Decision Making**

#### **Basic Principles**

#### **Chapter 4 — Principles of Risk Communication**



**Chapter Contents**

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**Definition of Risk Communication**

**“The interactive process of exchanging information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions involving multiple messages about the nature of risk...”**

*The National Research Council*

**1.0 Definition of Risk Communication**

Communicating about risk is an important and challenging part of doing business with corporations, the government, and the military. In fact, some professional communicators believe that, in modern society, all communication is risk communication. The National Research Council’s definition shows what risk communication is and what it is not.

**What risk communication is:**

**An interactive process.** This process (1) requires an understanding of factors that affect the communication process and ways in which people think about risk and risk information, and (2) provides for ongoing response and discussion with key audiences and affected parties.

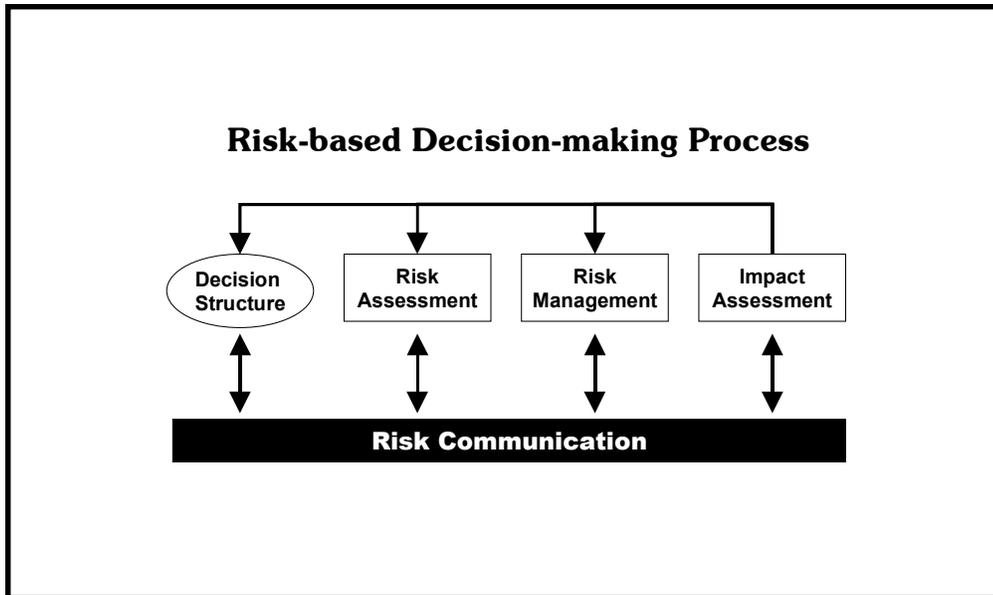
**An exchange of information and opinion.** The goals of this information exchange include (1) improving people’s understanding and (2) changing impressions, attitudes, and behaviors.

**A process that involves individuals, groups, and institutions.** These participants see your communication as (1) objective (a product of research, statistics, and technical expertise) or (2) subjective (based on personal values and experience).

**A process that concerns the nature of risk.** The nature of risk is more than simply the frequency and consequence of an event. It involves questions such as, “What can happen to me, personally?” and “What can I do to keep from having to deal with this?” It also involves the history of the risk and the future associated with addressing it.

**Risk communication is *not*:**

- A set of gimmicks or techniques to avoid debate or criticism
- A collection of unclear messages
- An afterthought during the final stages of risk assessment
- A promise of general agreement or consensus about risk management actions



## 2.0 Risk Communication in the Risk-based Decision-making Process

Skilled risk communication must take place throughout the risk-based decision-making process. The graphic above shows that communicating about risk is a part of all phases of the process. Risk-based decisions will rarely produce the desired results if the decisions are made without considering the opinion of those who will be affected; that is, the stakeholders.

