



**Finding the Right Words  
When Times Get Rough:  
How Commissions Can Address  
Difficult Communications**

**Tom Stanton  
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## **About the Author**

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## Executive Summary

Commissioners and commission staff often need to communicate about difficult subjects, frequently when emotions run high and sometimes in life-and-death situations. Prominent examples include responses to energy emergencies; utility-related accidents and widespread or long-term service outages; and contentious siting issues that often invite NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) responses from potential neighbors. More prosaically, commissioners and staff sometimes have to explain rate increases or will find themselves at the forefront of educating consumers about changes in regulations, technologies, and new customer choices.

Public relations professionals have been researching and practicing difficult communications for many years; case studies abound under the rubrics of crisis, emergency, and risk communications. This paper summarizes the best available information about the recommended communication strategies and techniques to use and applies that information to the issues commissions are likely to face. Guidance is based on the nature of the messages to be conveyed and the expected outlook of the receivers of the communications. Key questions explored in this project include:

1. What, if anything, can a commission do to prevent the occurrence of circumstances that might trigger the need for crisis or emergency communications?
2. What preparations can a commission make to prepare for crisis or emergency communications?
3. If a crisis or emergency does develop, what criteria about the event and the affected stakeholder groups should guide the commission’s response?
4. Depending on the specific type of crisis or emergency, what should be the elements of a commission’s response? Who should represent the commission? And what should guide the qualities and components of their response?
5. What, if anything, is new in this area? Do the increased use of the Internet and world-wide web, the rise in social media, and the growth of “citizen journalism” change the recommended approaches? If so, how?
6. During and immediately after a crisis or emergency, what can a commission do to promote a speedy and complete recovery?
7. After a crisis or emergency, what can a commission do to consolidate the lessons learned and provide self-reflection and feedback, to best prevent and prepare for future events?

This paper attempts to provide a useful introduction to the broad range of subjects potentially involved in the study of difficult communications, and provides references to the best, most relevant books, reports, articles, and organizations available to assist in further study. This work is primarily intended to be a primer and a source of basic recommendations for new commissioners and staff who face difficult communications challenges.

Part I of this paper catalogs the types of difficult communications challenges commissions are likely to face. The five identified types are briefly summarized in Table ES-1.

Part II presents guidelines for addressing difficult communications. Table ES-2 depicts the basic recommendations for addressing and managing all kinds of difficult communications, representing activities that take place before, during, and after a difficult situation presents itself. Management activities focus on preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from such events.

**Table ES-1: Defining Difficult Communications for Commissions**

<b>Topic or Type of Difficult Communications</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Emergency or Crisis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homeland-security or energy emergency: gas, electric, water, or other:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Infrastructure failure, accident, or disaster</li> <li>○ Long-term or widespread service outage</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NIMBYs, LULUs, BANANAs, and others<sup>1</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Infrastructure macro- and micro-siting<sup>2</sup></li> <li>○ Radio Frequency Interference (RFI) from smart meters</li> <li>○ Electromagnetic Field Effects (EMF) from T&amp;D facilities</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>“Bad” News</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate increases</li> <li>• Facility closures (with the loss of local jobs and tax-base)</li> <li>• Alleged or actual bad behavior on the part of a commission or its staff</li> </ul>
<b>“New” News</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsettling changes in technology, rules, and regulations</li> <li>• New customer choices</li> </ul>
<b>“Not My” News</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misquotes</li> <li>• False media reports, rumors, and urban myths</li> <li>• Misunderstandings about jurisdiction and responsibilities</li> </ul>
<p><sup>1</sup> NIMBY is an acronym for “not in my backyard.” Related acronyms include LULU, for “locally unwanted land use”; BANANA, for “build absolutely nothing, anywhere near anybody”; CRAVE, for “citizens radically against virtually everything”; NIMTOO, (sometimes spelled “NIMTO”) for “not in my term of office”; NIMEY, for “not in my election year”; and NOPE, for “not on planet earth.” See Fogarty and Lamb, 2012; Samuel, 2010.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> “Macro-siting” means selecting the general area where a facility will be located. “Micro-siting” means selecting the specific location, including the details of specific land-use issues such as access roads and traffic patterns, surface-water and stormwater management, and so forth.</p>	

**Table ES-2: Before, During, and After Stages of and Major Activities Involved in Difficult Communications Management**

Before		During	After
Preventing	Preparing for	Responding to	Recovering from
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What could happen?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why?</li> <li>○ Where?</li> <li>○ When?</li> <li>○ How?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Does our process provoke or fortify potential problems? If yes, how can we improve our process?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the targets for each kind of communications and the channels that will be used to reach them</li> <li>• Establish and exercise functional, positive relationships with the relevant target audiences and expedient means of using the channels to reach them</li> <li>• Identify and prepare commission spokespersons for various topics</li> <li>• Prepare ahead of time as much of the messages as practical</li> <li>• Allocate “issues management” resources</li> <li>• Provide training, practice, written plans, guidelines, and procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribute messages to, as appropriate:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Apologize</li> <li>○ Educate</li> <li>○ Explain</li> <li>○ Instruct</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Spokespersons employ the Arch Lustberg performance guidance<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor and evaluate outputs and outcomes</li> <li>• Obtain and utilize feedback for next time</li> </ul>
<sup>1</sup> Lustberg, 2008, Chapter 16. See Table 9.			

Part III includes specific recommendations for managing each of the five identified types of difficult communications. The guidance depends in part on the nature of the issues, the pre-dispositions of stakeholders and target audiences, and assessments of blame or responsibility for each situation.

The report concludes with the observation that commissions are well-suited to sharing with one another information and best practices about difficult communications, with the goal of developing more detailed recommendations using the ideals of evidence-based practice.

## Acknowledgements

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Any inaccuracies, mistakes, or omissions are my responsibility. Comments, corrections, and recommendations for future work are welcome and can be submitted to:

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# Finding the Right Words When Times Get Rough: How Commissions Can Address Difficult Communications

## Introduction

State public utility regulatory commissioners and key commission staff members often find themselves engaged in situations involving difficult communications. Seldom does a month go by without at least one commission in the country finding itself embroiled in some kind of difficult communications. It is too easy to think of examples:

- Ongoing safety concerns arising from the September 2010 San Bruno, California, pipeline explosion (Baker, 2010) spread to commissions as far away as Florida (Frank, 2010), Georgia (Leslie and Newkirk, 2010), Missouri (Frank, 2010), and New York (Woodruff, 2010).
- The crisis resulting from the tsunami at Japan's Fukushima nuclear reactors raises safety and reliability concerns at U.S. nuclear plants, from California (CNN Wire Staff, 2012) to Minnesota (Shaffer, 2011) and Ohio (Henry, 2011). Post-Fukushima NRC inspections in Ohio (Henry, 2011) uncover "wiring irregularities likely [to] have existed for decades."
- Hurricane Irene sets off long-duration power outages from Maryland to New York.

A Maryland news report (Cox, 2011a) describes a customer who was assessed an \$8 late-payment fee because she couldn't pay her online bill while her power was out. She is quoted as saying, "We're sick and tired of paying these gigantic...bills, and there's no maintenance, no taking care of what would need to be taken care of to keep the system up in a crisis."

New York Congressman Charles E. Schumer (2011) calls on the New York Public Service Commission "to adopt an alert system" about utility outages. The Congressman's press release states: "Schumer's call comes after inefficient and inaccurate information sharing with customers during power outages."

- A proposed rate increase in Colorado brings more than a hundred people to a public hearing, where residents are reported (Roper, 2011) as giving "sometimes blistering, sometimes sarcastic testimony...all of it adamantly opposed to [an electric utility] request for a 19% rate hike."
- A proposed settlement in Washington State prompts five state legislators to urge the commission to reject a 1.5% electric rate increase. One of the lawmakers, testifying at a commission hearing, is quoted as saying, "[A] rate increase would be devastating to a still-fragile economy...Residents would face a choice among heat, food, or prescription drugs, and businesses could be forced to shut down" (Lester, 2012).

