

Risk Communication



Your congregation and community will seek your guidance as a religious leader during and following a disaster, as they try to make sense of the situation and decide how to respond. Understanding how to communicate in a crisis will help you avoid mistakes that can undermine your credibility or result in confusion or even death. The key is staying connected with reliable public messaging and relaying it effectively to those who trust your guidance and interpretation.

WHAT IS RISK COMMUNICATION?

One of the reasons crisis response is difficult to coordinate is that *disasters are different from routine daily emergencies*. The difference is more than just one of magnitude. Disasters and public health emergencies generally cannot be adequately managed merely by mobilizing more personnel/material. Established routines are disrupted and communication equipment and utilities may be damaged or destroyed at the very time when there is an enormous amount of information to convey and the need is urgent. People require information to make critical decisions about their immediate well-being and their future.

Risk communication involves communicating to the public and the media in a way that delivers critical information without causing fear, and informs without provoking alarm. If done well, risk communication can help people cope by bringing a sense of order to what may be a confusing and chaotic situation; if done poorly, the result may be increased fear and distrust of people in leadership roles, even injury or death. The challenges facing religious and other leaders in the midst of a disaster response include decisions which must be made within a narrow time constraint, decisions which may be irreversible, decisions with uncertain outcomes, and decisions made with imperfect or incomplete information. Knowing how and when to convey information in a challenging situation such as disaster response/recovery requires a specific set of skills and techniques that can be documented, learned and practiced before a disaster occurs.

WHERE DO RELIGIOUS LEADERS FIT IN?

Faith communities often look FIRST to their religious leaders for help and guidance during any crisis. Even when an evacuation is ordered, for example, some people look to their religious leaders to confirm the notification before they act. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can serve as natural risk-communication networks and infrastructure for recovery. In addition, houses of worship are sought out for their links to community leaders or organizations which can provide services during and after disasters. To best utilize their potential for effective risk communication, **all congregations should have a plan, along with the capability and the capacity, to communicate with their entire congregation at a moment's notice.**

FIVE COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE RISK COMMUNICATION

Develop and Execute a Solid Communication Plan

- Good planning makes all the difference; develop a risk communication plan far in advance of a disaster.
- Anticipate the kinds of information you will need to impart to people; who will need to receive this information; and the means by which you will communicate. Developing sample wording for anticipated situations is also recommended.
- Keep the plan updated, and be flexible enough to modify it as the disaster response and recovery dictate.

Be a Timely Source of Information, but Ensure Your Information Is Accurate

- When people are seeking information, the first message they receive generally carries the most weight.
- People will infer that a slow response on your part indicates a lack of preparation or lack of interest in their situation.
- Providing timely and accurate information reduces confusion; also, you will not have to refute earlier, potentially false information. False rumors and speculation spread quickly when accurate information is unavailable.

Express Empathy Early

- In the first 30 seconds of your message, express your solidarity in the crisis and that you understand what people are feeling.
- Stating this early will help reassure people that you are aware of the situation so they are prepared listen to new information.

Show Competence and Expertise

- Using words and demeanor to convey your competence is more effective in establishing trust than stating you are an expert.
- Consult the right people so that you have the correct information to present; take the time to prepare before you present it.

Remain Honest and Open

- If you don't have specific information confirmed, tell your community that while you don't know for certain, you will do everything you can to find out; however, avoid speculating, which can lead to false rumors.
- Avoid answering "no comment" to questions. It suggests that you are not being candid or that you have something to hide.

HOW TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF FEAR AND INABILITY TO ACT

Your congregation and the public must feel empowered to take action in the event of a crisis to reduce the likelihood of victimization and fear. Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual preparation can relieve anxiety despite the threat of potential injury or death. An “action message” can provide people with the feeling that they can take steps to improve a situation and not become passive victims of the danger. Here are some common reactions to keep in mind:

Fear, Anxiety, Confusion, and Dread: As a religious leader, it is not your job to make these feelings go away. Instead, acknowledge these feelings in your statement of empathy, and through everyday conversations.