The involvement of all stakeholders in the risk-based decision-making process is essential and is consistent with the Coast Guard Marine Safety and Environmental Protection Business Plan (FY2001-2005) capability goal of partnership and stakeholder engagement. Every effort should be taken to include appropriate representatives from both internal and external organizations, as well as individuals affected by key risk-based decisions. Involving other stakeholders enhances the risk-based decision-making process in the following ways:

- It creates a sense of “buy-in” with the final decision among the stakeholders
- It allows stakeholders to understand other points of view
- It facilitates the consideration of ideas that would have been overlooked without stakeholder involvement

A balance of stakeholder involvement is required, though. Involving too many stakeholders in all aspects of the risk-based decision-making process can be overwhelming to the stakeholders and counterproductive to the decision-making objectives. At the same time, bringing in stakeholders after

the decision-making process has progressed too far can also be counterproductive. These issues must be considered early in the decision-making process.

When dealing with members of the public, remember that concerned citizens feel they have fought for and won the right to have a say in environmental, health, and safety matters that may affect their lives. The standard for “successful” risk communication in this setting has risen steadily. Citizens have come to expect notification, an exchange of views, and, whenever possible, consensus on key issues. They want to weigh the benefits against the potential downsides of economic and environmental decisions. They do not want surprises.

Refer to the PTP Guide for Improving Communications sponsored by G-MSE (located in the General Resources directory of Volume 4) for more information on how to communicate with the public.

### **Risk Communication Cycle**

- **Assess**
- **Prepare and train**
- **Broaden outreach and dialogue**
- **Plan and coordinate**
- **Communicate risk**
- **Follow up and evaluate**

## **3.0 Risk Communication Cycle**

Risk communication activities usually follow six basic steps. Any or all may take place at any time throughout the risk-based decision-making process, and not all activities are necessary for each situation. The step you choose to take and when you choose to take it depend on the circumstances.

Audiences or groups of stakeholders may choose to be involved at different levels and at different times in the process. However, all stakeholders must be genuinely given the opportunity to participate. Their opinions and concerns must be addressed, even if common ground cannot be found.

### **Assess**

- Identify audiences. These can include mariners, industry, environmental groups, and citizen action groups, as well as local, state, and federal government
- Determine how well the community understands the risks
- Evaluate existing communication efforts
- Evaluate available communication media

### **Prepare and train**

- Become familiar with basic principles and techniques of risk communication
- Learn and practice basic presentation skills

### **Broaden outreach and dialogue**

- Encourage community and stakeholder involvement
- Set up ways to exchange ideas with the community
- Improve community outreach efforts

### **Plan and coordinate**

- Set up a communication plan and timeline
- Establish a mission statement and set measurable goals
- Identify the primary concerns of each audience
- Select paths of communication for each audience
- Identify communication tools for each audience

### **Communicate risk**

- Develop and test messages
- Create communication materials
- Arrange events to exchange ideas
- Start up dialogue with key audiences

### **Follow up and evaluate**

Risk communication is a two-way street and an ongoing process. You must, therefore, do the following:

- Follow up and respond to stakeholder input, questions, and concerns
- Evaluate whether the communication process is effective

Refer to the PTP Guide for Improving Communications sponsored by G-MSE (located in the General Resources directory of Volume 4) for more information on how to communicate with the public.

### **Successful Risk Communication**

- **Factors influencing personal values**
- **Three principles of risk communication**
- **Seven cardinal rules of risk communication**

## **4.0 Successful Risk Communication**

Risk communication is the exchange of information, opinions, and ideas between you and the stakeholders. It is much more than communicating information and expecting stakeholders to come around to your side of the table. While you are presenting information from your point of view, so are many others. When faced with opposing views, participants in risk communication often become confused and may ignore input from one or all sides of an issue. This causes communication efforts to fail. Successful risk communication requires all stakeholders to know that their input has been heard and considered.

Successful risk communication also happens when all parties involved believe they are receiving quality information, and each person considers the values of the various participants. It is a mistake to assume that hazards, consequences, and remedies are viewed the same way by everyone.