- A rate change in Ohio results in what one reporter (Jackson, 2011) calls “a furor.” Another reporter (Scott, 2010) says “customers are noticing steep increases in their monthly electric bills...[and] continue to cry foul.”
- Proposed wind farms in Minnesota (Meersman, 2010) and solar farms in the California desert (Hull, 2011) unleash highly conspicuous, strident opposition.
- A front-page story in Minnesota (Meersman, 2012) describes rising public opposition to wind farms in Minnesota and other states. A follow-up report after the preliminary decision (Boese, 2010) carries the headline, “Wind farm opponents get ‘straight arm’ from utilities commission,” and quotes a representative of wind farm opponents who calls the situation a “war.”
- A California news reports (Hull, 2011) cites concerns about “irreparable harm to native plants and threatened species” and quotes a critic who says, “Initially, all of these big solar projects were being crammed down our throats.”
- “Smart meters” in Bakersfield, California, malfunction in a way that causes them to overestimate consumption. Vociferous customers all over the country—from California (Cox, 2011b), to Nevada (Damon, 2012), Georgia (Landers, 2012), and Maine (Cooper, 2012; Mentzinger, 2011)—rebel against wireless smart meters, based on an assortment of concerns about health, safety, and high bills.

Websites, including [www.stopsmartmeters.org](http://www.stopsmartmeters.org), compile dozens of articles alleging health and safety problems associated with smart meters and utility automated metering infrastructure (AMI) systems.

A Nevada news report (Damon, 2012) claims,

Commissioners were startled by the outcry...particularly when strange packages began arriving at their homes... Some of the public comments were so caustic that the commission took the unusual step of hiring armed security to keep the peace.

A California news report (Cox, 2011) quotes a consumer advocate, who says the Bakersfield situation “...‘should be a wake-up call’ to the state commission to take customer complaints more seriously.”

A “lead intervenor” in Maine is reported (Turler, 2011) as blaming her utility for a “pattern of trying to prove why customers don't deserve a choice, why our concerns don't matter, and why we should be forced to buy a product that we believe violates our right to health, safety, security, and privacy in our own homes.” Another smart-meter opponent calls Maine’s opt-out provisions “extortion or blackmail” (Cooper, 2012).

- CNN reports that “a short circuit at a substation in North Gila, Arizona, set off a series of failures that led to the massive power outage that left millions of people in California, Arizona, and Mexico in the dark” (CNN Wire Staff, 2011).

This handful of recent examples starts to depict the breadth of issues that can result in the need for commissioners and commission staff to engage in difficult communications. In many of these and related circumstances, public health and safety, even life-or-death situations, can be a paramount concern; emotions can run high; the interests of multiple participants can be diametrically opposed; commissions can be asked to solve problems over which they have no control or responsibility; and news reporters might attempt, with little success, to compress a complex issue into an overly simplistic sound bite.

In addition, commissions do not always play a central role in emergency or crisis communications. Commission communications frequently benefit from close coordination with the communications on the same issues coming from regulated utility companies, public safety officials, and other stakeholders. Many times, the commission’s primary role will be to support and help focus attention on communications from utilities, first responders, and other public safety officials. All of these factors reflect many of the difficult-communications challenges and complexities facing commissions.

These challenges come with the territory, because commissions address some of society’s “ill-structured” and “wicked” problems. A so-called “ill-structured” problem is one “for which the means or the ends or both are unknown (or the effectiveness of which are in doubt) or for which sharp and significant disagreement exists over what means should be employed to achieve what ends.” It is also one in which “ethical stance(s) and values are in doubt or not well accepted by a significant body of stakeholders” (Mitroff and Silvers, 2010, p. 37). Mitroff (2005, p. 90) concluded that “[i]ll-structured problems are problems for which fundamental differences... predominate...[and] intense disagreement is one of the major features... .”

A “wicked” problem is an “extreme example of an ill-structured problem” (Mitroff and Silvers, 2010, p. 37). It is one that society has already experienced as defying easy solution. Wicked problems often represent zero-sum games, in which a gain for one group or interest is achieved only at the expense of another. As Mitroff and Silvers (2010, p. 37) explain:

A wicked problem is one for which there appears to be no satisfactory way of determining an appropriate set of means or ends that would obtain sufficient agreement among a diverse set of stakeholders. That is, no currently known discipline, profession, or body of knowledge is sufficient to define the “wicked,” complex nature of the problem.<sup>1</sup>

Another term used to describe such problems is “mess.” As Mitroff (2005, pp. 75-76) explains,

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<sup>1</sup> See also Murphy, 2000, pp. 449-450; and Alpaslan and Mitroff, 2011, pp. 23, 27-28.

A “mess” is a complex system of problems such that no problem or part of the mess exists or can be defined independently of all the other problems that constitute the mess! In short, messes are highly interactive systems of problems.

In a difficult-communications situation, a commissioner or staff member is very likely to be called upon, often quite suddenly and perhaps unexpectedly, to fulfill a prominent role. That role could be, for example, arbitrator, coalition builder, conciliator, defender, disputant, educator, mediator, opinion leader, or persuader. Difficult communications situations are even pricklier because commissioners and commission staff often find themselves thrust into these circumstances without the benefit of prior training and experience in public relations, news-media relations, risk communications, or crisis management. Frequently, new commissioners’ difficult communications begin even before their new roles commence, with rough-and-tumble questioning at a confirmation hearing or during a fervently contested election. And, for commissions as a whole, the agency’s brand name is an asset to be protected and nurtured during trying events, just as commercial interests want to protect their brands. Commissions will want to manage difficult communications so that the agency’s reputation is upheld and stakeholders respect the commission’s well-deserved, highly specialized expertise and effective problem-solving abilities.

With those challenges in mind, the purpose of this paper is to advise commissions about how best to prepare for and manage difficult communications. A secondary objective is to reflect the best current thinking about how recommended communications needs and practices have changed and are continuing to change as a result of the widespread and still-growing use of the Internet and social networking. An important bonus included in this work is guidance about anticipating, and avoiding or preventing in the first place, the situations that result in the need for difficult communications.

Part I of this paper catalogs the types of difficult communications challenges commissions are likely to face. The five identified types are briefly summarized in Table 1.

Part II presents guidelines for addressing difficult communications. Table 2 depicts the basic recommendations for addressing and managing all kinds of difficult communications, representing activities that take place before, during, and after a difficult situation presents itself. Management activities focus on preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from such events.

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The report concludes with the observation that commissions are well-suited to sharing with one another information and best practices about difficult communications, with the goal of developing more detailed recommendations using the ideals of evidence-based practice. With commissions all over the country facing similar issues and grappling with similar problems, good opportunities exist to learn from one another.

## I. Typology of Difficult Communications

Whether or not a communications situation is difficult depends in large part on the attitude of the communicator. If a communication makes the communicator or recipient sufficiently uncomfortable, then it can be understood to be difficult. Communicators know it when they feel it. If the thought of a pending situation makes you queasy, or your fight-or-flight response kicks in, then you are embroiled in a difficult communications situation. Or, as explained by Coombs (2010, pp. 18-19), if a situation has the potential to seriously impact the commission or its stakeholders, it can trigger difficult communications.

The study of and guidance about difficult communications comes from many, many disciplines: crisis, disaster, and emergency management and communications; corporate citizenship and reputation management; community, constituent, employee, government, investor, media, public, constituent, and community relations; public affairs, public information, and outreach; and strategic marketing and planning (Gupta, 2011, pp. 56-57; Thomlison, 2000). Less directly, techniques used to address difficult communications sometimes also involve corporate branding, image building, marketing, and advertising. Potentially, any and all stakeholders can be affected by and included in the strategies used to address difficult communications, and both internal and external communications can be implicated (Coombs, 2010, p. 35).

This breadth of disciplines sometimes adds to uncertainties about how best to manage difficult communications situations, because the situations are not uniquely defined and a unifying theory is rarely available to guide practitioners. In addition, much of the literature and guidance about best practices arise from case studies of previous failures (Coombs, 2010, p. 23). That can be problematic, because such studies frequently concentrate the most attention on what not to do when faced with a difficult communications situation; many case studies fail to explore whether and how problems might have been prevented in the first place.

