

## Two Components of All SC

In spite of the fact that risk communication practitioners are almost always motivated by the genuine desire to help and to protect, the things they actually say and do sometimes feel to publics like a parent telling a young child how to behave. This results partially from the fact that, like all communication, every risk communication has two components, an explicit content component and an often implicit relationship component. The latter component of all SC communication can generate trust or distrust, resistance or support, and sometimes even anger when particular risks are successfully managed. These two components of all communication come from Watzlawick, Beavin-Bavelas, & Jackson's often cited 2011/1967 second axiom of communication which says that every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a meta-communication. This means, according to Coats (2009), that

Each person responds to the *content* of communication in the *context* of the relationship between the communicators. The word meta-communication is used in various ways . . . but Watzlawick uses it to mean the exchange of information about how to interpret other information. Just as the interpretation of the words "What an idiot you are" could be influenced by the following words "Just kidding", it could also be influenced by the relationship between the communicators. In the example given, the word "idiot" might be accepted quite happily from a close friend, but convey an entirely different meaning in other circumstances. (Axiom Two)

For SC this means that in every communication with publics there are two parts. First, the content of what is said. Publics often want this content to include technical information but seldom want it limited to that. Second, the relationship that the sender assumes between the parties is implicit in the message. The content is the actual words and the agreed to meanings of those words, and it is too often the sole focus of government and expert communication. This content is usually verbal -- it uses an agreed to code such as a particular language. The non-verbal component of messages on the other hand, carries critical information about how the sender sees the relationship, regardless of whether they intend to communicate this information or whether they even realize that they are communicating it. One reason senders may not realize they are communicating this information is because much of it is done non-verbally. Publics may be consciously aware or unaware that they are "hearing" this extra dimension of a message because people process much of the non-verbal communication at the non-conscious level as well.

Non-verbal aspects of SC include such simple but powerful cues as practitioners not communicating when publics think they should, failure to observe expected rituals or honorifics, sarcasm, interrupting or failing to take turns, the use of terms like compliance or obey, use of overly technical terms and other implicit messages about how they see the relationship between practitioners and their publics.

For example, when a physician or health communicator uses the term *compliance* to describe what publics decide in response to their communications about a threat to public health, they are assigning to publics a subordinate role in their relationship, irrespective of any other content in their message. They are also assigning themselves the role of information gods in relation to their publics. Sometimes a failure to "comply" is not about the medical or technical information. Sometimes it is just about not complying with the relationship the campaign sponsor is implicitly calling on publics to accept. A surprising percentage of even experienced, expert risk and preparedness, many of whom are quite

sensitive to any relational cues in what their boss, or a university professor, says are pretty relationship deaf when it comes to their relationships with their own publics. *Make no mistake that publics both want and need accurate technical or medical information in many situations*, but many of them are unwilling to pay the relational price some risk, preparedness and emergency communicators seem to want in exchange. It might be wise to start with public health communicators simply banishing the word compliance from their vocabularies.

The real challenge for SC practitioners comes from the fact that publics often process the relational content of a message at the non-conscious level. This is part of why the relational component is usually processed first and then, consciously or unconsciously, serves to frame for how the content part of the message will be understood. So while a person or group may process one word at a time they may also process many, many relational cues in the same period of time and then use those to decide how to process the few words involved, with the result that the relational part of a message often simply overwhelms the content component.

One useful analogy might be to think of this relationship between content and relationship in SC messages as kind of information highway. The content is usually verbal (words) as moving back and forth along a one-lane road. The road is one-lane because we usually have to attend to each word or group of words one at a time, and take turns speaking or listening. Thus, processing the content component of SC communication can be a rather slow process. At the same time there is a multi-lane expressway running between the parties, over which relational cues, that are largely non-verbal, are whizzing back and forth past one another. This road has multiple lanes because people usually do not have to stop to consciously process each relational cue one at a time. In fact, with a lifetime of experience behind them, people often process such cues in a holistic manner, using several together to get an overall feeling rather than discrete meanings of individual pieces.

Too often, risk communicators act as if they are, and publics should be, free of emotion or subjectivity in communication. Such a view, whether expressed in the content or relational components of communication, may be a large part of why Sandman wrote so much about what he called outrage in risk communication.

### **Social-Emotional Dimension of Risk**

Risk, as defined by Sandman's (1993a; 1993b) often quoted definition, is the actual hazard that is present *plus* the amount of anger, fear or concern (outrage) of the involved individuals and publics. Hazard, according to Sandman, is the amount of actual danger and its assessment is achieved by the traditional multiplication of probability (P) and magnitude (M) as above. That is, how likely it is that something will happen is multiplied by how bad it will be if it does happen.