### **Factors influencing personal values**

These factors may include the following:

- Cultural background
- Shared interests, concerns, and fears
- Social attitudes
- Ability to understand technical language
- A personal stake in the process or outcome

### **Three principles of risk communication**

**Perception = Reality**

**Goal = Trust + Credibility**

**Communication = Skill**

#### **4.1 Three principles of risk communication**

Understanding the values of your stakeholders and how their values influence opinions and beliefs is only one factor in a successful risk communication program. Research into risk communication offers other guidelines that affect your communication efforts. These principles fall into three general categories:

##### **Perception = Reality**

Even if the stakeholder's perception is not based on fact, it cannot be dismissed. In risk communication, you must deal with expected or known perceptions that may disagree with your technical understanding. These perceptions are still real to the person who holds them and must be respected as that individual's reality.

##### **Goal = Trust + Credibility**

The goal of successful risk communication is reached through the development of a basic trust with the stakeholders, often influenced by past experience, and the soundness of the information communicated. Low-trust, high-risk situations require more care in developing the risk messages.

##### **Communication = Skill**

Even when trust is earned, results are positive, and leaders are sincere, the success of risk communication depends on the communication skills of those involved. Factors that affect how risk messages are understood include the following:

- Sincerity of the source (YOU)
- Content of the message (WHAT you say)
- Delivery of the message (HOW you say it)
- Planning (WHERE you say it)

### Seven cardinal rules of risk communication

1. **Accept and involve the public (actually, all of the stakeholders) as a partner**
2. **Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts**
3. **Listen to your audience**
4. **Be honest and open**
5. **Plan and work with other reliable sources**
6. **Meet the needs of the media**
7. **Speak clearly and with understanding**

#### 4.2 Seven cardinal rules of risk communication

Even if you establish a trusting relationship with your stakeholders, risk communication can provide a tangled web of information. Though this may be the information age, *more* information is not always *better* information. Information coming from many sources may contain opposing messages. Therefore, it is up to you to make sure that the messages you communicate are clear, accurate, and understood (if not accepted). You must also provide ways to accept the same kind of messages from your stakeholders. While the three principles of risk communication will guide you through the beginning of your risk communication efforts, the following seven cardinal rules of risk communication will help you carry out an effective program.

1. **Accept and involve the public (actually, all of the stakeholders) as a partner.** Paying lip service to the risk communication process is worse than having no risk communication at all.
2. **Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts.** If you do not know where you are going, how will you know when you get there? Set measurable goals in the beginning.
3. **Listen to your audience.** Act on and respond to their concerns.
4. **Be honest and open.** The human qualities of the person who represents you have a more lasting impact than the words of the message. You become the message.
5. **Plan and work with other reliable sources.** Involve reliable third parties — clergy, local elected officials, emergency responders, employees — in the risk communication process.

**6. Meet the needs of the media.** Most members of the public receive their information from the media.

**7. Speak clearly and with understanding.** Even a well-structured and well-delivered message can be lost if it is delivered by an unskilled speaker.

The following table provides a few factors affecting the ways in which risk is understood, along with situations that tend to increase and decrease public concern.

<b>Factors Affecting Risk Perception</b>		
<b>Factor</b>	<b>Conditions Associated with Increased Public Concern</b>	<b>Conditions Associated with Decreased Public Concern</b>
Disastrous potential	Deaths and injuries at the same time in the same place	Random deaths and injuries
Familiarity	Unfamiliar	Familiar
Understanding	Mechanisms or process not understood	Mechanisms or process understood
Controllability (own)	Uncontrollable	Controllable
Exposure willingness	Involuntary	Voluntary
Effects on children	Children specifically at risk	Children not specifically at risk
Effects timing	Delayed effects	Immediate effects
Future generation effects	Risk to future generations	No risk to future generations
Victim identification	Identifiable victims	Statistical victims
Dread	Effects dreaded	Effects not dreaded
Trust in institutions	Lack of trust in responsible institutions	Trust in responsible institutions
Media attention	Much media attention	Little media attention
Accident history	Major or minor accidents	No major or minor accidents
Equity	Uneven spread of risks and benefits	Even spread of risk and benefits
Benefits	Unclear benefits	Clear benefits
Reversibility	Effects irreversible	Effects reversible
Origin	Caused by human actions or failures	Caused by acts of nature or God

### Developing Key Messages

- **Premise statement**
- **Support points**
- **Enhancements**

## 5.0 Developing Key Messages

Keeping these risk communication principles and rules in focus throughout the risk communication process helps you work toward your goal, in which all parties involved believe they have received quality information. Nowhere in the process are these principles and rules more important than in developing your key messages. Your key messages — no more than three, each of which is no more than 15 to 20 words — are the heart of the communication process. Begin by considering what is most important in the minds of your audiences. Environment? Health of their children? Job security? Knowing what kinds of information your audience wants will help you prepare messages more effectively.

