There are no easy prescriptions for successful risk communication. However, those who have studied and participated in recent debates about risk generally agree on seven cardinal rules. These rules apply equally well to the public and private sectors.

Although many of the rules may seem obvious, they are continually and consistently violated in practice. Thus, a useful way to read these rules is to focus on why they are frequently not followed.

Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner

A basic tenet of risk communication in a democracy is that people and communities have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, their property, and the things they value.

Guidelines: Demonstrate your respect for the public and underscore the sincerity of your effort by involving the community early, before important decisions are made. Involve all parties that have an interest or a stake in the issue under consideration. If you are a government employee, remember that you work for the public. If you do not work for the government, the public still holds you accountable.

Point to Consider:

- The goal of risk communication in a democracy should be to produce an informed public that is involved, interested, reasonable, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and collaborative; it should not be to diffuse public concerns or replace action.

Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts

Risk communication will be successful only if carefully planned.

Guidelines: Begin with clear, explicit risk communication objectives—such as providing information to the public, motivating individuals to act, stimulating response to emergencies, or contributing to the resolution of conflict. Evaluate the information you have about the risks and know its strengths and weaknesses. Classify and segment the various groups in your audience. Aim your communications at specific subgroups in your audience. Recruit spokespeople who are good at presentation and interaction. Train your staff—including technical staff—in communication skills; reward outstanding performance. Whenever possible, pretest your messages. Carefully evaluate your efforts and learn from your mistakes.

Points to Consider:

- There is no such entity as "the public"; instead, there are many publics, each with its own interests, needs, concerns, priorities, preferences, and organizations.
- Different risk communication goals, audiences, and media require different risk communication strategies.

Listen to the public's specific concerns

If you do not listen to people, you cannot expect them to listen to you. Communication is a two-way activity.

Guidelines: Do not make assumptions about what people know, think, or want done about risks. Take the time to find out what people are thinking: use techniques such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Let all parties that have an interest or a stake in the issue be heard. Identify with your audience and try to put yourself in their place. Recognize people's emotions. Let people know that you understand what they said, addressing their concerns as well as yours. Recognize the "hidden agendas," symbolic meanings, and broader economic or political considerations that often underlie and complicate the task of risk communication.

Point to Consider:

- People in the community are often more concerned about such issues as trust, credibility, competence, control, voluntariness, fairness, caring, and compassion than about mortality statistics and the details of quantitative risk assessment.

Be honest, frank, and open

In communicating risk information, trust and credibility are your most precious assets.

Guidelines: State your credentials; but do not ask or expect to be trusted by the public. If you do not know an answer or are uncertain, say so. Get back to people with answers. Admit mistakes. Disclose risk information as soon as possible (emphasizing any reservations about reliability). Do not minimize or exaggerate the level of risk. Speculate only with great caution. If in doubt, lean toward sharing more information, not less—or people may think you are hiding something. Discuss data uncertainties, strengths and weaknesses — including the ones identified by other credible sources. Identify worst-case estimates as such, and cite ranges of risk estimates when appropriate.

Point to Consider:

- Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain. Once lost they are almost impossible to regain completely.

Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources

Allies can be effective in helping you communicate risk information.

Guidelines: Take time to coordinate all inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications. Devote effort and resources to the slow, hard work of building bridges with other organizations. Use credible and authoritative

intermediaries. Consult with others to determine who is best able to answer questions about risk. Try to issue communications jointly with other trustworthy sources (for example, credible university scientists, physicians, or trusted local officials).

Point to Consider:

- Few things make risk communication more difficult than conflicts or public disagreements with other credible sources.

Meet the needs of the media

The media are a prime transmitter of information on risks; they play a critical role in setting agendas and in determining outcomes.

Guidelines: Be open with and accessible to reporters. Respect their deadlines. Provide risk information tailored to the needs of each type of media (for example, graphics and other visual aids for television). Prepare in advance and provide background material on complex risk issues. Do not hesitate to follow up on stories with praise or criticism, as warranted. Try to establish long-term relationships of trust with specific editors and reporters.

Point to Consider:

- The media are frequently more interested in politics than in risk; more interested in simplicity than in complexity; more interested in danger than in safety.

