Communication:
What’s the big deal?

Kristi George
Special Projects & Information Coordinator
Sanitarian Training | Charleston, WV
Summer 2020
Communication – What is it?

The Definition of Communication

–noun 1. the act or process of communicating; fact of being communicated. 2. the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs. 3. something imparted, interchanged, or transmitted. 4. a document or message imparting news, views, information, etc.

“Communication works for those who work at it.”
- John Powell
Media Involvement

- **REACTIVE** – in reaction to something
- **PROACTIVE** – informative/a call to action
- **EXPLORATIVE** – information gathering stage
To the degree that you’re able....

- Monitor the media and social media to provide yourself with situational awareness.
- Get out in front of the story. If possible, tweet and post on your agency’s social media accounts.
- Post updates and changes to your agency’s website.
- Be congruent with messaging. Coordinate sharing of information internally/externally and across all platforms.
- Draft pre-event messaging. When possible, consider writing press releases and other information in advance. Fill in the blanks later, when an incident actually occurs.

Any of these things may enhance public safety during incidents.
Communication Opportunity

- The media offers the means to communicate quickly and persuasively with large numbers of people.

- Our obligation as public health officials is to respond via the media in an accurate and a timely, open and candid manner.

- When we are conscientious and immediate about requests for information, reporters may be more inclined to reciprocate when seeking coverage on issues important to us.
What is News?

- News is what is perceived as *new* today.
- Storytellers look for conflict, criticism and controversy.
- Whenever possible, turn negatives into positives.
- No matter how complex your subject, be concise.

Just Litter/Garbage?

Or is this an opportunity to promote recycling?
Before You Agree to an Interview

• What is the story? Are you part of it? How so?
• Who have you talked to and what have you seen?
• What is the interview format?
• When will the story run and what is your deadline?
• What do you think the reporter believes about the story? Does he or she have any strong feelings about it? Others typically don't know many details on what we do, so this is an opportunity for you to educate them.
• Is it reasonable to suggest getting back to the reporter?
Call Back

- What does the reporter want or need? Consider obtaining all the actual questions prior to answering.
- Offer to call the reporter back after you have gathered all of the information the reporter needs.

Then decide...

- Am I the best person to respond?
- Do I have permission to call the reporter?
- Who's your audience? **Know your audience**!
- Have you decided what you can say and how you will say it?
Make a Plan

• Have your own outline or agenda.
• Be clear, concise, and free of ambiguity.
• Rehearse (out loud if possible).
• Repeat your point(s) over and over during the interview.
• Do not answer questions which may touch on patient or client confidentiality, legal issues, proprietary matters or personnel problems.
• If you can’t answer, you must explain why. “No comment” is unacceptable. State that you will need to get back to them after you obtain the appropriate information.
Framing Your Message

• Always have one positive objective with examples to support it.
• State your words in sound bite format, starting with the conclusion.
• Bridge to your objective(s) at every opportunity. Don’t wait for the perfect question to provide the answer you wish to give.
• Keep in mind that you may be trying to get a message to the general public as much or more than to the media outlet. Therefore, it is paramount to communicate in a way that everyone can understand.
Interview Tips

• Be yourself.
• Talk informally.
• Keep answers short and simple.
• Use colorful words, analogies, and absolutes.
• Talk in sound bites.
• Be positive.
• Be credible.
• Be accurate!
• Stop talking after you’ve answered a question.
• Remember that compassion and safety are always of concern.
• Remain cool.
• Always behave as though the camera and microphone are on (they usually are!).
The Media Interview

It can be one of the most stressful experiences of your life, but solid preparation will ensure a good interview.
What Not to Do

Don’t…. 

• Use jargon, acronyms or technical terms (shop talk).
  • Be careless with language.
  • Speak off the record.
  • Speak for someone else.
  • Speculate.
  • Become angry.
  • Ever lie to a reporter.

Let’s eat Grandma.
Let’s eat, Grandma.

PUNCTUATION 
SAVES LIVES
Newspaper Interviews

Be prepared to offer greater detail. Print usually handles complex stories or issues involving ideas, concepts and intangibles.

Key Points:

• Print reporters often want more aspects and substantiation.
• Print reporters from larger newspapers are more likely to be specialists in their area.
• Before the interview begins, know what it is about so that you can be well-prepared.
Radio Interviews

• Radio reporters most often tape their conversations.
• Be brief, speak in a normal tone, explain in clear terms, and be yourself.