Messages generally have three parts:

**Premise statement.** The fundamental message. The one thing you want your audiences to know or understand about you and what you do.

**Support points.** Develop two to four key support points for your premise statement. Use easy-to-understand facts or figures, stories or comparisons, historical data, or quotes from reliable third-party sources.

**Enhancements.** These are examples or sketches of your story in action, elements that give your story a human face — a person who developed a new safety process, for instance, or an end-user who benefits personally from the fact that the Coast Guard is here.

The next page provides a checklist to help you develop and present better risk communication messages.

**Risk Message Checklist\***

<b>Information about the Nature of Risks</b>	
	What are the hazards of concern?
	What is the probability of exposure to each hazard?
	What is the spread of exposure (who is exposed to the hazard)?
	How likely is it that someone will be harmed from a given exposure to each hazard?
	What are the sensitivities of different populations to each hazard?
	How do exposures interact with exposures to other hazards?
	What are the qualities of the hazard?
	What is the total population risk?
<b>Information about the Nature of Benefits</b>	
	What are the benefits associated with the hazard?
	What is the probability that the expected benefit will actually follow the activity?
	What are the qualities of the benefits?
	Who benefits and in what ways?
	How many people benefit and how long do benefits last?
	Which groups get an unequal share of the benefits?
	What is the total benefit?
<b>Information on Options</b>	
	What are the options regarding the hazards in question?
	What is the effectiveness of each option?
	What are the risks and benefits of other actions and of not acting?
	What are the costs and benefits of each option and how are they spread out?
<b>Uncertainties in Knowledge about Risks</b>	
	What are the weaknesses of available data?
	What are the assumptions on which estimates are based?
	How sensitive are the estimates to changes in the assumptions?
	How sensitive is the decision to changes in the estimates?
	What other reviews have been made; what differences exist and why?
<b>Information on Management</b>	
	Who is responsible for the decision?
	What issues have legal importance?
	What constrains the decision?

\*Improving Risk Communication, National Research Council

### Dealing with an Angry Public

- Why is the public angry?
- Develop a mutual gains approach to dealing with an angry public

## 6.0 Dealing with an Angry Public

Risk communication often takes place among parties who are on opposite sides of an issue. One or all of the parties, particularly *the public*, may be angry.

### Why is the public angry?

Members of the public may be angry for any of several reasons:

- Because they have been negatively affected by something
- Because they are fearful of being negatively affected by something
- Because they disagree in principle with something that is happening

Traditional responses to an angry public have included (1) proving that the public has not been negatively affected by something, (2) attempting to put aside public fears, and (3) downplaying differences in values. In addition, many organizations find well-known supporters for their point of view.

### Develop a mutual gains approach to dealing with an angry public

The traditional approach does not work, because a public that prefers not to take any additional risk does not trust the supporters. In addition, advocacy groups sometimes take advantage of conflict for their own ends. Often, the media increase distrust, and the public does not understand that the differing interests are valid. The mutual gains approach to dealing with an angry public is more effective when you do the following:

- Accept concerns of the other side
- Encourage joint fact finding

- Offer commitments to reduce impacts if they do occur; promise to make up for unintended effects
- Accept responsibility, admit mistakes, and share power
- Act in a trustworthy way at all times
- Focus on building long-term relationships

The mutual gains approach to dealing with an angry public has, at its core, effective risk communication. During this process, you must do the following:

