Message Mapping for Emergency, Disaster and Crisis Communication Effectiveness

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The Disaster-Level Context

Disaster crises are unexpected and sudden.

They may:

• Disrupt or destroy normal operational processes
• Endanger the safety, security and wellbeing of people
• Threaten the continued existence of the organization
• Result in ongoing, significant financial or reputational harm

Recent events such as the 2014 Ebola virus outbreak in Africa, Storm Sandy and Sandy Hook school shootings in 2012, the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, are examples that have amplified the importance of crisis communication preparedness

*Communication preparedness and planning for disaster events is an urgent component of disaster preparedness*
Crisis Communication: The Challenge

Even when electricity, phones, email and SMS are working, you may still not be communicating effectively.

Factors affecting the perceived meaning and behavioral response of target audiences include:

• *What* you say
• *How* you say it
• *When* you say it

In addition, *the modality used, the context of the message, and the mental and physical status of the audience* all affect whether communication succeeds.
The Need for a Comprehensive, Collaborative Crisis Communication Plan

After-action reports cite “communication difficulties” among major failings and challenges to effectiveness in emergency response.

A successful response to a major emergency incident requires a coordinated, interoperable response among multiple response communities:

- Public safety
- Public health and
- Emergency management communities
Key Objectives

Part of any comprehensive communication plan is to:

• Have the sustained capability to alert and notify critical target audiences of immediate dangers

• Provide instructions, and

• Verify that these warnings are being heeded
A crisis will...

- Expose vulnerabilities of processes, technology and people
- Impact the way people think, react and behave
- Impact the ways that people perceive, understand, listen, think, act, speak, interact and behave
Communication Breakdowns and Failures

During very high-stress situations, there are typical communication breakdowns:

- Spread of wrong information
- Broken communication chains, malfunctioning communication channels

Anticipate: how to minimize, mitigate and manage their occurrence

Communication breakdowns have the potential to greatly affect the outcomes of disaster management and can significantly magnify and worsen already challenging logistical situations, within any of the phases of the disaster event.

People  Processes  Technology
Communication Breakdowns and Failures

- Failure to communicate with all the relevant people
- Inaccurate information
- Timing (too early/too late)
- Misunderstood meanings
- Lack of specific directions or instructions
- Unreachable targets
- Lack of confirmation or feedback
- Technology failures
- Failure to plan
- Ineffective messages
Communication Breakdowns and Failures

Sequential Communication Failures

With each interjection of a new receiver and new communicator, there is a new opportunity for additional potential alterations of the message, including:

- Omission
- Addition
- Distortion

*The more complex the message

and the more complex the sequence of transfer,

the greater the potential for communication error.*
Human Cognitive Processes Impacted by Crisis

Crisis stress can, at least temporarily, impact the following:

- Reaction time
- Ability to mentally focus, and to perceive and comprehend information, leading to inattention
- Message loading: Number of message variables that can be received, considered and processed
- Changes in speech processing; ability to accurately elaborate and to relay messages
- Primary language orientation:
  - Reversion to first language, or “mother tongue,” in speaking, hearing and thinking
Human Cognitive Processes Impacted by Crisis

Situation Awareness:

• Ability to accurately perceive and understand one’s circumstances and surroundings (or, knowing what is going on so you can figure out what to do)

Risk Perception:

• Ability to accurately perceive the present or future level of risk or danger

Contending with these variables requires multiple communication cues, messages, and interaction
Human Cognitive Processes Impacted by Crisis

Low Stress

- Recipients process an average of 7 messages per communication episode
- Information processed at the “average” grade level (about 10th Grade, in the general population)

The Spectrum of Cognitive Abilities

Normal Cognitive Abilities
- Routine misinterpretation
- Routine misunderstanding
- Assumptions
- Sequential Errors

Diminished Cognitive Abilities
- Increased confusion
- Inability to focus
- Easily distracted
- Increased misinterpretation
- Increased number of misunderstandings
- Unable to complete complex critical thinking

