

RISK COMMUNICATION: IF IT GOES TWO WAYS, HOW WILL WE EVER MEET?

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ABSTRACT

The need for clear, two-way risk communication is widely understood and accepted by waste management professionals. However, to increase the effectiveness of risk communication, waste management professionals need now to broaden the range of issues being discussed in risk communications to include social values; to ensure that risk communication is not just two-way but genuinely interactive; and to ensure that all parties are truly open to change.

INTRODUCTION

A friend once told me, "When everyone starts to agree with you, it's time to re-examine your position and move on. Otherwise, your work will soon be irrelevant."

Ten years ago, environmental restoration and waste operations managers at a conference such as this might have been arguing the very validity of public participation or puzzling over how it differs from public relations or public information. Today terms like "risk communication" and "two-way communication" are generally understood and accepted, at least by people who attend conference sessions and read papers about the issue. We need now to be certain that this new acceptance leads to concrete, lasting changes in the way we conduct our business. That is, we need to institutionalize the changes we know are needed. But, as we scramble up to this new high ground, we need also to consider what the next plateau should be.

Thus, we must first make sure we do a good job of communicating risk and of ensuring that risk communication is two-way. Then, we must take each of these further. We need to broaden the range of issues being communicated to include social values, and we need to ensure that risk communication becomes not just two-way but genuinely interactive, with all parties truly open to change.

COMMUNICATING IN A CONTEXT

In its report *Improving Risk Communication*, the Committee on Risk Communication of the National Research Council describes the old, outmoded model of risk communication as a message, developed by experts for non-experts, to describe risks, hazards, or risk-reducing efforts (1,19). The old model was one-way and did not consider the context of the message.

The new model, now generally accepted by waste management professionals, does consider the context and sees risk communication as having: technical subject matter (information about a problem or proposal which people are or should be concerned about) which needs to be communicated to a specific audience, at a particular time or phase in a risk management process, for specific purposes. The

technical subject matter must be discussed in terms of the audience's interests, not just presented as a watered-down version of a technical report.

Why does or should the situation matter to them? Who is worried--the public or the technical experts and program managers? What are they worried about? What is the management process or set of proposals into which the risk communication fits? How can people interact in the process? What alternative solutions exist? How does management (or can individuals) decide among the alternatives? What are the purposes of the risk communication? To get people to protect themselves? To get their support for actions an agency has already decided to take? To enable people to participate in decision-making? Who exactly is the audience anyway, and how can you make the subject matter clear to them?

We have learned to consider these kinds of questions carefully in designing risk communication and public interaction. The change that needs to occur now has more to do with the content than the tone. The very subject matter of risk communication needs to go further, to broaden the range of issues being discussed.

TALKING ABOUT VALUES

We need to talk not just about "risks" and "facts" but about incorporating values in making technical/social decisions. Waste management and environmental restoration decisions are practically never, if ever, purely technical or purely political. They are complex, encompassing technical information and social values, scientific judgement and political reality. Some aspects of a decision may be primarily technical, such as determining how the groundwater flows at a particular point. Other aspects are primarily social, such as assigning relative values to present and future public health and economic needs. No matter how apparently objective the underlying scientific information may be, final decisions about technology are inherently value-laden.

Both technical and social aspects must be taken into account in making major decisions about specific programs at specific sites. For example, managers may need to decide whether to clean up a given site immediately, even though

* Carol Williams, consulting editor, contributed significantly to the development of this paper.

available methods are expensive and incomplete, or postpone the cleanup until research, currently underway and apparently promising, has developed more effective, less expensive methods. Under what conditions of actual or potential health risk, regulatory requirement, and technology development can or should managers decide to delay cleanup?

Good risk communication discusses these issues openly. Communications to the public need to spell out what values are served by various alternative actions. And good risk communication needs to find out from the public what their values are and what issues and perspectives the technical program managers may have overlooked. That means risk communication has to be two-way.

Two-way communication often stops short of producing the mutual understanding needed as a basis for technically and publicly acceptable decisions. Too often, "two-way" communication means that "we managers tell the public our positions, they tell us their positions, and the court recorder gets it all down; then we decide what we'll do and send them a formal 'comment response document' which basically either dismisses their positions or shows how our position wasn't really in conflict."

The process of making technical/social decisions should be not just nominally two-way--two cars driving in opposite directions, honking at each other--but interactive. It needs to be a process in which all parties seek not only to understand each other's information, values, and perspectives, but also to reexamine, rethink and reformulate their own positions in light of that understanding.