Table 1 lists the major types and examples of difficult communications that are most likely to affect state utility commissions. An emergency or crisis is a disruptive situation that calls for some immediate action, and frequently ongoing actions, in order to stop the disruption or prevent it from spreading. Although there are no precise industry definitions of “emergency” and “crisis,” there is general agreement that a crisis happens on a scale “that affects or has the potential to affect the *whole* of an organization” and a major crisis is one that “exact[s] a *major toll* on human lives, property, financial earnings, the reputation, and the general health and well-being of an organization” (Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001, pp. 34-35, emphasis in original).

Researchers also differentiate between natural disasters and manmade or human-caused crises (Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001, p. 6), and further between accidental and purposeful or intentional manmade crises. The distinction between a natural disaster and a manmade crisis often blurs. For example, an earthquake or tornado is nobody’s fault, but at least some of the resulting damage and problems might be blamed on the interaction between natural forces and the many manmade infrastructures. The concept of purposeful or intentional crises is a rather recent one. It highlights the idea that an individual or group might instigate a crisis, on purpose, as some kind of antisocial or political act (Olinic and Toia, 2011, p. 7).

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<p><sup>1</sup> NIMBY is an acronym for “not in my backyard.” Related acronyms include LULU, for “locally unwanted land use”; BANANA, for “build absolutely nothing, anywhere near anybody”; CRAVE, for “citizens radically against virtually everything”; NIMTOO, (sometimes spelled “NIMTO”) for “not in my term of office”; NIMEY, for “not in my election year”; and NOPE, for “not on planet earth.” See Fogarty and Lamb, 2012; Samuel, 2010.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> “Macro-siting” means selecting the general area where a facility will be located. “Micro-siting” means selecting the specific location, including the details of specific land-use issues such as access roads and traffic patterns, surface-water and stormwater management, and so forth.</p>	

Crises are further differentiated by reaction time and duration. That is, crises can be identified as exploding, immediate, building, or continuing and chronic. In an exploding crisis, instantaneous consequences greatly limit reaction time. An immediate crisis comes as a surprise, but allows some time for response. A building crisis can be anticipated and therefore allows some time to prepare responses and even possibly to influence the situation. A continuing crisis builds over time and is slow to dissipate. All these circumstances, however, are “highly visible, require immediate attention, contain an element of surprise, have a need for action, and are outside the organization’s complete control” (Olinic and Toia, 2011, p. 6).

Risk assessment, as it applies to state public utility regulatory commissions, is the general name for communications about the actions of a commission or a regulated company that some individuals or groups perceive as creating extra, undesired risk. Prominent examples include public concerns about the siting of new infrastructure and the perceived risks associated with electromagnetic field effects, radio frequency interference, and nuclear radiation.

The other three categories identified in Table 1—Bad News, New News, and Not My News—have been created exclusively for this paper, to represent other kinds of commonly encountered difficult communications for commissions. The Bad News category reflects circumstances in which information must be communicated that any group of stakeholders is likely to perceive as negative. “New news” means situations in which information about significant changes must be communicated. Even if those changes are not perceived as negative per se, most people are creatures of habit, and many people find any kind of significant change to be unsettling or disturbing. People often react negatively to the idea of change, irrespective of the context of the particular situation at hand. New-news situations can also morph into risk-communications situations, in which changes are framed so that they generate fear in a relevant population. Finally, the Not My News category is a placeholder for those circumstances in which a commissioner or staff member is asked (or feels a need) to respond to misinformation or must address a problem that is non-jurisdictional. An all-too-common example in recent years has been complaints directed to PUCs about non-jurisdictional telecommunications services.



## II. Tools and Techniques that Apply to All Kinds of Difficult Communications Situations

Part 2 presents the basic ideas about difficult communications that apply to all of the different categories, and Part 3 presents ideas specific to each category identified in Table 1. These two parts of this paper present summaries of the steps recommended by researchers who have studied crisis management and communications.

The information included in Part 2 is organized into the four major activity areas listed in the second row of Table 2: (1) preventing; (2) preparing for; (3) responding to; and (4) recovering from the situations that result in difficult communications. The three stages, shown in the first row of Table 2, are simply before, during, and after an emergency or crisis situation (Coombs, 2010, p. 20). The major themes and purposes for each activity are summarized in the third row. As the varying column widths in the first and second rows of Table 2 suggest, some of the activities overlap the stages: Preparing for an event includes activities that take place both before and at the beginning of a difficult communications situation, and recovery begins during the latter stages of a situation and continues after it subsides.

**Table 2: Before, During, and After Stages of and Major Activities Involved in Difficult Communications Management**

Before		During	After
Preventing	Preparing for	Responding to	Recovering from
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What could happen?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why?</li> <li>○ Where?</li> <li>○ When?</li> <li>○ How?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Does our process provoke or fortify potential problems? If yes, how can we improve our process?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the targets for each kind of communications and the channels that will be used to reach them</li> <li>• Establish and exercise functional, positive relationships with the relevant target audiences and expedient means of using the channels to reach them</li> <li>• Identify and prepare commission spokespersons for various topics</li> <li>• Prepare ahead of time as much of the messages as practical</li> <li>• Allocate “issues management” resources</li> <li>• Provide training, practice, written plans, guidelines, and procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribute messages to, as appropriate:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Apologize</li> <li>○ Educate</li> <li>○ Explain</li> <li>○ Instruct</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Spokespersons employ the Arch Lustberg performance guidance<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor and evaluate outputs and outcomes</li> <li>• Obtain and utilize feedback for next time</li> </ul>
<sup>1</sup> Lustberg, 2008, Chapter 16. See Table 9.			

As Coombs (2010, pp. 20-22) summarizes, the *before* stage “revolves around collecting information about crisis risks, making decisions about how to manage potential crises, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process. The training includes crisis team members, crisis spokespersons, and any individuals who will help with the response.” Activity *during* the situation “includes the collection and processing of information for crisis team decision making along with the creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team... ” And *afterwards*, “post-crisis involves dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages as needed.”

The period before a crisis materializes is also the right time to consider all of the parties external to the commission that could end up being important players in a crisis situation’s management. The guidance in this paper focuses on the commission itself; however, readers are encouraged to bear in mind the roles in addressing the various situations that will be filled by regulated utility companies, other government agencies, and other partner organizations. It is especially recommended, during the earliest stages of difficult-communications scenario analysis and planning, that commissions consider when they will be acting in concert with other parties and open dialogues with those parties to discuss cooperation and coordination.

#### **A. Preventing the need for difficult communications**

As the often-recited adage says, “If you fail to plan, then you are planning to fail.”<sup>2</sup> That is the thrust of guidance about the process of predicting, preparing for, and trying to prevent the need for difficult communications. Table 3 summarizes the steps involved in these activities.

Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 29) report:

[E]ven with the best methods or frameworks one can[not] prevent all crises. Indeed, complete prevention is impossible. Nonetheless, with appropriate and advanced planning and preparation, one can limit substantially both the duration and the damage caused by major crises. In fact, it has been found repeatedly that those organizations that are prepared for major crises not only recover substantially faster but with significantly less damage than those organizations that are not prepared.

A first step is to assemble a team that will focus attention on possible problem areas. Anyone and everyone in an organization can participate in this brainstorming effort. Crisis-communications consultants recommend that, at a minimum, the team should include a diverse group of employees from many different areas within an organization, with team members representing different age groups and experience levels in the organization; sometimes new employees will see things that seasoned veterans might not. As the process continues, consider succession in team members and leadership, including the sharing of responsibilities and cross-training, so that at least two employees are available to fulfill each major function.

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<sup>2</sup> Essentially similar statements have been attributed to many keen observers of the human condition, including Ben Franklin and Winston Churchill.