High Stress

- Recipients process an average of 3 messages per communication episode
- Information processed at an average of -4 grade levels, in the general population
Stage 1: Warning

Communication is often **precautionary** and **intended to heighten awareness**

- Some incident types have distinct warning phases: hurricanes, snowstorms, etc.
- Others have no warning periods, or very subtle warning signs that
  - Examples: Power outages, workplace violence, earthquakes
Part 1: Six Stages of a Communication Crisis

Stage 1: Warning

*Keep in Mind: Crisis impacts ability to listen, think, comprehend, and comply*

- **Who to communicate with during the Warning Stage**
  - Your crisis team and key constituents (citizens, students, employees, and other non-crisis team members to whom you are accountable to communicate)

- **How to communicate:**
  - [Messages, methods, processes]

- **What to communicate:**
  - Information content (defining the threat and danger)
  - Meta-Message (conveying the tone, urgency, etc.)
  - Specific behavioral requests (telling what to do - where, when and how)
  - Method to confirm compliance - how to provide feedback, two-way communication
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

- Communication is geared toward **assembling the right people** to determine how to handle the situation.

- In the moments after an incident occurs and/or is reported, the crisis response team activates the organization’s emergency response plan.

- **Communications are sent only to decision-makers during risk assessment.** Public communications occur during the response phase.
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Keep in Mind:

Stress levels change decision making, risk perception and critical judgment skills

Who to communicate with

• Your crisis team, key executives and other personnel, local law enforcement, other agencies

Critical factors:

• Rapid and accurate incoming information and information processing
  • Gather, prioritize, analyze, store for retrieval
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

How to communicate:

- Messages (information and meta-messages)
- Methods (procedural protocols)
- Processes (interaction including risk-analysis processes – avoiding pitfalls)

What to communicate:

- Information content (what is the threat/danger) and meta-message (tone, urgency, etc.)
- Specific behavioral or task requests
- Method to have interaction and decision-making (feedback, two-way)
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Crisis can happen anywhere and when least expected.

Learn to recognize the warning signs of a crisis

- Inbound information is critical – communication plays key role
- Assessment and risk analysis communication – beware of faulty conclusions – *Diligent and vigilant decision-making does not happen automatically without training and preparation*
- Outbound communication during this stage is often precautionary but should accomplish key tasks:
  - Build credibility and trust with public, stakeholders and media
  - Educate and inform (disclosure of what you know)
  - Utilize message maps
- Test and validate messages as well as channels and procedures
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Assess your risks:

- Be first, be right, be credible
- Acknowledge with empathy
- Explain and inform about risk
- Describe what you know, don’t know, and what you are doing about it
- Commit to continued communication. Keep communication channels open

Communication in this stage is geared toward assembling team members, notifying executives, officials and advising law enforcement

Keep in mind:

- **High-stress situations** can dramatically change the rules of communication
- The risk assessment stage requires a core team of decision-makers who are willing to speak freely, confidentially and honestly, and to conduct a **vulnerability audit** of the situation
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

At this stage, communication shifts from low- to high-stress.

**Low Stress**
- Recipients process an average of 7 messages.
- Info processed at an average grade level of about 10th grade (general population).
- Focus on competence, expertise, knowledge.

**High Stress**
- Recipients process an average of 3 messages.
- Info processed at 6th-grade level or below.
- Focus on listening, caring, empathy, compassion.
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Communicating in high-stress situations

Truth #1: Stress negatively affects cognitive process

- Balance ideas, information, and words in the context of the crisis
- Create messages that are accurate, consistent, and which reinforce each other
- Avoid mixed or erroneous messages

Keep in mind: The wrong message can contribute to panic and confusion

Note: In this stage, there will be a need to cut through the “mental noise” due to high emotions, stress and sensory overload
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Communicating in high-stress situations

Truth #2: **Stress negatively affects comprehension**

- Simplify the message (lower reading level)
- Reduce **number of message points** to a **maximum of three**
- Use **short sentences**
- Use **numbers carefully**
- Use **pictures or graphics** whenever possible
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Communicating in high-stress situations