Key Points:
• Radio news reporters want very short and simple answers.
• Radio happens fast; use quick, concise responses.
• Commit to appear on talk or call-in shows only after you know the host’s agenda.
Television Interviews

• Television interviews are particularly challenging because you must respond to a reporter’s questions and you must perform for the camera.
• Statistics show that viewers respond more to our appearance than what we say.
Television Interviews (cont’d)

• When we communicate face-to-face, or on camera, the words we choose account for only 7% of the message impact.
• Our vocal quality accounts for 38% of the message impact.
• Our nonverbal communication (eye contact, facial expression, dress, make-up, etc.) accounts for 55% of the impact of the message.
• Given this, how much will they actually take away? The lesson here is repetition; it’s okay to repeat yourself in order to get the message out.
Television Points to Remember

Key Points:

• Steady eye contact and a smile portray confidence and believability. Be yourself.

• Shift to your objective whenever possible. Regardless of questions, try to transition to the message you wish to convey.
Potential Pitfalls

• Phantom Authority – vague reference to a study or quote by some authority. Don’t respond unless the reporter can provide the exact data.

• False Assumption – sets a premise that is incorrect. Do not repeat the error in your response, even to deny it. Simply say, “That’s not accurate. What is correct is ....”

• “A” or “B” – The “A” or “B” Dilemma: “Do you prefer A or B?” Answer: “I think C is a good choice because....” Don’t let the reporter limit your choices.
Potential Pitfalls (cont’d)

• “Dumb” Questions – If a reporter asks you to list your five biggest problems, or to describe the problems you’ve encountered, quickly decline. If you respond, expect full reports on everything you point out.

• “What if?” Questions – Don’t speculate, guess, assume, or speak for others.

• Badgering – A persistent reporter may ask the same question a dozen times, trying to get the response he or she wants. Don’t concede the point to get rid of it.
• Irrelevant Questions – When the reporter strays from your area of expertise, don’t follow. Bridge to your own objective.
• Multiple or Rapid Questions – Take issues one at a time. When confronted with several questions, choose the one you want to answer and ignore the rest. Simplify, simplify, simplify!
Many times after an interview, you may believe a reporter misquoted you or used your worst comments. Your pride may have been affected or you may believe your career has been damaged.

Before you blast a reporter, consider these questions...

- Was there real damage, or were you just not presented as positively as possible? If the damage is real, is it significant?
- Will the error become a reference for future stories?
- Could the error become a factor in a legal action?
- Could the error trigger action or reaction by others (legislators, regulators, opponents, critics)?
CDC’s CERC draws from lessons learned during past public health emergencies and research in the fields of public health, psychology, and emergency risk communication. It provides training, tools, and resources.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers guidelines and best practices on CERC: https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc
CERC Principles

- CERC principles can help you provide the public with information to make the best decisions given challenging time constraints and to accept the imperfect nature of choice.

- These principles help to inform the public so that they can make educated decisions for themselves about how to protect their safety and health.
6 Keys to Successful Crisis Communication

- **Be First**: Crises are time-sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial.
- **Be Right**: Accuracy establishes credibility. Tell the public - from the very beginning - what is known and what is unknown.
- **Be Credible**: Honesty and truthfulness should **never** be compromised.
- **Express Empathy**: Acknowledgement builds rapport and trust.
- **Promote Action**: Giving people something to do can help calm anxiety.
- **Show Respect**: This promotes cooperation.

The **right message at the right time from the right person** can save lives.
Crisis + Emergency Risk Communication

1. **Be First:**
   Crises are time-sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. For members of the public, the first source of information often becomes the preferred source.

2. **Be Right:**
   Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps.

3. **Be Credible:**
   Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.

4. **Express Empathy:**
   Crises create harm, and the suffering should be acknowledged in words. Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.

5. **Promote Action:**
   Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes some sense of control.

6. **Show Respect:**
   Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation and rapport.
Recommended Training for PIO Responsibilities

- IS-29 PIO Awareness Training
- CDC Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications
- IS-42 Social Media in Emergency Management
- IS-702a NIMS Public Information Systems
- G290 Basic Public Information Officer – Class offered in WV; call (304) 558-5380.
- E/L0388 Advanced Public Information Officer – Class held at FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, MD.
Contact

Kristi George
Special Projects & Information Coordinator
West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources
Bureau for Public Health
Center for Threat Preparedness
(304) 558-6900, ext. 71460
Kristi.S.George@WV.gov
dhhr.wv.gov/healthprep