In adding a social-emotional dimension to thinking about risk, Sandman made a seminal contribution to understanding a cocreational view of risk (and all of SC for that matter) because he ascribed to publics a previously unacknowledged independent role in risk communication in which publics cocreate the meaning of a risk for themselves by including in it a non-technical, social-emotional dimension. So the actual formula for risk following Sandman's model would be risk = (probability x magnitude) + outrage,

Figure 1 Sandman's Model of Risk

$$R = (P \times M) + O$$

*or*

$$R = H + O$$

However, the term outrage carries some unfortunate baggage by associating publics with angry emotionalism when confronted with a risk. This may imply to some that publics have *only* calculated or outraged responses to risk situations. What publics bring to the table is a more human understanding of risk with both emotionalism *and* calculated rationality involved in that more human perspective. Sandman used the term outrage as a partial expression of the role of cocreation by publics, so a better term for his component might be the *social-emotional dimension* of risk that includes outrage but goes well beyond it.

The social emotional component of risk is intimately related to an issue's life cycle stage in that as one increases the other tends to also. As an issue moves along its timeline more publics not only become aware of it but are also ready for a decision because of their calculated and social-emotional concern so they begin to demand a decision. Thus as the stage of an issue advances so do the social-emotional aspects and, often, P x M calculation. My practice years convinced me that as the stage of an issue advances the social-emotional component often skyrockets, although at the time I did not fully understand the role of publics in this. Thus, at least for this discussion, the social-emotional component of risk can be thought of as reflected in the stage to which publics decide to take a given issue so a risk model specific to *communication* should include the stage (S) of an issue in its life cycle.

### Cocreative View of Risk Communication

Recall from chapter 5 that in SC social meaning cocreation by publics is arguably the most powerful component in the organization-public relationship, in part because it is the primary determinant of the life cycle stage of an issue. This in turn influences the other parts of the relationship and, therefore, the risk an issue carries for the organization, in at least four ways, a) how many publics are concerned and/or angry, b) the probability of impact from the issue, c) the probable magnitude of any impact and, d) the number of strategic options still available to the organization because at each new stage of an issue's development fewer and fewer strategic options are available.

Strategic communication, then, needs a new model focusing on the knowledge that the stage publics determine an issue to be in is a significant determinant of the risk faced by an organization. A simple formula for this might look like,

Figure 2: Risk Formula for Strategic Communication

$$R = S_i \times (P \times M)$$

Where the risk associated with an issue (R) is determined by its stage (S) with 1 = embryonic, 2 = public, 3 = mature *or* lurking and 4 = mature crisis stage because, as publics move an issue deeper into its life cycle, the risk associated with it becomes much greater. Thus stage, which includes the social-emotional dimension of risk, serves as a multiplier of the technical components of risk in determining overall risk. Conceptually, this model is not very different from Sandman's outrage model except that stage is a much broader idea than casual readers might understand outrage to be although, to be fair, for Sandman outrage is also a broader concept than its label implies. The major difference in this model is that the stage of an issue is not just an equal part as outrage was, but now becomes a multiplier for both probability and magnitude, *even while recognizing that forces outside the control of publics or clients* account for much of the probability and magnitude of any risk. Thus, it is unlikely that either precise probabilities or an acceptable scale of magnitude of potential damage could be known, but a hypothetical example can still help illustrate these relationships.

Suppose that probability and magnitude could both be put on a 0.00 to 1.00 scale, with higher scores indicating a greater probability or magnitude. Then the risk associated with an issue in the mature stage, but with a 50% chance of happening ( $P = .50$ ) and that is half way up your scale of magnitude ( $M = .50$ ) would be  $3 \times (.50 \times .50) = 3 \times .25 = .75$ . Whereas the risk associated with an issue with P and M both at .75, but at the crisis stage, would be  $4 \times (.75 \times .75) = 4 \times .56 = 2.25$  on a scale where the highest possible risk would be  $4 \times (1 \times 1)$ , or 4.0.

It is important to remember that this is a cocreational model of risk so it is an attempt to explain the relationship of what publics think and do with other factors in risk *communication* situations. In this case the role of publics is expressed primarily through their influence over the stages in the life cycle of an issue that was discussed in Chapter 5. This model does not apply to assessing the probability of a landslide, earthquake or viral outbreak occurring, or how many lives they might take (where  $R=P \times M$  works better).

**Figure 3: Cocreational Definition of Risk Communication**

Risk communication is *all* the communication within publics and between publics and organizations about actual and perceived risks, and how to respond to them.

Many risk communication practices emerge from the roles people enact as they prepare for crises. For example, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy that is consistent with their assigned roles, content experts, managers and government leaders often assume that the key to effective risk communication is for them to simply educate publics about the best available science or medicine. From their standpoint the public's lack of knowledge about physical threats ( $P \times M$ ) is the major obstacle to public safety. This perspective has been called the technical view in both risk and crisis communication (Fiorino, 1990) and that term is used in this book to describe a similar view of all SC.

In contrast publics often perceive their own lack of power or control in risk and crisis settings as a fundamental impediment to safety. From this standpoint not knowing what

officials may be doing, or not doing, is frightening and adds to the sense of being at the mercy of yet another unknown. This latter perspective has been called the democratic view of risk and crisis communication (Fiorino, 1990). Thus information, and who has access to it, is important at both the content-expert level and the social-emotional level in risk communication.

*Strategic Communication Theory and Practice: The Cocreational View*, Botan, C. H. (2016, forthcoming). Wiley-Blackwell.