Truth #3: You can’t forget varied demographics

- Customize the message, based on geographic location, languages and economic resources
- Messages must be written in the recipient's spoken language
- Messages must be coordinated and consistent across all levels

Note:

- First-language reversion (as a neurological response) during crisis has been reported. Therefore, during preparation of emergency messaging, organizations should prepare messages not only in the dominant spoken languages of the public in the location, but also in the first and second language fluencies of those who will depend on these messages for survival and safety.
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Communicating in high-stress situations

Truth #4: **Key personnel may be unavailable**

- Ensure an alternate reliable decision-maker is in place if key personnel are not available due to schedule absences or illness
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Communicating in high-stress situations

Truth #5: Business reputations may suffer

- You will be under a microscope
- Poorly articulated or worded responses to questions may affect an organization’s survival post-disaster
- The perception that an organization behaved in a capable and reliable manner during a crisis is key to recovery
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Overcoming communication pitfalls

‘Message Maps’ are a tool that allows organizations to communicate clearly during an emergency

- Message maps are:
  - Created prior to crisis events
  - Written at or below a sixth-grade reading level
  - Specific to one organization
  - Written using the 3 & 30 rule
  - Sensitive to the needs of different demographic groups
Stage 2: Risk Assessment

Formulate a concise message

- Consider people affected by your organization
- Walk through every possible emergency scenario
- Make choices about types of messages
- Determine channels of communication
  - How will these messages be delivered?
  - How will you know the message was received?
  - Is there a confirmation process?
  - Is an automated system in place?
- Tie in with pre-messaging
- Deep background education
- Hone and refine actual message maps
Stage 3: Response

- Once the emergency response plan is activated, crisis team members call first-responders into action and begin to notify the “masses” about the incident.

- Focus is geared toward making constituents aware of the incident, providing instructions, and seeking confirmation of response.

- Includes Emergency Notification Messages
Stage 3: Response

Who to communicate with during the Response Stage:
Your crisis team, first responders, people at risk, key personnel/executives, local law enforcement and other responding agencies, citizens/students/employees.

Critical factors to consider:
Context of rapidly changing events, “facts” with low confidence, misinterpretation (receiver orientation) issues, psychological interference (noise), communication breakdowns due to human error and/or technological malfunction.

How to communicate:
• Convey decisiveness; be expedient, calm, direct
• Use richer instead of leaner information messaging
• Utilize redundancy, C3 focus, directive (informational and instructive), two-way with feedback. Emphasize “push” communication flow.

Stage 3: Response

The most critical alerts are frequently issued during the response and management phases and occasionally during the warning phase.

- A basic emergency notification message should follow the 4/DA or danger-action structure.
- The four basic functions of a typical emergency notification message are:
  - Information
  - Meta-message
  - Behavioral request and instructions
  - Feedback request
Stage 3: Response

- The **3 & 30 Principle** states that an emergency notification message should be written in **no more than three sentences and 30 words**.
- The **6 & 60 Principle** states that an emergency notification message for general population audiences should be written at a **readability rating of at least 60 and no higher than the 6th grade reading level**.
- The three imperatives communicators should meet to define audience expectations are:
  - The demand for **speed**
  - The demand for direct **communication**
  - The demand for honesty and **transparency**
Stage 3: Response

The duration of each stage varies and is characterized by varying levels of stress, threat, surprise and response time.

- Identify things for people to do
- Indicate a willingness to cooperate and share authority and responsibility
- Provide important roles and responsibilities
- Tell people how to recognize problems or symptoms
- Tell people how and where to go to get further information
- Continue to help public understand its own risks
- Empower risk/benefit decision-making
- Gain understanding and support for response plans
- Listen to audience and correct misinformation
Stage 4: Management

Crisis now either moves toward resolution or gets worse with deepening layers of complexity. Organizations must respond differently according to the progression of the crisis at hand.
Stage 4: Management