Speak clearly and with compassion

Technical language and jargon are useful as professional shorthand. But they are barriers to successful communication with the public.

Guidelines: Use simple, non-technical language. Be sensitive to local norms, such as speech and dress. Use vivid, concrete images that communicate on a personal level. Use examples and anecdotes that make technical risk data come alive. Avoid distant, abstract, unfeeling language about deaths, injuries, and illnesses. Acknowledge and respond (both in words and with actions) to emotions that people express—anxiety, fear, anger, outrage, helplessness. Acknowledge and respond to the distinctions that the public views as important in evaluating risks, e.g., voluntariness, controllability, familiarity, dread, origin (natural or man-made), benefits, fairness, and catastrophic potential. Use risk comparisons to help put risks in perspective; but avoid comparisons that ignore distinctions that people consider important. Always try to include a discussion of actions that are under way or can be taken. Tell people what you cannot do. Promise only what you can do, and be sure to do what you promise.

Points to Consider:

- Regardless of how well you communicate risk information, some people will not be satisfied.
- Never let your efforts to inform people about risks prevent you from acknowledging—and saying—that any illness, injury, or death is a tragedy.
- If people are sufficiently motivated, they are quite capable of understanding complex risk information, even if they may not agree with you.

This pamphlet was drafted by Vincent T. Covello and Frederick W. Allen, with the assistance and review of numerous colleagues in and out of government. Covello is Director of the Center for Risk Communication at Columbia University and is currently President of the Society for Risk Analysis (SRA). The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of Columbia University or the SRA. Allen is Associate Director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA has published this pamphlet as a non-binding reference document, recognizing that the manner in which the guidance should be applied will necessarily vary from case to case. The authors invite your comments.

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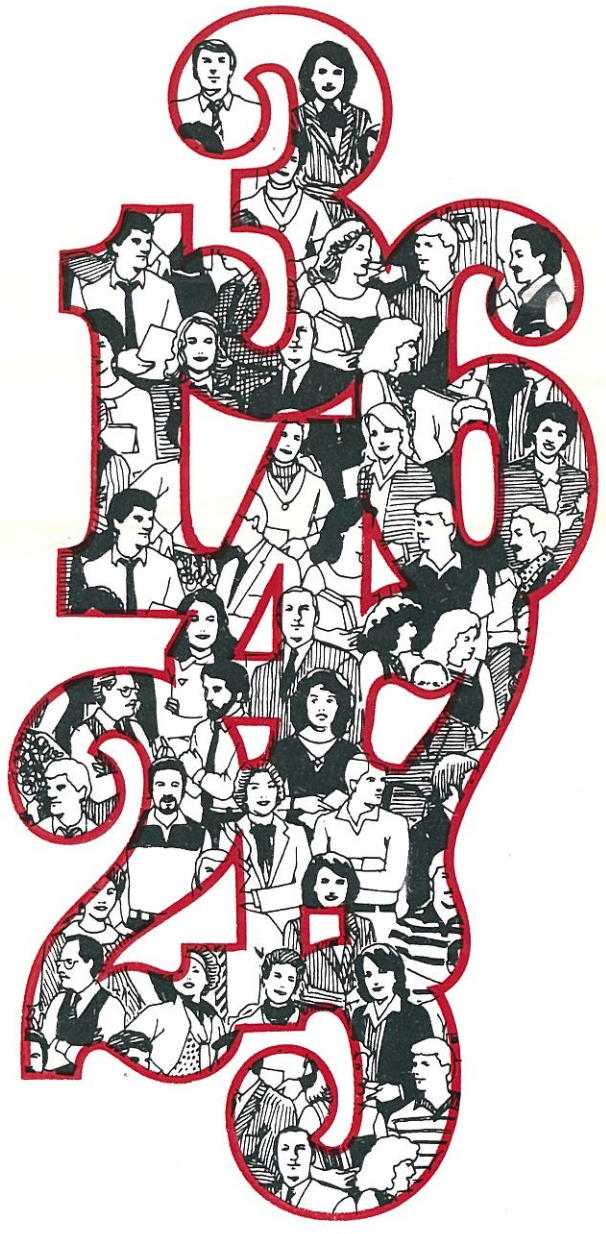
Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication