

# EHS Communication Skills: Tips & Tactics for Stressful Times



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# Overview

- Significance/Relevance
- Public Meetings
- Written Communications
- Crisis and Emergency Communications
- Spokespersons Role
- Working with the Media
- Conclusions
- Q&A

# Vince Covello

- When people are stressed and upset, they want to know you care before they care what you know

# Significance/Relevance

- Major Employment Task
- Situational Management
- Emerging N,B,C,R and Mass Causality
- Organizational Management
- Gov't Agencies: PH Graduates Poor

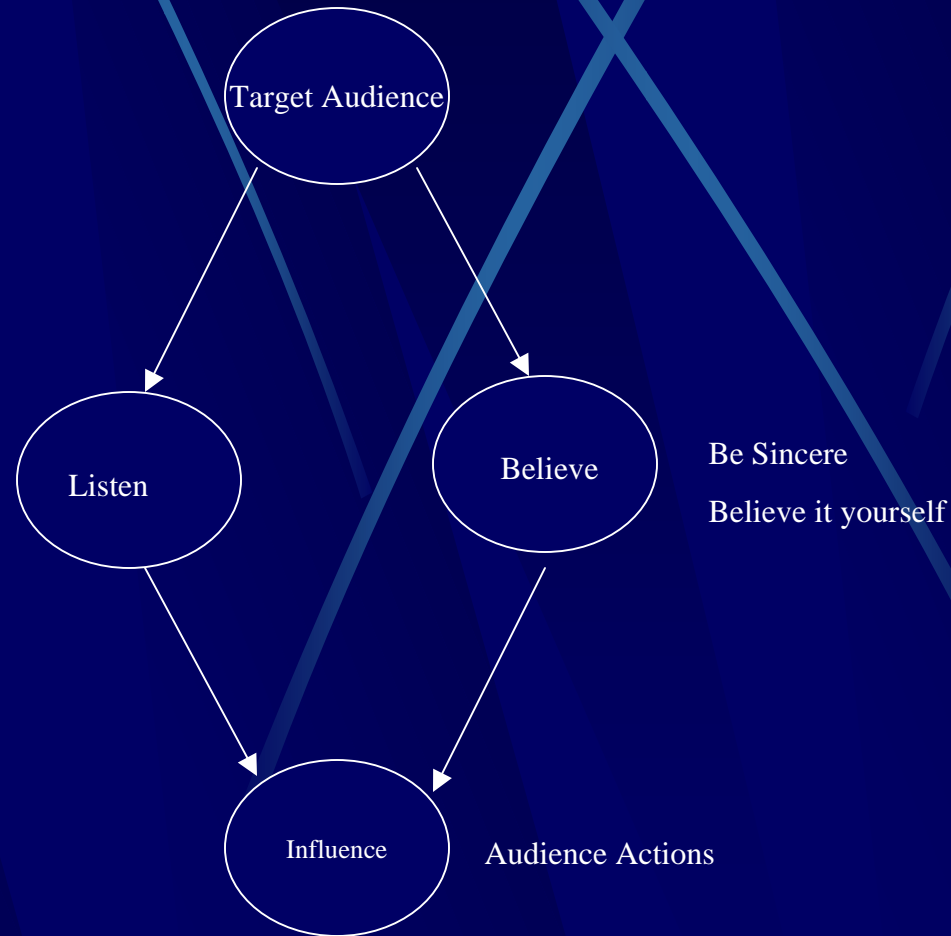
# Communication Literature

- 8000 peer reviewed articles
- 2000 books

# Four "C"s for Successful Presentation

- Clarity
  - Connected
  - Consistent
  - Confident
- 
- The above places you in Control

# Characteristics of a Good Presentation



## A. Risk Communication: Public Meetings

- Convene sooner rather than later
- Convene many small meetings
- Be on time or early
- Wear a name badge
- Don't mingle with your co-workers
- Use Flip Charts: Ask Permission "did I hear you correctly"

# A. Risk Communication: Public Meetings

- Possess a **key** message (no more than 3)
- Know the audience
- Prepare properly
- Align your ideas with the audience
- Return to your **key** message
- Remember: Repetition of **key** message is good

## A. Risk Communication: Public Meetings

- Tell People what you are going to tell them
- Tell Them
- Tell Them what you Told Them

## A. Risk Communication: Public Meetings - Tips

- **Agenda** – be brief “Interested in what you have to say, we will present for ten minutes, then answer your questions”
- **Questions** – “Some of you may not feel comfortable.....please meet me during the break”

# A. Risk Communication: COKE Principal

- Commitment (men)
- Open (women)
- Knowledgeable (men)
- Empathy (women)

## A. Risk Communication: How to Answer "Is it Safe?"

- "Yes", and here's what I mean by safe...
- Absence of risk simply does not exist

## A. Risk Communication: Your Agency Has Made a Mistake

- Tell audience what went wrong
- Tell audience how you will correct it
- Communicate why it will never happen again

## A. You are in the hot seat

- Answer Question + Key Message = Response

## B. Written Communications

- Be Honest
- Provide information in a useful form
- Do not expect readers to know information not provided by you
- Explain the Risk
- Explain the uncertainties in the assessment
- Avoid Comparisons, but if you must, make it useful & do not mess with GOD

## B. Written Communications

- Make recommendations for reducing risk
- ADDRESS PUBLIC ANXIETIES
- Be Short (never longer than 1 page)
- Be understandable
- Accept limitations

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication

- Simple
- Timely
- Accurately
- Repeatedly
- Credibly
- Consistently

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication – Don't over-reassure

- A high estimate of harm modified downward is much more acceptable to public than a low estimate of harm modified upward

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication – State continued concern before stating reassuring updates:

- Although the worst appears over, we still have considerable.....

