



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: *Anticipating and Responding to Stressful Events*

“When people are stressed and upset, they want to know that you care before they care what you know” — Will Rogers

Background

How leaders behave and communicate during stressful situations, such as the response to a disaster event, can make significant differences in how people respond and react. It may also influence whether leadership is strengthened or diminished.

This communication can take many forms including written messages, formal and informal talks, and ritual development and participation.

The Leader

Strong leaders know and care about their people. Optimally, caring is demonstrated in everyday activities and interactions and can be especially powerful at key times. Optimally, leaders also know the characteristics of their people, what they have experienced, the nature of the work they do, and how they respond best to the efforts of leaders. Effective leaders capitalize on this informed compassion to take full opportunity of events when people may be especially vulnerable or needing of support and reassurance.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a function of many internal and external factors. Strong leaders are continuously vigilant in identifying factors that have the potential to negatively affect people (such as times that remind people of loss or trauma). They are also aware of those factors that can reduce vulnerability (such as health status, peer and leadership support, and a healthy organizational culture).

Message Development

There are many factors to consider in optimizing communications in times of increased or high stress. Many of these principles, like the ones presented here, derive from the field of risk and crisis communication, especially

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the work of Vincent Covello, Ph.D. Additionally, how you deliver your message will often have an even greater impact than what you actually say or do.

- It is always better to consider and craft messages beforehand. The advantage goes to those who prepare.
- It is important to remember that in high stress situations, people often process information differently (e.g., reduced attention/concentration, distractibility) and so messages need to be short, simple, and repeated.
- In high stress, people tend to focus on negatives more than positives (Covello indicates a 3:1 ratio) so positive messages should outnumber negative messages.
- Don't be afraid to say, “I don't know.” Make sure to commit to finding out and following up.
- A helpful and valuable model is the Compassion, Competence, Optimism (CCO) model for message development: Compassion (statement demonstrating that you care/empathize with the intended audience); Commitment (statement demonstrating commitment to helping/supporting/solving); Optimism (statements indicating a positive view of the future).
- Also, remember the sequence in which people remember things they have heard (primacy/recency template). People tend to remember information in the following order: first, last, middle. As a result, your most important message should go first and next most important should go last. It is important for leaders to prioritize their points/messages with this understanding.

Further Resources

- Covello VT. Best practices in public health risk and crisis communication. *J Health Commun.* 2003;8(Suppl. 1); 5–8.

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■ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communications Guidance for Public Officials*. Department of Health and Human Services Web site. <http://www.hhs.gov/od/documents/RiskCommunication.pdf>. Published 2002.

■ Vineburgh N, Ursano R, Hamaoka D, Fullerton C. Public health communication for disaster planning and response. *Int J Public Pol.* 2008;3(5/6): 292–301.



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