INTERACTING WITH THE PUBLIC

A detailed how-to for public interaction seems doomed to failure in a short paper or a one-way speech. A conversation, an exchange of iterative drafts, or an interactive workshop are more effective ways to discuss how to develop truly interactive communication and involvement. Talking about two-way communication and interaction from a podium or in a paper soon reaches the same kinds of limits as teaching someone how to swim without water. However, I will venture a few general remarks and examples on how to extend the usual public communication and involvement methods to make the process of communication truly interactive.

To find the right match of communication and involvement activities for the situation, you have to consider at least four variables (2,556): a) the decision or milestone for which public interaction is needed; b) the goals or purpose of the communication or interaction--both yours and the public's; c) the kinds of information the public needs and that you need if you are both to understand the relevant technical and social issues; and d) the type of communication or involvement that best serves to meet your and the public's

goals. This set of options offers many opportunities for deepening commitment to true interaction with the public.

- a. Consider the decision at hand. You do not have to abdicate responsibility for making a decision; however, you do have to become open to the possibility that interactive communication will produce different decisions, better decisions, not just because public scrutiny improves technical accountability, but also because technical/social decision-making is better when it considers public values. Keep in mind that some members of the public can contribute to technical information, analysis, and understanding.
- b. Clarify the goals. One way to begin being open to change is to confront significant differences in assumptions by an agency and the public about goals for a project and goals for public interaction.
- c. Define the kinds of information needed by both the public and the agency to understand relevant technical and social issues. For the decision at hand, what does the public need to know about scientific issues and about management process? What technical information can the public provide to the agency? What does the agency need to know about public preferences and values?
- d. Choose types of public involvement best suited to communicate that information and meet those goals. First, be aware of the wide range of methods available to you (3,58-60). At one end of the range are one-way arrows of information to the public: advertizing, brochures, and news conferences; in the middle are the arrows coming back, like questionnaires and written submissions; also available are lots of interactive methods, depending on the time commitment you are willing to make and the extent of control you are willing or able to release. These methods range from simple ones, like calling someone on the phone to clarify what he or she meant, to more complex ones, such as having panels, workshops, task forces, and advisory groups.

One extremely helpful approach is to think of interactions in series, not as single events. For example, a public hearing may be a focal point of planning public communication or involvement, but it may be useful only if it is preceded by press releases, small workshops, phone calls to selected public representatives, and distribution of fact sheets, and if it is followed by thank you letters, distribution of a summary of the issues raised and how they will be resolved, and invitations to succeeding events.

To sum up these suggestions about extending two-way communication to reach mutual interaction with the public: plan a series of effective interactive methods to communicate the scientific and social information needed to meet the

goals of both the agency and the public in making technical/social decisions.

IMAGINING A NEW WAY

Imagination may be the most important new key if we are to advance our understanding about how government agencies and the public are to work together on environmental cleanup and waste management. The Department of Energy's Five-Year Plan contains some very clear directions on culture change needed in the Department (4,56):

"The new culture," the Secretary said in SEN-11-89, "will emphasize an open door philosophy and demand professional excellence in both government and contractor performance, and it will be a culture wherein constructive criticism from any source, external as well as internal, is encouraged and rewarded."

What does this mean? Where will it lead?

Much of what human beings accomplish has to be imagined first. The golfer or ski racer plays through the course in her imagination before the contest. The composer hears the music before he writes it. The inverse is also true. People say, "I just can't see myself doing that," and then they don't try whatever it is.

If we are to engage in real interaction with the public, we must be able to imagine ourselves in new roles. We must be able to envision how such interaction will be useful in accomplishing our goals before we can make it a reality. The changes going on in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union illustrate how difficult it is to change how a society works. Even when the existing arrangements are bankrupt,

it is hard to turn loose and try something new. Our problems are, of course, less immediately wrenching than are theirs, but it is clear we have not yet worked out reliable ways to make decisions that are at once technically sound and socially and politically acceptable, within our interesting mix of representative and direct democracy. But at least we are working on it.

If we are to solve problems together, the public may have to change in its expectations and goals, just as officials may have to change. We will need to agree in some measure on what the problems are and agree that we want to find solutions. It will not be easy to evolve closer interactions that lead to solutions, but it is clearly the direction we must take. It will help if we find a vision of the future to share, because as Casey Stengel said, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else."

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