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication – Confidence vs Uncertainty

- Express confident believe in the process that will address the source of the community anxieties .....don't promise an outcome

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication – Give people things to do

- Contingent: – “if” – “then” behaviors
- 3 actions
  - Must do (Don't drink H2O)
  - Should do (Boil H2O)
  - Can do (Purchase bottled H2O)

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication –

Allow People the right to feel fear

- Don't tell people they should not be afraid
- Don't pretend they're not afraid
- Acknowledge fear

## C. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication – Negative Dominance

- Avoid absolutes (always, never)
- Avoid unnecessary negatives (no, nothing, none)
- 3 + 1 rule (for each negative statement, state 4 positives)

## D. Spokesperson

- Give Organization a Human Form
- Connect with Audience
- Spokesperson “is” the Statement

## D. Spokesperson's Role

- Take organization from “it” to “we”
- Build trust and credibility
- Gain support for PH Response
- Ultimately: Reduce illness, injury & mortality

## D. Spokesperson's Recommendations

- Stay within your responsibility
- Tell the Truth
- Follow-up on Issues
- Expect Criticism (in public meetings but do not accept abuse)

# D. Spokesperson's Pitfalls

- Use of Jargon
- Humor
- Repeating the Negative
- Expressing Personal Opinions
- Showing off your Vocabulary

## E. Working with the Media

- We Need Them
- Effective Vehicle for getting message out
- Know their audience and what they need

## E. Working with the Media

- Understand your job is not media's job
- You can't dismiss them when they are inconvenient
- Accept the media, and plan accordingly

## E. Working with Reporters

- Reporters want information NOW
- Be Prepared
- If you don't have the facts, tell them
- They are not scientists

## E. Working with Reporters

- Never trust a reporter
- Tell the truth
- Call assignment editor for referral to correct reporter
- Provide written statements/press packs
- Direct interview (3 key points)

## E. Dealing with the Press – Terms to use

- Let me say this
- Bridges back to what I want to say
- The real issue
- My message is
- Your readers should know
- For the record
- Let me report /its important to remember

## E. Dealing with the Press – Terms the reporter wants to use on you

- What if
- Either or
- I heard
- Off the record
- Watch for a Pause (Silence is your Friend)

## E. Avoid Interview Pitfalls

- Don't repeat reporters inflammatory statements
- If inflammatory, reframe question
- Don't assume reporter is correct, "I have to verify that before I respond"

## E. Telephone interviews

- Know the reporter
- Ask if you are being recorded
- Ask when info will be used
- Spell difficult names/technical terms
- Limit time for interview up front (I have ten minutes)
- Ensure reporter understands what you are saying

## E. Radio Interviews

- Audible Pauses: “Uh”, “Umm”, “You know”
- Do not repeat reporters negative questions (you validate it if you do)

# E. Television Interviews

- Ask for a chair that does not swivel
- Do not make broad gestures (hands)
- Reply in 10-20 second phrases
- Slow down – it makes you appear in control

# E. Television Interviews

- Don't reply in monotone
- Don't look into monitor
- Look at reporter, not camera unless directed otherwise
- Do an earphone check (what happens if it pops out?)

## E. Television Interviews – what to wear - men

- Avoid patterned suits, stripes, checks
- Button double breasted suits, unbutton single breasted suits – sit on your coattails
- White or light blue shirts
- Somber neckties (convey seriousness)

## E. Television Interviews – what to wear - men

- Knee length socks
- Shave!

## E. Television Interviews – what to wear - women

- tailored clothes work best
- Do not wear short skirts
- Neutral colors and less pattern
- Dark shoes
- Avoid jangles
- Wear regular makeup

## E. Television Interviews – what to wear – men & women

- Neat, trimmed hair is best
- Ask for powder to reduce skin shine
- Consider removing glasses, or wear non glare

## E. Effective non-verbal communication

- Maintain eye contact
- Maintain an open posture
- Do not stand behind podiums or tables
- Do not frown or show negative facial expressions
- Do not dress dramatically different than your audience

# Conclusions

- Risk Communication is a Science
- Communication Skills are Important
- Communication Skills can be Acquired
- Anticipation, preparation & practice
- Be Prepared & Be Human



Questions?

# Sources

- Bruce Chin, PH.D. – U of Michigan
- Alvin Chung - USEPA
- CDC/Alabama Dpt. Of Public Health
- Vince Covello - Consultant