**Table 3: Recommendations for *Preventing Difficult-Communications Events***

<input type="checkbox"/> Assemble a diverse team from many agency divisions, composed of staff varying in age, education, and experience in the organization.
<input type="checkbox"/> Brainstorm to predict the various kinds of emergencies and crises that could arise. <input type="checkbox"/> Collect and file examples of the kinds of difficult situations that might arise.
<input type="checkbox"/> Create scenarios around at least one of each major type of crisis or emergency. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop preliminary frames for each of the selected scenarios, to help guide prevention and preparation activities. <input type="checkbox"/> Begin to identify stakeholder groups, target audiences, and potential partners for each scenario. <input type="checkbox"/> Consider sharing information about the selected scenarios with relevant stakeholders and potential partners. <input type="checkbox"/> Begin shaping pre-crisis preventive messages and consider sharing them with relevant stakeholders.
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify, where possible, markers that could help predict the emergence of each of the selected scenarios. <input type="checkbox"/> Establish systems for monitoring and reporting changes in those markers.

The next recommendation is for the team to develop a preliminary list of the different kinds of emergencies or crises that could face the commission. The commission would be asking, as an agency: What could go wrong? What are the “ticking time bombs” that might eventually go off, creating a crisis situation for the commission? (Mitroff, 2005, p. 66).

Because every agency can and will devote a limited amount of time and effort to this endeavor, the best guidance is to begin with a rather narrow view of the types of issues to be considered. The team can start with the most obvious possibilities, but the recommended approach is to never stop searching for problem areas. Over time, an initial list can be widened to include what are considered more remote possibilities and smaller risks. To get the process started, commission teams can consider the general types of issues included in Table 1 and a broad list of different possible causes, including those that are economic, technical, natural, reputational, human resources, and even psychopathic (Mitroff, 2005, pp. 68-69, 98-99).

Identifying areas of concern will be an ongoing activity; participants should be encouraged to generate examples of issues that might be further evaluated in the future. Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 115) call this “thinking about the unthinkable... basically an exercise in creative thinking.” It is important to recognize that crisis situations frequently result when the unthinkable happens or when multiple different problems occur simultaneously in ways that build on and compound one another. In any case, experience in numerous organizations demonstrates that this brainstorming exercise is likely to produce helpful, positive results. To paraphrase, experience demonstrates that any stranded investments resulting from preparing for difficult situations that never occur are more than offset, and are sometimes dwarfed, by the costs saved because the difficult situations that do occur are prevented or responded to more

adequately. Mitroff (2005, p. 15) explains that experience shows that the best-prepared organizations find ways to “contain and even lower substantially the economic, human, and existential costs” of difficult circumstances. In addition, growing evidence exists that the skills and techniques developed through the exercise of preparing for crisis management and crisis communications are useful and help build important organizational capabilities for engaging in normal, non-crisis operations (Alpaslan and Mitroff, 2011, pp. 82-85).

Admittedly, this exercise contains an element of what Mitroff (2005, pp. 104-109) calls “controlled paranoia.” Mitroff (2005, pp. 14-15) explains:

Businesses have to learn to welcome thoughts about the worst that can happen to them, without letting those thoughts interfere with their hopes and aspirations for the best. ... [C]ompanies must confront the disturbing question, “How paranoid do we need to be in order to anticipate, plan for, and cope effectively with major crises?”

The recommendation is that both management and the brainstorming team embrace the exercise of controlled paranoia and run with it. It is recommended that they suspend disbelief to some extent and consider a broad variety of possible situations, including even ideas about seemingly random events that could result in serious challenges. It is strongly recommended that management create and maintain an atmosphere in which staff can bring up ideas about potential problems, without fear of any negative ramifications. Ideally, this process will eventually be integrated into every commission’s strategic planning effort, as well as into day-to-day management. In particular, the team can be encouraged to explore any ways in which the commission’s own practices and processes might be allowing or even causing difficult situations to emerge. Sometimes modest changes can help defuse difficult situations before they arise.

Once the list of possible challenging situations has been prepared, it is recommended that the team pick at least a few different problem types and possible causes and use them to develop scenarios for the two exercises of preventing and planning for crises. The scenarios do not need to be developed in extensive detail, but they should include at least basic statements about the type and extent of damage the commission would face, a list of affected stakeholders and the type and extent of damage they would face, the degree of control the commission would have over the situation, and the options for the commission’s response. This is essentially an exercise in framing the issues (Hallahan, 1999). As Hallahan suggests, each issue area can be framed in terms of the situations themselves and their attributes, the choices and actions that stakeholders will face, how to best frame responsibility and causes and effects for the situation, and how best to frame the situation for the news media.

The purpose for the scenarios, at this stage, is simply to guide the commission in the remaining steps of the prevention stage (Coombs, 2010, pp. 25-26). Those steps include identifying affected stakeholders and using all the information gathered so far to begin shaping pre-crisis, preventive messages and sharing them with relevant stakeholders. Sandman (1993, pp. ii-iii) provides a helpful list of the “key publics” to consider when identifying stakeholders:

- industry,
- regulators (at all levels),

- elected officials (at all levels),
- activists (at all levels),
- employees and retirees [of both the commission and industry],
- neighbors (everyone who is especially impacted by [a] particular issue),
- concerned citizens (everyone who already has indicated a desire to get involved in [a] particular issue),
- experts (everyone who has specialized knowledge of [a] particular issue), [and]
- the media (and through the media, the rest of the public).

These same activities will be revisited in greater detail during the preparing stage. The focus in this stage of the process should remain on preventing future problems. Decisions about whether, when, and how to engage stakeholders and potential partners should hinge on the extent to which those entities could be drafted to help with prevention. A relevant example is communities setting up cooling centers, transportation assistance, messages to explain those resources, and channels for getting that word out, so that those resources are ready to assist vulnerable citizens during heat waves, thereby helping to avoid emergency and crisis situations.

A second reason for a detailed analysis of stakeholders and stakeholders' needs and desires, however, is to identify groups that could interfere with or thwart the commission's attempts to meet its goals and objectives. Hon and Grunig (1999, pp. 8-10) highlight why it is so important to identify stakeholder groups and try to manage stakeholder relations:

[E]ffective organizations are able to achieve their goals because they choose goals that are valued both by management and by strategic constituencies both inside and outside the organization... because they develop relationships with their constituencies... . The process of incorporating the goals, interests, and concerns of publics into the strategic decision processes of organizations is never easy, of course, because organizations generally encounter multiple publics with multiple goals. ... [O]rganizations generally make better decisions when they listen to and collaborate with stakeholders before they make final decisions rather than simply trying to persuade them to accept organizational goals after decisions are made. ... Sometimes, good relationships keep publics from engaging in negative behaviors such as litigation, strikes, protests, or negative publicity.

The remaining steps in the prevention stage are to try to identify potential warning signs that could help sense when one of the scenarios is developing and then set up monitoring systems for identifying and reporting changes in those warning signs. Wherever practical, the team should identify some means of vigilance for sensing and monitoring the environment for cues that one of the scenarios could be building (Coombs, 2010, pp. 25-26).

Example 1 includes excerpts from a pre-crisis preventive message distributed in New York. This example includes several of the recommended features. Note that: (a) New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo acts as the spokesperson for this communiqué; (b) multiple state

agencies are cooperating in the preventive efforts; and (c) a website provides additional details for the interested public.<sup>3</sup>

## B. Preparing for difficult communications

Preparing for difficult-communications events means preparing: (a) the people who will be involved; (b) the gist of the information the people will be asked to convey, including draft messages; and (c) the procedures that will be used during any crisis that is of sufficient scope and duration that it triggers the need for an ongoing response from your difficult-communications team. Recommendations are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4: Recommendations for Preparing for Difficult-Communications Events**

<input type="checkbox"/> Identify team members for each scenario and prepare and share a directory with multiple means of contacting team members in the event of an emergency. <input type="checkbox"/> Complete team decision-making skills training.
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify target audiences for each scenario; create a directory of contacts and communications channels that will be used to reach the target audiences.
<input type="checkbox"/> Identify spokespersons for each major type of situation and complete spokesperson training.
<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare draft messages for each major situation, for each communications method, and for each medium, and file them for easy retrieval in an emergency.
<input type="checkbox"/> Establish and practice using all outreach mechanisms and communications channels. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Establish and practice using online monitoring systems.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Engage in frequent informal and preventive communications contacts with all partners.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Develop and practice setting up a commission crisis-operations center: who, what, when, where, why, and how.</li> </ul>

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<sup>3</sup> See also these additional examples of preventive communications: "[Florida] PSC Commissioner Brise Speaks at 2011 Town Hall Forum on Disaster Preparedness," *Targeted News Service*, 14 May 2011; "[Kentucky] PSC Urges Caution if Storms Brings Power Outages," *Targeted News Service*, 26 May 2011, *Infotrac Newsstand*; "With Blizzard on the Way, [Michigan] PSC offers utility-related tips," (1 Feb 2011), *States News Service. Infotrac Newsstand*; and "Missouri PSC Observes National Safe Digging Month: Call 1-800-344-7483 Before You Dig," *Targeted News Service*, 10 July 2011, *Infotrac Newsstand*.

