

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, Nov. 8, 2002

The right words

Here's how to communicate sensitive, frightening information to your staff

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, *For Small Business Times*

Question: It seems every time we turn around there's another violent act or threat being reported. 9/11. Deaths due to e-coli in ground beef. Anthrax letters. The sniper shooting people in Washington, D.C. In the wake of all those incidents, I'm wondering about the right way to communicate sensitive or scary information to employees. Are there any do's and don'ts that you can share?

Answer: That you ask such a question is a sign of the times in which we live. Like it or not, we must confront the reality of these uncertain, risk-filled times. We must be prepared and we must be vigilant. This is true not only at the national level but at the local level. It is also true at the workplace level. For example, disaster recovery planning is a must today. So, too, is having a plan for communicating risks and threats.

Having a well-reasoned, thoughtful risk communication plan in place is simply good business at this point. Having a sound plan in place ensures that you will not be caught off guard if a risk or threat comes about. The old Boy Scout credo that says, "Be prepared," has never been more applicable. Within the context of risk communication, it suggests that that you must be proactive in making your employees aware of emerging risks. Making your employees aware of

threats builds knowledge and knowledge leads to action. That's the point—to create an informed workforce that is armed with knowledge so that they can take more meaningful action if a threat does arise.

Too often, though, organizations hesitate to invest in building a risk communication plan. There are many reasons for this. A study by Cross and Associates identified these common myths that interfere with building an effective risk communication program:

- We don't have enough time and resources to have a risk management program.
- Telling people about a risk is more likely to unduly alarm them than keep them quiet.
- Communication is less important than education.
- These issues are too difficult for people to understand.
- Technical decisions of this kind should be left in the hands of technical people.
- Risk communication is not my job
- If we give them an inch, they'll take a mile.
- If we listen to them, we will devote scarce resources to issues that are not a great threat.
- Activist groups are responsible for stirring up unwarranted concerns.

Sound familiar? I'm sure you've heard most, if not all, of these before. The common thread in all these items has to do with believing that people aren't going to be able to handle it, aren't up to the rigors associated with the risk, have ulterior or selfish motives, etc.

Yet, holding back information or failing to communicate that a risk or threat exists only serves to make the problem worse.

Frankly, underestimating the hardiness of your people is a mistake. Researchers have found that people can be surprisingly resilient and resourceful when they are provided with information about a risk. In fact, access to information is in some ways the key to minimizing and dispelling unfounded fears or apprehensions. Among other things, researchers have discovered that people's perceptions of the magnitude of risk are influenced in the following ways:

- Risks perceived to be voluntary are more accepted than risks perceived to be imposed.
- Risks perceived to be under an individual's control are more accepted than risk perceived to be controlled by others.
- Risks perceived to have clear benefits are more accepted than risk perceived to have little or no benefit.
- Risks perceived to be fairly distributed are more accepted than risks perceived to be unfairly distributed.
- Risks perceived to be natural are more accepted than risks perceived to be manmade.
- Risks perceived to be statistical are more accepted than risks perceived to be catastrophic.
- Risks perceived to be generated by a trusted source are more accepted than risks perceived to be generated by an untrusted source.
- Risks perceived to be familiar are more accepted than risks perceived to be exotic.
- Risks perceived to affect adults are more accepted than risks perceived to affect children.

So, in light of the preceding, what should you do to build a credible risk communication program? Here are seven basic rules, suggested by Covello and Allen, researchers with expertise in this area:

- Accept and involve your constituents as a partner. Your goal should be to produce an informed constituency.
- Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts. Different goals, different audiences, and different media require different actions.
- Listen to the concerns of your constituents. People often

care more about trust, credibility, competence, fairness, and empathy than about statistics and numbers.

- Be honest, frank, and open. Trust is difficult to regain once it has been lost.
- Work with other credible sources. Conflicts among sources confuse people and erode your trust and credibility.
- Meet the needs of the media. The media are there to report the story; work with them, not against them.
- Speak clearly and with compassion. Never let your risk communication efforts keep you from acknowledging a tragedy, an illness, or a death, etc.

Ultimately, employees rely on their employers to keep them informed, particularly when it comes to high stakes issues and concerns. Employees are not mind readers, nor are they empathic. So, help them out by building an effective risk communication plan.

You owe it to them.

As Dr. Barry Johnson, former Assistant Surgeon General, has stated, "If we have not gotten our message across, then we ought to assume that the fault is not with our receivers."



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