• Organizations must:
  • Provide **regular status updates** to their various audiences
  • Change or add to previous instructions
  • Control rumors, and
  • Conference with leadership and responder teams
  • Course correction may be needed in order to respond to changes in the situation.
Stage 4: Management

Who to communicate with during the Management Stage

- Your crisis team
- Key personnel, executives
- Local law enforcement and other agencies
- Partners, constituents and stakeholders
- Media
- Community citizens
- Employees

*Crisis Management Stage: The Contact List*

How would you compile this list?
How would you ensure it is maintained/updated/corrected?
Stage 4: Management

Critical factors to consider:

- Potential sequential communication breakdowns
- Information management issues
- Effects of fatigue and stress

How to communicate:

- Using direct language:
  - Concrete, objectified, uses specific instruction
Stage 4: Management

How to communicate:

• Richer vs. leaner, in both the medium and the message.
  • The medium you use affects what people perceive, interpret and decide.
  • The modality you choose is a key component.
  • The more types of verbal/nonverbal and vocalic information (intonation, sarcasm, pitch, rate, volume), the richer the message.

**Rich** = in-person, includes setting, nonverbal, etc. = “rich” context. Fewer misunderstandings result.

**Lean** = for instance, email. No setting, little context, tone doesn’t translate. When message is “lean” the message meaning is created in the mind of the recipient. (Messages that are lean are less well-understood and communicated.)
Stage 4: Management

How to communicate:

- **Redundancy** – Having more than one channel of communication (in case one fails; in order to increase opportunities for message receipt) – Send multiple times through multiple channels. Message needs to be received, perceived, and acted upon correctly.

- **Two-way with feedback:** Feedback provides a way of controlling misinterpretation. You have to know what they think they’re understanding. Almost a dialogic perspective (versus monologic). If you are not in a dialog, you are not communicating.

- **Sustained multiple channels/modalities** (technology/technical issues)

- **Public communication must adapt to different audiences:**
  
  • Every audience group has different agendas, languages (generational, cultural, professional, etc.)
Stage 4: Management

How to communicate:

• Utilize both **push** and **pull** communication flow:

• Find the appropriate mix

  • **Push:** You launch a message toward a target (broadcast, alert notifications, automated calling system). Prioritize in order not to overwhelm: Think of what kinds of information to push vs. pull.

  • **Pull:** Information you keep available that people seek, have to come to you to receive (timeline of your disaster on your website; your 800# hotline, facebook and other social media, etc.)
Stage 4: Management

What to communicate:

- Information-loaded messages
- Behavioral directions
- Meta-message factors
  - “The message about the message.” Undertones, intonations, modes of approach, facilitate “reading between the lines” – or, looking to see if information is credible/serious
  - “You need to evacuate” is different from “you need to evacuate now”
- Give thought to how your messages will be interpreted
- Requests for input, feedback/information
Stage 5: Resolution

Once the crisis has been resolved and is drawing to conclusion, crisis team members communicate that resolution to all audiences in the form of all-clear alerts and messages of reassurance.
Stage 5: Resolution

- Indicate status return to normalcy
- Closure
- Indicate transition to recovery
- Recall or demobilize emergency response or management protocols and procedures
- Change (transfer) of command authority or structure
Stage 5: Resolution

Who to communicate with:

- Target audiences who have been actively impacted by the management of the crisis
- Constituents and stakeholders
- Emergency responding personnel
- Assigned individuals, agencies, and teams that will take charge of the operational recovery phase

Critical factors to consider:

- Psychological and cognitive issues
- Lingering confusion and misinformation “pockets”
- Sequential communication delays, breakdowns, and information ripples
Stage 5: Resolution

How to communicate:

• Both PUSH and PULL measures
• Multiple (direct and indirect) channels;
• Source credibility (authority).

What to communicate:

• Simple declarative closure measures
• Change of status, transition
• Information on anticipated recovery steps
• How to obtain resources or additional information
• Reassurance, confidence, and stability are all important meta-message aspects to communicate
Stage 5: Resolution

AVOID sending messages which are:

- Ambiguous
- Uncertain
- Limited in distribution

Do not send mixed messages.