Another Michigan PSC example demonstrates close coordination with other agencies: "State Fire Marshal Urges Safety While Using Generators [and] Install at Least One Carbon Monoxide Detector in Every Home," (24 Sep 2010), *States News Service, Infotrac Newsstand*.

### Example 1: Excerpts from a Pre-Crisis Preventive Message

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo today outlined New York State's preparations and urged New Yorkers to take precautions for the ice, sleet and snow storm that has all of New York State under a Winter Storm Watch or Warning for Tuesday through Wednesday.

Governor Cuomo this afternoon directed the New York State Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to activate the state's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan and open the State Emergency Operations Center to ensure [that] resources and equipment are positioned for an appropriate response to the forecasted storm. ...

\* The Department of Public Service (DPS) is coordinating with all of the state's major electric utilities to ensure that the utilities have the necessary resources in place to deal with the expected storm. ...

\* The DPS will ensure that its Consumer Services Hot Line (1-800-342-3377) will be fully staffed and available to assist utility customers needing information from their service provider. Staffing of the hotline has been increased to handle additional storm-related volume. ...

\* Watch for down[ed] power lines and signal outages. Signalized intersections where power outages occur should be regarded as four-way stops. Use extra caution. ...

Be wary of the potential dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, produced by common items such as automobile exhaust, home heating systems, poorly vented generators, and kerosene heaters. To avoid carbon monoxide poisoning, do not run generators indoors if you lose power.

Generators should be run only outdoors and downwind, and be kept away from children at all times. Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include sleepiness, headaches and dizziness. If you suspect carbon monoxide poisoning, ventilate the area and get to a hospital. ...

\* If you use a kerosene heater, open a window slightly to vent the fumes. ...

\* If you lose power, do not use charcoal to cook indoors and do not use a gas oven to heat your home. ...

For more information on how individuals can be better prepared for emergencies and for winter safety tips, visit: [www.semo.state.ny.us](http://www.semo.state.ny.us).

Source: New York Governor Mario Cuomo. (5 Feb 2011). "Governor Cuomo Outlines State Preparations and Urges Precautions for Anticipated Snow and Ice Storm." [Press Release]. *US Official News. Infotrac Newsstand*.

## **1. Identify team members**

A first step is simply to identify the team members. These can be the same individuals who have participated in the prevention activities, but often some of them might be subtracted from the team, and others added, depending on the scenarios identified in the previous step. A key recommendation is that everyone on the team should have ready access to a directory of all team members. As much as is practical, the directory can indicate which team members to contact in which scenarios and provide multiple means for contacting each team member at all times (e.g., by landline, mobile phone, text message, email, and so forth).

The directory can specify, for each major scenario, who will be called first to work on each particular topic area, who will be identified as potential spokespersons, and how internal communications will be handled to keep the commission itself and its senior management team apprised of the situation status and progress (Coombs, 2010, p. 26). These groups can always be augmented later as needed, but identifying the first responders is necessary for situations that call for immediate action.

Consider providing training for the team, to reinforce decision-making skills and make sure everyone understands the commission's (a) philosophy for managing each kind of scenario, (b) internal communications systems, and (c) channels for reviewing plans and obtaining any necessary permissions.

## **2. Identify target audiences and communications channels for reaching them**

For each scenario, it is recommended that the team list the target audiences it will need to reach quickly. Commissions should identify, for each target audience, important contact persons and the communications channels that will be used to reach both important intermediary contacts and the whole of the target audience. At this stage, it is best to expand the view of media to include every conceivable option. Consider how each target audience can or might be reached, and plan for multiple channels of communications as needed.

It is no longer sufficient to assume that all or even most people can be reached by information distributed only to the newspaper(s), radio, and TV station(s). The mainstream news media are still important, but their role is declining, and the role of the so-called new media is increasing (Jordan-Meier, 2011, p. 20). The Pew Research Center (2012) finds that online audiences are growing and print circulation is continuing to decline. Pew reports, "[T]he newspaper industry has shrunk 43% since 2000." Another important trend (Pew, 2012, *Major Trends*) is traditional news media outlets' move to online services and subscriptions. Pew explains:

Perhaps as many as 100 more [news]papers are expected in coming months to join the roughly 150 publications that have already moved to some kind of digital subscription model. ... Over the last five years, an average of 15 papers, or just about 1% of the industry, has vanished each year. A growing number of executives predict that in five



years many newspapers will offer a print home-delivered newspaper only on Sunday, and perhaps one or two other days a week that account [for the] most print ad revenue.

Thus, it is already incorrect to think that all or even most of the members of a particular target audience will be reached in a timely manner using only mainstream media. As Jordan-Meier (2011, p. 21) reports, the mainstream media are likely to miss important audiences, so it is important to supplement with new media and other means.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the traditional media are dedicating fewer resources to their own reporting. With news staff in decline, the traditional media are acting more and more as mere forwarders of press releases received from others. And, with the exception of a crisis that turns into a major news event, traditional media will cover any topic “only briefly.” Jordan-Meier (2011, p. 21) explains, “If you need more than one to three minutes” to get your point across to your audience, then “you need social media (and fast).”

Be aware of the time lag involved in getting your messages to the intended target audience. As shown in Table 5, the delay between when the commission sends out a message and when the target audience can be expected to receive it can vary substantially. The “Day 1” category will include almost all traditional local news media, but keep in mind that all the times shown in Table 5 are the minimums for each type of media; it can always take longer and seldom takes less time than what is depicted in Table 5. Regular practice using the various communications systems during non-emergency situations can help to inform you about how rapidly your messages will reach people.

However, many mainstream news media staff are themselves using the news media as primary information sources and to find ideas about what to cover. Thus, messages sent out through microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networks, and social-content media (see Table 5), in addition to press releases sent via email, are increasingly likely to reach news media partners in addition to any other subscribers. As Jordan-Meier (2011, p. 24) puts it, “Twitter [is] the new police scanner. Many newsrooms had police scanners and monitored the networks to ascertain what stories to cover—the scanner was a source for news. Now it is Twitter acting as a siren for reporters.”

Kent (2008, p. 35) observes:

The news business has always been somewhat parochial and susceptible to a peculiar kind of inbreeding that affected decisions about what topics to cover. ... What is rather new, though, is that reporters of all stripes are increasingly using Internet sources such as Facebook, Twitter, really simple syndication (RSS) feeds, and blogs to help determine what to cover.

The point is that the same Internet media used to reach various opinion leaders and other target audiences can also serve to reach the traditional-news-media reporters who are likely to follow and report on commission news. It is also worth considering that whatever is presented by way

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<sup>4</sup> The Society for New Communications Research publishes *Best Practices Tip Sheets*, *Case Studies*, and *Journal of New Communications Research*. <http://www.sncr.org/>, retrieved 23 Mar 2012.

of email can also be posted on the commission website, Facebook page, or other medium, and the same content can be cross-referenced to the followers of a commission microblog, too.

**Table 5: Speed of Communicating in a Crisis Using New Media  
(Generic Types and Services)**

<b>Seconds</b>	<b>Minutes</b>	<b>Hours</b>	<b>Day 1</b>
<i>Microblogs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twitter</li> </ul>	<i>Social networks, blogs, photo uploads</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook, Google+</li> <li>• Real simple syndication (RSS) feeds</li> <li>• Flickr, Picasa, Instagram</li> </ul>	<i>Social content, video, news aggregators</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YouTube, Vimeo</li> <li>• Wikipedia</li> <li>• Google news</li> </ul>	<i>Editorial blogs, internal agency networks</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local, regional, or national news media</li> <li>• Agency emails</li> </ul>
Source: Adapted from Emerging Media Research Council, 2010, p. 1.			

