

Crisis Communication:

Guidelines for Responsible Speculation

(even though you don't like the word!)

Copyright © 2004 by Peter M. Sandman and Jody Lanard. All Rights Reserved.

1. *Don't speculate over-confidently.* If it's speculation, by definition you're not sure. Don't sound sure. Keep insisting that you're not sure.
2. *Don't speculate over-optimistically.* Over-pessimistic speculation is also a mistake, but a much rarer one. Over-optimistic speculation is so common it isn't even seen as speculation ... but it is.
3. *Don't refuse to speculate.* Saying nothing until you are sure what will happen (or what has happened) leaves an information vacuum for less responsible sources. You can't do risk communication without speculating.
4. *Clarify what you know as well as what you don't.* Distinguish your speculations from your more definite information.
5. *Clarify the extent of your uncertainty.* Distinguish the likely hypotheses from the unlikely ones. But make clear that even the likely ones are still only hypotheses.
6. *Acknowledge discrepant opinions.* If you are aware of others' speculations, summarize them -- and what you think about them. Distinguish consensus speculations from hotly debated ones from off-the-wall ones.
7. *Don't neglect worst case scenarios.* "What's the worst that could happen?" is always on people's minds. Answer the question, even if the worst case is extremely unlikely, and even though some people wish you wouldn't talk about it.
8. *Acknowledge everyone's discomfort.* You wish you knew what was going to happen and didn't have to speculate. You know we wish that too.
9. *Explain what you are doing to find out more.* Also explain when you expect to know more. And if some questions may stay unsettled forever, tell us that too.