

Risky Business: Communicating with Credibility

When your audience wants to hear what you have to say but isn't inclined to trust you, the special rules of risk communication come into play.

A school board member demands an explanation for a budget shortfall. An angry parent wants to know why the music program at her son's school was eliminated. The local paper calls to ask about a rumor that someone in your office has been embezzling funds.

Sound familiar? In such scenarios, the normal rules of communication don't apply. Instead, you need the special skills and techniques of what's known as "risk communication." Developed and honed through years of research and application, these skills and techniques come into play whenever the following occurs:

- Your audience is concerned that you're exposing them to some sort of risk, whether physical, emotional, financial, or environmental. It's important to remember that the risk doesn't have to be real—it's enough that your audience members *perceive* themselves to be at risk.
- Your audience doesn't trust you. Don't take it personally. Distrust can exist for reasons beyond your control. Your audience may believe your organization has harmed them before or they may think you're biased because of your job. It doesn't help that the credibility of people in positions of authority generally has eroded over the years.



By Leonard S. Greenberger

In these hostile situations, your goal as a communicator is to establish and maintain trust and credibility with your audience. Otherwise, you'll never be able to change anyone's mind. Your instinct may be to respond with facts and information, to prove that you are in the right. But in fact, when people think and act based on emotions rather than on reason, trying to answer difficult questions with a stream of facts will only worsen a bad situation.

Your goal as a communicator is to establish and maintain trust and credibility with your audience.

Risk communication is a skill. As with any skill, practice makes perfect. No singer or actor would go on stage without being fully prepared. Neither should a communicator. Here are three basic steps that will help ready you for the next time you find yourself in a hostile situation:

1. Think about how audiences judge your trustworthiness and credibility. Research conducted by Vincent Covello, founder of Columbia University's Center for Risk Communication and one of the field's leading experts, shows that most people judge these traits by asking themselves four questions:

- *Are you caring and empathetic?* This is the most important question because most people weight it highest in rendering a trust/credibility judgment. Most people also decide whether or not you're caring and empathetic within 30 seconds of meeting you. The best way to ensure they reach the right conclusion is to tell a personal story that shows you understand how your audience feels, or otherwise relate to them on a personal level. Do you need to lay off an employee? Start by telling a story about the time it happened to you (if you can).
- *Are you open and honest?* Never lie or deceive, of course. You can be open and honest and maintain trust. For example, if you don't know the answer to a question, say so, but promise to get an answer within a set time and follow through.
- *Are you dedicated and committed?* A distrustful audience needs to know that you really want to help. If your audience is large, arrive early and introduce yourself to people individually. This will build trust and credibility before the formal session begins. Then, be the last one to leave the room. Even people who don't stay to ask questions will see that you're committed and open, willing to discuss concerns with individuals after the formal session. You should also provide ways for your audience to get more

information. If appropriate, give them your email address so they can contact you later. No one may contact you, but you'll score a lot of trust and credibility points.

- *Are you an expert?* Don't assume your audience will think so. Make sure you're well prepared. Cite independent sources of information to back up what you say. And although it's OK to say you don't know the answer to a question, don't do it too often or your audience will begin to wonder whether you really know what you're talking about. Interestingly, research shows that most Americans perceive women as caring, open, and dedicated simply by virtue of their gender. Men are only perceived as experts. This "risk communication gender gap" suggests that all other things being equal, if you need to send someone into a hostile environment, send in a woman.

A distrustful audience needs to know that you really want to help.

2. Pay close attention to the nonverbal messages you send. Research shows that nonverbal messages tend to be three times more powerful than verbal messages in influencing people's perceptions of trustworthiness and credibility. In other words, people will decide whether you're caring, open, dedicated, and expert more by your eyes, hands, posture, clothing, gestures, and other nonverbal cues than by what you say. Here are some helpful hints:

- Maintain steady eye contact with your audience, whether it's one person or many. If you look around, or side to side, or up and down, people will think you're being dishonest.
- Keep your hands visible, in front of you, and between your hips and shoulders. Don't put them in your pockets or fold your arms. In hostile environments, these gestures signal discomfort and aggressiveness. If you are inclined to gesture wildly with your hands as you talk, tone it down.
- Remove any barriers between you and your audience. If you're meeting with someone in your office, don't sit behind your desk. If you're speaking to a group, don't stand behind a podium or table.
- Dress conservatively. Crazy patterns and gaudy jewelry are distracting. Dress at least as well as the people in your audience, or ideally one notch better.
- Drink a little water before you start. Nervousness can cause your mucous membranes to dry up, which in turn will cause you to lick your lips, touch your face, and clear your throat. In a hostile environment, people will interpret these signals as dishonesty.

3. Think about questions your audience may ask—and the answers you want to give. Write them down, practice them alone, and then get a colleague, friend, or spouse to fire some questions at you. I've always found that performing for someone you know is much harder than performing for strangers. In preparing your answers, use the CAN model:

- **C** is for “caring and empathy.” You must demonstrate them right up front, again by telling a story that expresses your understanding of your audience’s concerns.
- **A** is for “answer the question.” Your answer is your sound bite, the thing you want your audience to remember most. It should be relevant, positive, and concise. Support it with information from third-party, independent information. And don’t be afraid to repeat the answer more than once.



If you take time to prepare, you will be ready to communicate with credibility in the toughest situations.

Few people are natural risk communicators. Those who do it well honed their skills over many years spent in hostile environments. If you take the time to prepare and rehearse, you’ll be ready to communicate with credibility even in the toughest situations.

Leonard S. Greenberger, a partner at Potomac Communications Group in Washington, D.C., has trained hundreds of people in the skills and techniques of risk communication. Email: lgreenberger@pcgpr.com

- **N** is for “next steps.” Here is your chance to show dedication. Offer Websites and other sources where your audience can find more information, or set a date for a follow-up meeting. If warranted, present your own next steps for dealing with the issue being discussed.

103(b)
 AUDITING
 BENEFITS
 COMPLIANCE
 DOCUMENT
 EDUCATION

DOES YOUR TPA MAKE THE GRADE?

CPI COMMON REMITTER & COMPLIANCE SERVICES
 A DIVISION OF CPI QUALIFIED PLAN CONSULTANTS, INC.

CALL TODAY,
 800.279.9916 x.764