- **Take the initiative** — do not wait until you are on the defensive
- **Seek agreement** — do not try to convince people they are wrong; give them a reason to do what you want them to do
- **Emphasize outcomes** — do not lose sight of your long-term objectives
- **Maintain credibility** — do not say anything that you know is not true; do not make promises you cannot keep
- **Enhance legitimacy** — act as you want others to act

### Working with the Media

#### Three keys to success with the media:

- use conflict creatively
- put substance in a sound bite
- present the story visually

## 7.0 Working with the Media

Many stakeholders affected by your issues, whether angry or not, get most of their information from the media. The media are essentially the pipeline through which information to the public must ultimately pass. Therefore, the media are vital to the success of any risk communication program. Knowing how the media work and understanding their role in the communication process can help you communicate with this important audience and, thus, with the audiences the media reach for you.

Journalists work under tight deadlines and management constraints. They often have little technical expertise or understanding, and they cover viewpoints, not truths. Your story, whether good or bad, competes for air time or print space with many others. Remember, bad news sells, and that is what journalists are first to cover. While you cannot prevent media coverage of the bad news, you can work effectively to see that all information is fairly and accurately presented. The Coast Guard has developed several formal protocols for working with the media. Work with the appropriate Coast Guard public affairs office when you know the decision-making process will require contact with the media.

#### Three keys to success with the media

- 1. Use conflict creatively.** Every media interview is an opportunity to show your organization's commitment to its mission. It is a chance to spread your message and improve public opinion.
- 2. Put substance in a sound bite.** Most television stories are 45 to 90 seconds long; you have about 20 seconds to get your point across. Focus on your key messages, and always answer questions honestly. Do not give in to the temptation to tell the reporter more than he or she, or the audience, wants to know.

**3. Present the story visually.** Provide easy-to-understand charts, graphs, and photographs for print media, and video or audiotapes for the electronic media.

### Some Interview “Dos” and “Don’ts”

#### ■ Do

- ◆ speak to the physical audience
- ◆ consider the editorial process
- ◆ refer to key messages often
- ◆ state important facts first
- ◆ say you don’t know if you don’t
- ◆ be responsive, but maintain control
- ◆ keep answers short
- ◆ keep it simple
- ◆ assume the camera is always on
- ◆ be serious

#### ■ Don’t

- ◆ say “No comment”
- ◆ speculate or guess
- ◆ lie
- ◆ speak off the record

### Some Interview “Dos” and “Don’ts”

The following are some important “dos” and “don’ts” to remember when talking with the media. While these suggestions are not magical formulas for success, they should help you avoid some of the most common media interview pitfalls.

#### Do

**Speak to the physical audience.** Speak to the reporter or camera crew. If addressing a gathering of people, speak to that audience.

**Consider the editorial process.** The reporter is looking for a 10- to 20-second sound bite containing your actions and concerns.

**Refer to your key messages often.** Do this at every opportunity.

**State the most important facts first.** Who, what, when, where, why, and how. Speak directly and simply.

**Say you don’t know if you don’t.** Do not try to snow the questioner. The questioner will have greater respect for you and your operations if you do not waste time trying to dance around the issue. Say “I don’t know, but as soon as I can get that information, I’ll get back to you.” Then do it.

**Be responsive, but maintain control.** Do not lose your cool with a questioner who seems pushy or technically uninformed.

**Keep your answers short.** They are more easily understood and less likely to be edited by the media.

**Keep it simple.** Do not be technical. Remember, you are talking to people who do not share your knowledge of your organization. Do not use jargon or acronyms.

**Assume that TV cameras and microphones are always on.**

Assume they are recording your words, actions, and expressions.

**Be serious.** Any attempt at humor will fail with some listeners, and may embarrass you as well.

### Don't

**Say "No comment."** The questioner will think you are trying to hide something. If you cannot discuss something because it involves matters of a confidential nature or because you do not know, say so.

**Speculate or guess.** Do not allow yourself to be drawn into answering hypothetical questions or into debates with third parties who are not present.

**Lie.** Be honest and factual.

**Speak off the record.** With the media, there is no such thing. Assume that anything you say in an interview — or before or after an interview — is fair game for publication or broadcast.