Hopelessness and Helplessness: If feelings of fear, anxiety, confusion, and dread grow unchecked, they can turn into helplessness and hopelessness, which are detrimental to a community and are counterproductive during response and recovery. Your message should help your community manage their fears and direct them toward a course of action. Actions help overcome fears; providing people with a sense of action is vital to community recovery, even if the action is only symbolic.

Panic vs. Survival Instincts: In general, people don't panic in disaster situations. Individuals may revert to more basic “fight or flight” reactions, but people generally make rational decisions based on the information they have, and refrain from extreme behaviors. However, their choices may not necessarily be good for the community as a whole. As a religious leader, be aware of these individualist tendencies and encourage people to work together and do what is best for the community.

Uncertainty: This can be a very unsettling feeling for people. In a disaster, people want answers; any information can be empowering. Oftentimes, uncertainty is worse than dealing with bad news. Don't promise things that are outside of your control, but don't leave people suspended in uncertainty in order to protect them from bad news. If you don't have information, let your community know what you will do to get it and to share it with them.

FORMAT OF RISK COMMUNICATION MESSAGES

- 1. Express Solidarity and Empathy**
- 2. Present Confirmed Facts and Action Steps**— Explain the basics of the disaster (who, what, when, where, why, how) and any other information you may know. Keep to the basic points and only clarify the relevant information.
- 3. Acknowledge What You Don't Know—Never Lie**
- 4. Explain the Process to Answer the Unknowns**— After acknowledging there are unanswered questions, explain the first steps being taken to find the answers. Explain what things your community can expect next.
- 5. Statement of Commitment**— Assure them that as a leader in the community you are prepared to assist them through the challenges of disaster recovery.
- 6. Where People Can Get More Information**— Direct your community to a hotline, website, or other appropriate sources which can help them learn more about the nature of the disaster and how they can recover.

COMMUNICATION FAILURES THAT HARM SUCCESSFUL RESPONSE

- Mixed Messages
- Delayed Information
- Paternalistic Attitudes
- Not Countering Rumors
- Public Power Struggles

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH A CONGREGATION OR AT A COMMUNITY MEETING

Talking with your community or at a congregational meeting during a crisis can be a tough communication task. It is a very important responsibility and you should not avoid it. Be prepared; here are some tips to make the task easier.

Let people talk— Lectures, whether from a religious leader or a hired expert, are seldom effective or accepted. People want to talk about what scares or angers them instead of listening to a list of facts or a speech. Keep lectures to five minutes and use the majority of the time for discussion.

Invite questions— Wait for members of your community to ask questions before you offer solutions. You may be surprised to find that what you perceive as the issues differs greatly from what the community perceives.

Meet every person's input with respect— Promote an environment where people can safely speak their minds and add input. Never discourage anyone from speaking; model and expect mutually-respectful speaking and listening for all.

Tell the truth— Admit when you don't know something. If you find or receive information about the subject later, make sure to follow up and give people the information they wanted.

Don't lose your temper— Members of your community have just lived through a traumatic experience and they may feel hurt, threatened, or out of control of their situations. Anger and fear can come to the forefront very quickly for members of the congregation, including yourself. You will be most effective if you acknowledge that anger and fear are natural reactions to trauma, but do not need to dictate one's response to any situation; one can choose to strive for understanding.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control — Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: <https://bit.ly/33GwITt>
- Notify NYC— NYC Official Source for Emergency Alerts: <https://a858-nycnotify.nyc.gov/notifynyc>
- FEMA — Effective Accessible Communication Webinar: <https://bit.ly/35AeEYd>
- FEMA — FEMA IS-242.B Effective Communication: <https://bit.ly/2Ftc5MZ>
- Ready.gov — Business Crisis Communications Plan: <https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/crisis>
- World Health Organization — Risk Communication: <https://www.who.int/risk-communication/background/en/>
- Islamic Society of North America — Masjid Crisis Communication and Response Webinar: <https://bit.ly/3c6OqOa>