A recommendation for preparing for difficult-communications events is to consider how best to reach target audiences that are not easily reached by Internet or smart-phone communications. The so-called “digital divide” is still a real phenomenon; many people either do not have or do not regularly use access to the communications media that others take for granted. To get messages out to some people, you might need to resort to methods that include neighbors talking with neighbors and reaching people through other, localized means. Checking the Internet is recommended, to find any “hyperlocal” sites (Jordan-Meier, 2011, pp. 19-20) that might be used to help disseminate your information. It is also recommended to consider how the commission can use its website to most easily connect with and reach intended target audiences, as well as make it easy for people to learn about and subscribe to your various types of press releases, email distribution lists, Twitter and RSS feed(s), and so forth.

All this means that the Internet and social media can and should be used to reach people, but it is not practical to rely only on those channels. It is also recommended that commissions develop “an established presence online *before* the crisis hits” (Jordan-Meier, 2011, p. 95; emphasis in original). During a crisis or emergency is not the time to try to learn how to use new communications channel. Commissions should identify the channels ahead of time and (as explained below, in Step 4) find reasons to start using them. Example 2 refers to some of the ways in which commissions are successfully using new media to reach important constituencies.

### **3. Identify and train spokespersons**

A next step is to identify spokespersons for each identified scenario and provide training to help prepare them for the situations they are likely to face. One likely spokesperson might be the commission chairman or a commissioner with particular experience with a specific issue. In addition, one or more senior staff members might be selected to be a spokesperson. Consider, too, including one or more operational spokespersons (Jordan-Meier, p. 91). Especially in the earliest stages of an emergency or crisis situation, it can be important for at least one

## Example 2: Using New Media for Commission Communications

The Florida PSC (on Twitter, @FLORIDAPSC) uses Twitter to disseminate notices when a news release is issued, including abbreviated hotlinks to the full news release.

The Kentucky PSC (on Twitter, @KYPSC) also uses Twitter to advise more than 360 followers about outages and progress in service restoration. Even with 140-character Tweets, KYPSC conveys timely information about numbers of customers out of service and sometimes when service is expected to be restored.

The Kentucky PSC provides live video streaming of some hearings. The Kentucky PSC has also started a YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/KYPSC>). A Kentucky PSC YouTube channel video, featuring Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, explains the “Lifeline” and “Link-up” telecommunications services. That video has been viewed more than 500 times, and its YouTube listing includes links to related Kentucky PSC documents, an op-ed letter, and Governor Beshear’s proclamation ([http://psc.ky.gov/agencies/psc/press/092010/0914\\_r03.PDF](http://psc.ky.gov/agencies/psc/press/092010/0914_r03.PDF)). YouTube data makes it easy to track numbers of viewers over time and provides useful information about where the viewers are finding links to the video.

Following a big spike in natural gas prices in 2002–2003, the Kentucky PSC embarked on a series of news media briefings around the state, where price forecasts could be explained ahead of heating season. In the following year and for the next several years, webcasting capability was added. People could email questions ahead of time, and local TV stations could send cameras and reporters if they wanted higher-quality video. Last year, the Kentucky PSC decided to pre-record the briefing and post it on YouTube prior to the news media briefing.

The Kentucky PSC decided not to use Facebook for most commission news, but it did set up a special Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/KYSmallUtilities>) and webpage (<http://smallutilities.ky.gov/>) for communicating with Kentucky’s smaller and more rural utility companies (gas, water, sewer, and municipal electric companies). A lot of Kentucky’s smaller utilities might not have access to adequate Internet connections and might be using slower-speed dial-up access only. Virtually all utilities have access to cell-phone service, however, which lets them access Facebook content using smartphones. Thus, the Kentucky PSC uses the Facebook page to push information to small utilities about training and regulatory changes.

The New York State Department of Public Service (on Twitter, @NYSDPS) uses frequent tweets to update more than 320 followers. Almost every NYSDPS tweet links to a press release and most also link to the NYSDPS Facebook page, which has over 120 followers (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-York-State-Department-of-Public-Service/197168574737>).

The Michigan PSC offers email distribution lists. Interested users self-subscribe to lists including Commission Meeting Schedules and Agendas (1,012 subscribers), Consumer Alerts (976 subscribers), Commission Meeting Minutes (627), Notices of Hearings and Opportunity to Comment (563), and Press Releases (1,088). <http://www.dleg.state.mi.us/mpsc/about/subscribe-listserv.htm>

spokesperson to be intimately knowledgeable about the details at hand. The public tends to want to hear that top leadership sincerely cares about a situation and is managing the response. It is also important to avoid situations in which a spokesperson might be asked about technical details with which he or she is not familiar. It is far better, under those circumstances, either to postpone answering questions until the details can be confirmed or place in the role of spokesperson at that time someone who is fully knowledgeable. The ideal selection, according to Jordan-Meier (2011, pp. 103-104) is a “knowledgeable ‘frontline’ expert... [who has] firsthand, authentic experience.” Keep in mind, though, that the best spokesperson is not always the one with the deepest knowledge of the technical issues. The best spokesperson is the person who can best relate information in terms that are simple enough for ready understanding by the media and general public. The ability to convert complex subject matter into easily understandable explanations can be just as important as the spokesperson’s technical expertise.

Ideally, individuals selected to be spokespersons will have a complete set of attributes that prepare them for this role. For example, Jordan-Meier (2011, pp. 99, 103-104) recommends looking for spokespersons who embody courage, conviction, authenticity, and genuine concern; who will be nimble, dynamic, savvy, and honest; and who project credibility and accountability. Coombs (2010, pp. 27-28) recommends that spokespersons have excellent decision-making skills and situational awareness and that they be quick, accurate, and consistent.

Admittedly, fully authorizing and empowering spokespersons can seem risky. Commissioners and commission-staff managers will likely worry about the choices the spokespersons will make when the pressure is on and the media or others are throwing up difficult questions. The recommended goal is to identify a cadre of spokespersons ahead of time, and help them become as comfortable as possible. That means helping to make sure they understand the commission’s preferences, goals, and organizational culture. Each spokesperson should understand clearly what subjects he or she is being asked to cover and have a clear idea of how not to answer questions or make impromptu comments about subjects outside of their areas of expertise. Spokespersons do need to be authorized by management to accept their role, though, and then, in practically all cases, they will need training for their role (Jordan-Meier, 2011, pp. 87, 103).

An important aspect of spokesperson training is learning that it is all right to say, “Let me get back to you on that.” Also, in difficult communications the media frequently attempt to ask the same question in multiple ways, trying to get the answer they are looking for. It will be important for the spokesperson to stay on message. It may seem repetitive, but staying on message no matter how the question is asked keeps your agency in control. Because these skills are not generally a part of everyday conversation, some practice will likely be needed to help a spokesperson be ready to apply the appropriate response when it is needed. (See Example 3.)

In addition, it is recommended that the commission’s policies about social-media communications be developed in advance. That includes identifying who has the responsibility for social-media communications (Jordan-Meier, 2011, p. 83). The commission’s social-media communicators will benefit from training, too.

Coombs (2010, pp. 26-27) reports that training for spokespersons is one area in which crisis-communications research “has done an excellent job ... identifying what spokespersons should and should not do during a crisis.” He further explains (2010, p. 27):

We have the perfect blend of practice and theory informing one another. The starting point was the published conventional wisdom of practitioners. Later, research found data that support this wisdom. For instance, spokespersons are told to avoid saying “no comment.” Research established that when people hear “no comment” they think the organization is guilty and hiding something. Research in other areas of communication validated many of the accepted practices. The deception research supports the advice that a spokesperson must have solid eye contact, few vocal fillers, and few nervous adaptors because people use those three cues to assess deception. Thus the spokesperson advice on delivery is... to avoid looking deceptive.

