

Crisis Communication:

How to Reassure Without Over-Reassuring (Page 1)

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1. *Ride the risk communication seesaw.* Emphasize the ways in which the situation is understandably alarming, and let your audience focus on the ways it is reassuring.
2. *Remember that over-reassurance backfires.* People sense that you're withholding alarming information, and become all the more fearful. Or they learn later that you withheld alarming information, and never trust you again.
3. *Remember that an over-reassured public isn't your goal anyhow.* You want people to be concerned and vigilant, not apathetic.
4. *Recognize that you will be tempted to over-reassure.* So over-compensate. Aim for the alarming seat on the seesaw, and you might wind up closer to the middle.
5. *Don't neglect worst case scenarios.* When talking about the future, be sure to discuss the worst that could happen -- as well as less disastrous, more likely possibilities.
6. *Make your first communication on a topic your most discouraging communication on that topic.* "It's not as bad as we feared" is a less damaging day-two story than "it's worse than we thought."
7. *Never say anything is "safe."* X may be safer than Y, or pretty safe, or safer than it used to be, or safer than the regulatory standard. But it isn't "safe" -- and it certainly isn't "absolutely safe."
8. *Expect criticism for "over-reacting."* Those who prefer a more reassuring official line will criticize you for scaring people. This is far preferable to being criticized for over-reassuring people.
9. *Put reassuring information in subordinate clauses.* Give people the information they need to feel reassured, but make this information subordinate to the reasons why you are still concerned.

Subordinated reassurance: "Even though we have seen no new West Nile Virus cases in the past month...

Alarming main clause: ... we are still testing dead birds and recommending long-sleeved shirts at night."

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10. *Be careful to warn about possible future risk.* This is the classic opportunity to use subordination: Even though the news is good so far, there may be bad news coming, and it is too soon to relax our precautions or our vigilance. Help people hold onto both sides of the situation at the same time: low present risk and higher potential future risk.
11. *Distinguish risk probability from risk magnitude.* A possible crisis or an emerging crisis is frequently a low-probability high-magnitude risk: The feared outcomes are unlikely but awful. Never say "unlikely" without "awful"; never say "awful" without "unlikely."
12. *When in doubt, err on the alarming side.* This is the bottom line of reassurance: Be as reassuring as you can be so long as you are virtually certain that reality won't turn out worse than your reassurances. That's less reassuring than you're normally tempted to be.