Keep in mind the **ripple-effect**: Your intended messages will usually be repeated in not only intended but unintended ways. Also, at a later time, one message may still be circulating after circumstances have changed.

**Framing/misframing**: Information is perceived within contexts that may completely alter the intended meaning and/or desired ability to perceive risk/act upon directions.
Stage 5: Resolution

Communicate resolution in the form of **accurate and consistent all-clear alerts**.

Use messages that are:

- Well-defined
- Widely understood

**Key Notes:**

- *Stage 5 of the original crisis may be Stage 1 of the next cycle of crisis communication/management.*
- *Crisis Stages overlap and evolve.*
Stage 6: Recovery

The goal of this stage is to convert this turning point into opportunity

- Focus on healing and getting back to normal
- Communication revolves around post-crisis counseling, a return to pre-crisis policies and operations
Stage 6: Recovery

- Offer relief, celebration, acknowledgement for getting through the event
- Instill trust and confidence with your audience
- Acknowledge shortcomings and how they will be rectified in the future
- Damages, losses and costs are examined and analyzed, and planned recovery strategies are evaluated, modified and executed.
Stage 6: Recovery

Who to communicate with:

- Affected target audiences
- Constituents and stakeholders
- Assigned individuals, agencies, and teams in charge

Critical factors to consider:

- Coordinated communication management
- Prevention of manage rumors and misinformation
- Avoiding inefficiencies and breakdowns
- Getting back to “business as usual”
Stage 6: Recovery

How to communicate:

• Use both PUSH and PULL measures
• Use multiple (direct and indirect) channels

What to communicate:

• Focus on operational (pragmatic) information
• Keep alert for changed circumstances and people
• Explanation and post-event analysis
• Beware blaming or negative focus
• Communicate changes in policies, procedures, and facilities that are being implemented
Stage 6: Recovery

Communication needs to revolve around a return to pre-crisis mode.

AVOID sending messages that include:

- Exaggeration
- Drama
- Blame games
- No explanations
- No follow-up
Stage 6: Recovery

Message maps help organizations communicate clearly during a crisis

Build maps for different sequence paths

- Be prepared
- Practiced
- Practical
Message Mapping Strategy
Message Mapping Strategy

Creating a message mapping strategy takes time, energy and resources. The process involves input from many members of an organization. Although time-intensive, crisis communication planning can save lives, company assets and organizational reputations.

- **Determine core constituent audiences**
  - **Stakeholders**: employees, customers, vendors, suppliers, government regulators, investors, media, etc.
  - Employees can be divided into subcategories (managers, field workers, clerical, etc.)
- **Walk through every possible disaster scenario**. Ask “what if” questions that any stakeholder might ask.
- Consider legal, public relations, financial, business, and operations type message needs
Message Mapping Strategy

• Determine channels of communication, confirmation process, and necessary recipient lists

• Next, hone and refine actual message maps:
  • Reduce ALL important, emergency-relevant concepts to:
    • No more than three short sentences... that convey three key messages... into 30 words or less.

• Each primary message should have no more than three message points
The Chandler Message Mapping Model: REVIEW

- Begin with the overall communication goal(s) for incidents
  - Organize these by stages of the crisis
- Identify key audiences and the most appropriate message “source” for messages
- List basic messages for each
- Establish the Key Point for each message (related to your message goal(s))
  - Determine the three sub-points that relate to the Key Point
  - Create three sentences for each message sub-point
Message Mapping Strategy

- Create additional *key phrases* and *key words* that will need to be used in messages
  - Consider *Audience Factors* that will affect your message construction requirements during *each stage* or *type of crisis*
- Create a basic template with specific wording, phrases, and language for each message (template might include *blanks to be filled in* for details or specific applications)
- Determine the *timeline* and *sequence* for all messages
  - This is where you will organize the *overall matrix* of message maps
- Identify *optimal delivery channels* for messages for each audience
- Provide *method for reply* or feedback from audiences
Message Maps 1.5 – Chandler Model