More is involved in training spokespersons than these ideas, but it should be encouraging to everyone involved to know that this is an area in which specific training and practice can improve performance.

#### **4. Prepare draft messages**

A next step for the team is to prepare draft messages for each scenario and, if possible, for each stage of each scenario. It is recommended that the team practice using and become familiar with all of the commission’s different modes of communications, including audio and video messages in addition to the variety of print media that are likely to be used.

It is also recommended that the team prepare draft messages for each communication type. The commission can use these training and preparation efforts to make sure that it has developed and communicated to the team clear “guidelines on the approach, tone, and language used” (Olinic and Toia, 2011, p. 50). Ideally, the draft messages will be filed so they are ready to retrieve, edit, and use when a crisis situation does occur.

Example 3 depicts the idea of preparing generic messages prior to an actual crisis situation. Note that some of the details in this example illustrate important ideas that are presented elsewhere in this paper, too. For example, this set of talking points includes a draft apology (see Table 7) and examples of sticking to the prepared talking points instead of buying into “loaded” questions or repeating any “lethal buzzwords” (see Table 9).

To the extent practical, consider the demographic characteristics of both target audiences and spokespersons. Coombs (2010, p. 28) notes that recipients of pre-crisis messages are more likely to comply with guidance and instructions if the audience perceives the spokesperson as similar to them and sensitive to their concerns.

### Example 3: Preparing Draft Messages Prior to a Crisis Event

Excerpts from Pipeline Safety Talking Points Template prepared by NARUC

*Starters: This Commission takes pipeline safety seriously and is very concerned that such an incident has occurred in our state. We are saddened by the destruction of property that has occurred (and, [if applicable] grieve for those who have been lost and/or injured because of this unfortunate event). The Commission, in cooperation with the company and [if applicable] federal regulators, will make every effort to determine the cause and take appropriate action to ensure such risks are properly addressed.*

Q: Why didn't the state safety investigators prevent this?

A: Despite our best efforts to inspect, monitor, and prevent, a pipeline incident can occur even if the pipeline owner and the state officials charged with inspecting pipelines have been diligent about ensuring safety.

As you may know, there are thousands of miles of pipelines serving our state. Some of these pipelines are fairly old and have experienced certain problems. Laws and regulations exist to help ensure the safety of these older pipes and the proper design and maintenance of the new pipes. Even so, failures occur just like with any man made equipment.

It should be noted that the leading cause of pipeline failures continue to be damage by excavation. So, we encourage the public to call 811 at least three days before digging anywhere in our state. This will allow the utilities to mark their lines so that excavation can happen safely. Also, if you ever smell gas, leave your home and immediately and contact 911.

Safety inspectors cannot prevent accidents in the same manner that a cop can prevent speeding or a fireman can prevent fires. Inspectors check records, ensure project completion and up to code, basically make sure companies are fulfilling their responsibilities.

Q: Why did the pipeline explode?

A: We need to do a timely, thorough investigation. There are no quick answers; we are reviewing evidence and will only report our conclusions when they are ready.

Q: Will it happen again/here?

A: We are working with the utilities to prevent accidents and the best way to do so is through education. If you smell gas, call 911—get out of the house immediately.

In addition, everyone needs to be certain to contact their [state hotline service name and number] at least a few weeks prior to any digging or excavating. The utilities will survey and mark the locations of all underground facilities so that accidents can be avoided.”

## 5. Practice using all communications channels

The last step in preparing is to practice using all of the available communications channels. The channels can be employed to deliver pre-crisis, preventive communications, as already mentioned. In fact, it is recommended that commissions engage in frequent informal and preventive communications contacts with all partners, using all the available channels. It is wise to seek out opportunities to use the identified channels to engage in positive communications, too. Positive communications can help build agency name-brand recognition and a positive reputation, while giving all participating staff the opportunity to practice developing and sending messages.

If informal, preventive, and positive messages are not sufficient to provide ample practice for the team, then it is recommended to prepare and practice delivering additional test messages. The commission might even need to establish practice or test facilities for some communications channels, in addition to the actual production facilities that will be used during a real event.

It is recommended that the team make sure the commission's different outreach mechanisms are already established and ready to use to engage stakeholders, and that at least some team members know how to access those systems as needed. This can include the commission's website—specifically, knowing how to expedite pushing new content onto the website as quickly as possible during an emergency situation. It will also include access to whatever additional services the commission will use, such as blogs, microblogs, and social networks. Scrambling around trying to find out how to access these systems during an actual emergency or crisis event can easily turn into a worst-case scenario, so practice is necessary. Some redundancy should exist to ensure that at least one team member familiar with each operation will be available when the time comes.

Another recommendation is to establish and practice using efficient online monitoring systems that include all relevant websites and social-media channels (blogs, social networks, etc.). In any real emergency or crisis event, the team and commission will want to get rapid feedback about how its efforts are working and how the various stakeholders and target audiences are reacting to the messages from the commission and other sources. The monitoring systems and assignments for monitoring and reporting can be developed and tested in non-emergency circumstances. Table 6 lists criteria for monitoring and reporting systems.

Holding training exercises such as mock disaster drills can help with this process (as with steps 3 and 5, and all the subsequent stages). As silly as it might sound, pretending to be in a crisis event helps people anticipate an actual situation and can be the best possible preparation.

Another recommendation for such events is to include practice and training in the commission's internal communications systems. Ideally, training will reinforce the commission's systems for obtaining permissions that might be needed, clarifying who will be tapped as spokespersons in each scenario, and simulating the roles team members will be asked to fill (Yang et al., 2010).

**Table 6: Recommended Criteria for Monitoring and Reporting Systems**

- Do not deliberately block signals that would alert you to an impending crisis.
- Do not ignore warnings.
- Keep lines of communication open.
- Make sure you utilize signal-detection mechanisms that are already in place.
- Reward signal detection and emphasize safety.
- Make sure your detection mechanisms search for signals from all...types of crises....
- Make sure your mechanisms are directed internally and externally, attuned to both technical and people signals.
- Make sure there is someone who is watching over these signals and who is ready to sound an alarm if necessary.
- Create a clear reporting sequence so that people know what to do in the event of a crisis.

Source: Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001, p. 112.

It is further recommended that commissions establish plans for setting up and staffing a commission crisis-operations center. In any event of significant scope and duration that requires multiple communications over a period exceeding several hours, it can be necessary to start up and maintain a crisis-operations center. The plans can be established ahead of time and would include all the basic information about, for example, (a) who will be asked to report to the center; (b) what equipment and resources will be available at the center; (c) if the needed equipment and resources are not permanently in the center, how they will be delivered to the center and by whom; and (d) what circumstances will trigger the center's start up and who will be responsible for making that decision. Keep in mind that a commission could need multiple options for this purpose; where will the center be established if the commission's office building is not available (for example, due to a power outage or equipment failure or weather-related emergency)?

### **C. Responding to a difficult-communications event**

Responding to a difficult-communications event begins with the plans made during the preparing stage. As soon as it appears that a situation could demand multiple responses over a sufficient time period, it is recommended that the commission trigger the plans for mobilizing and staffing the commission's crisis-operations center. Depending on the type of event: (a) the team can be mobilized; (b) draft messages can be brought out from storage, so they can be checked, edited, and prepared for delivery; and (c) the spokespersons can be mobilized, ready to deliver the initial response. Basic recommendations for responding are summarized in Table 7.

It is strongly recommended that the first commission responses be available in a matter of minutes and hours, not days. As Jordan-Meier (2011, p. 86) instructs, "Whatever you do, make it fast.... You simply cannot afford to wait until you know everything." The recommendation is to go ahead and trigger the commission's initial response as quickly as practical, even if that response is basically just to say, "The commission is aware of this situation, and is preparing a response that will be delivered as soon as possible."