Message Maps 1.0 + PLUS

- Adapt/prepare maps for specific target audiences during each stage of an event (audience Analysis) – sort by topics, and delivery channels
- Develop a roadmap or navigational chart forecasting when you will need to communicate key messages and to whom
- Create additional key phrases and key words that will need to be used in messages
- Focus on more targeted delivery channels and confirmation
Message Maps 2.0 – Chandler Model

Message Maps 1.5 + PLUS

- Consider Audience Factors that will affect your message construction requirements during each stage or type of crisis
- Create a basic template with specific wording, phrases, and language for each message (might include fill in the blanks for details or specific applications)
- Determine the timeline and sequence for all messages (organize the overall matrix of message maps)
- Identify optimal delivery channels for messages for each audience and ensure wording choices for maximum effect
- Provide method for reply or feedback from audiences – situational awareness and reconnaissance
- Follow 3-3-30 and 60 & 6 Principles
- Multiple Language Maps (First Language Reversion adaptation)
- Social Media/New Media plans
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors

Hospitals and medical facilities healthcare agencies, nursing homes, state and local public health units should each develop a comprehensive crisis communication plan for each stage of a crisis; one that does not overlook two-way communication and which includes:

• Protocols specific to the healthcare facility/organization’s functions and various potential crisis circumstances
• Corresponding message templates
• Planned modalities for messaging
• Contact information which is updated regularly and frequently
• Means of assessing success and effectiveness

Such plans should be tested and evaluated regularly.
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors

This plan should include procedures to provide information to internal and external audiences, including the media, and deal with their inquiries considering the requirements for routine and emergency states, for:

- Alerting people potentially impacted by an actual or impending incident
- Facilitating structured communication with emergency responders
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors

• Assuring availability of the communication means with emphasis on a crisis situation and disruption
• Assuring the interoperability of multiple responding organizations and personnel
• Assuring that the communication processes, messages, as well as the technology have been tested during hyper-stress contexts
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors

The hospital or medical facility will need to decide, based on life safety as the first priority and in consultation with stakeholders, whether to communicate externally about its significant risks and threats, both before and after an incident, and should document its decision.

- Record vital information about the incident, actions taken and decisions made
- Establish a central contact facility or communication hub
- Decide upon post-incident documentation requirements for communication
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors

- Plan to use multiple, two-way communication channels for redundancy
- Use reinforcing messages stressing resilience
- Constituents must be reached, be able to comprehend the message and be empowered to respond appropriately
Hospital/Healthcare Facility Disaster Communication Factors

Remember that, additionally, the type of crisis affects potential communication issues and needs you may encounter

Example: Issues and Needs For Communicating During a Hurricane

- **Communication Issues**
  - Moving targets, ongoing evolution of circumstances
  - Differing expectations and information needs
  - Differing levels and stages of situational awareness
  - Different risk perception tendencies and changes in cognitive functioning

- **Communication Needs**
  - Accurate and clear inbound and outbound communication
  - Messages that are adapted to context, people, and changing need-states
  - Messaging redundancy: Use of multiple communication channels
  - Listening (as important as speaking)
  - Focus on resilience

UCF Nicholson School of Communication
Sample Messaging Advisory Resource: Health Related Crisis – CDC’s HAN

http://www.bt.cdc.gov/han/
Healthcare Worker-Specific Advisories

http://www.bt.cdc.gov/han/
Crisis Life Cycle Analysis – Summary of Key Points

Each phase of a crisis presents different communication needs, opportunities, and challenges that evolve and change during the life cycle of a crisis.

*Crisis communication planning should follow these stages, and specific communication preparedness tied to each phase of an emergency should be created.*

Unique *needs, challenges and changes* in the target audiences during each phase

Greater *stressors and distractions* for target audiences during certain times. Specific adaptations for emergency notification should be adapted for *high-stress phases*.

Communication needs and your people all change, just as the emergency itself changes.
Accountability, Metrics and Critique

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QUESTIONS?

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