**Table 7: Recommendations for Responding to a Difficult-Communications Event**

<input type="checkbox"/> Make at least a preliminary response as quickly as is reasonable, within the first hour if possible.
<input type="checkbox"/> Trigger plans for monitoring communications to receive and report information about unfolding events and target audience responses to the commission's messages.
<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare these kinds of messages, and deploy them at the appropriate time and in the appropriate sequence, depending on the circumstances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Instructing messages, explaining how people can best cope with the situation, including details about what actions are needed, and by whom, to protect public safety and prevent harm.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Adjusting messages, expressing appropriate sympathy and empathy about any harms that have already occurred and explaining the steps being taken to prevent further spread or a repeat of the situation.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Reputation-repairing messages, which might include apologies, image-restoration messages, and renewal messages.</li></ul>
<input type="checkbox"/> Deliver messages to the relevant news media as a means of reaching target audiences, trying to match the media and channels used to the type of message and target audience. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Be proactive in determining which media to use and the best format for delivering each message, whether print, audio, video, or a combination.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> For all news-media relations, apply Mongelluzzo's recommendations (Table 8).</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> For interview situations, follow Lustberg's recommendations (Table 9).</li></ul>

Coombs (2010, p. 28) suggests a response within an hour. He relates:

A failure to respond lets others provide the information that will frame how the crisis will be perceived by stakeholders. Silence is too passive and allows others to control the crisis. Moreover, research has proven the value of bad news coming from the organization itself. When an organization is the information source about a crisis occurring, there is less reputational damage than if the news media are the first to deliver the information. This effect has been called "stealing thunder" and provides proof that organizations must discuss the crisis and not remain silent. (References omitted)

Plans for monitoring communications can be implemented early on, too, so that information about unfolding events and target audience responses to the commission's messages can be received and communicated as quickly as is practical.

There are generally three different types of communications used in crisis or emergency situations: instructing, adjusting, and reputation-repairing (Coombs, 2010, pp. 29-33). Instructing messages explain how to best cope with the situation and what actions are needed, by whom, to protect public safety and prevent harm. Strive for accuracy and consistency, making sure that all spokespersons are working from the same basic information and are presenting the same basic

messages. Adjusting messages express the appropriate sympathy or empathy, or both, regarding harms that have already occurred, and explain what is being done to prevent further spread or a repeat of the situation. Research has shown that adjusting messages are valuable to both the organization experiencing a crisis and the stakeholders. The primary guidance from existing research, Coombs (2010, p. 31) reports, is to sincerely apologize and accept responsibility when that is called for. Sandman (2007) provides more specific, detailed guidance about how best to express empathy in risk communications.

Reputation-repairing communications are classified in three closely related subtypes: organizational apologies, image restoration, and renewal. Apologies are a form of self-defense, focused on defending the character of the organization in relation to perceptions of blame and responsibility for a difficult circumstance. Image-restoration messages apply to circumstances in which an organization's reputation is threatened because of accusations of blame and responsibility. Image-restoration messages are generally responses to an attack. Image restoration usually takes one or more of these forms: (1) reminding people of the many good and favorable things the organization has accomplished (and will continue to accomplish); (2) disassociating the organization from blame and responsibility for negative events by offering alternative explanations; and (3) transcending blame and responsibility by placing actions in a broader, more favorable context. Renewal communications are future-oriented and focus on "how things will be better for the organization and its stakeholders" (Coombs, 2010, p. 32). Two primary ideas included in renewal communications are (1) how the organization is helping the victims of a crisis situation; and (2) how the organization is working to improve itself and grow from the present crisis.

For situations that require use of the news media to deliver messages to target audiences, try to match the media and channels used with the type of message and target audience. Refer again to Table 5, which generally indicates the speed of communication for each new media type. Mongelluzzo (2005, 2006) provides recommendations that make sense for a commission's news-media policies. Those recommendations are summarized in Table 8.

It is recommended that commissions not allow reporters and the traditional news media to dictate which media to use to deliver the commission's messages. Rather, the commission can be proactive in determining which media to use. Internet capabilities make it rather simple and straightforward to prepare and develop prepackaged written-word, audio, and video messages. A commission can readily prepare its own communications in question-and-answer format, for example, and present that to news media for their use, rather than waiting for the news media to complete a question-and-answer interview and relying on the media's editing.

As Coombs (2010, p. 35) relates, this makes it possible for the commission "to tell its side of the story" and provide as much detail as it wants. Such self-publishing also provides the opportunity for retakes and editing that is seldom afforded in a live news-media interview. Remember that the same Internet capabilities the commission uses to reach its communications partners and leaders of stakeholder groups directly and quickly can and will reach the news media, too. It is recommended that the commission not be shy about directing news media to the commission's website, social media, and microblogs. Many times, reporters themselves will find those mechanisms an easy-to-use and welcome alternative compared to the logistics of a press

conference or in-person interview. News media are still likely to relay only part of the information, but with increasing frequency the media will insert a link on their website or report a link to the commission's website. In many ways, this is the best outcome, because in such an instance the media becomes less of a gatekeeper and censor and more of a conveyor of the commission's information. Example 4 includes some ideas from one commission about using the commission's website.

Media interviews, including any of the commission's own self-produced audio and video materials, are best understood as performances on the part of the speakers. Lustberg (1982, 1988, 1989, 2008, and [www.lustberg.net](http://www.lustberg.net).) provides extensive guidance about such performances, in all kinds of interview situations and other in-person communications. As Lustberg (2008, pp. 25-26, 62) explains, performance does not imply acting, which means pretending to be something or someone the actor is not. The idea of interviews as a performing art simply emphasizes being the best self possible in a circumstance requiring difficult communications. Table 9 presents a brief summary of many of Lustberg's recommendations.

**Table 8: Summary of Selected Mongelluzzo Recommendations for News-Media Policies**

- Develop and communicate to all spokespersons and staff at large the commission's policies for communicating with the news media.
- Brainstorm and make lists of all of the issues that the news media might contact the commission about, and any issues the commission wants to discuss with the media.
- Make clear who will handle news-media referrals and what the back-up plan will be if the primary contact person is not available. Make clear what issues different people can and cannot talk about with the news media. Train the spokespersons.
- Develop baseline messages for the issues identified and talking points on recurring subjects. Gather in a file any success stories, quotations from authoritative sources, examples, and other materials that could be helpful in addressing the issues.
- When someone from the news media contacts the commission with a request, buy time to prepare. Even if it is only a few minutes or hours, some time to prepare is better than none. Always find out the deadline for the media source, and then be ready to negotiate time to deliver the requested information. Try hard to honor whatever agreement is reached. News-media staff will be much more likely to cooperate with the commission in the future if they experience the commission trying to cooperate with them.
- Develop messages and anticipate questions for each and every interview. After buying time to prepare, use that time to develop messages in writing and practice; have someone ask the questions and practice giving the answers.
- Have those messages handy during interviews. During TV interviews, though, practice making good eye contact.

Source: Adapted from Mongelluzzo, 2006, *12 Steps to Take Before a Media Interview*.

#### Example 4: Using the Commission’s Website

The Florida PSC posts summary explanations of its major decisions, under Hot Topics on its website, to help consumers (and reporters) better understand the details of decisions with high public interest (<http://www.floridapsc.com/about/recentdecisions.aspx>).

The Florida PSC news releases are frequently prepared in both print and audio versions. Audio news releases, provided since May 2011, can be edited easily into radio news items (see *PSC Offers Audio Access...*, <http://www.floridapsc.com/home/news/index.aspx?id=758>).

**Table 9: Excerpts from Lustberg Recommendations for Communications Performances**

- Be yourself. Smile when appropriate and genuine. Gesture when it’s comfortable and appropriate. Don’t frown or look dead. Don’t hide or tie up your hands.
- Be open, giving, warm, friendly, and loving. Speak in a quiet, conversational voice.
- Don’t make a speech, preach, teach, orate, or pontificate. Look and sound pleasant and interesting. Send positive, loving signals. Be likable.
- Pause. Don’t move your mouth until your mind is in high gear. Don’t run on at the mouth. Think silently. Don’t use sounds to think by. Get rid of all audible pauses.
- Stay calm and reasonable. Be ready for the worst possible scenario. Don’t shout. Don’t get angry or uptight. Don’t repeat a nasty question or any “lethal buzzwords,” or ask the questioner to repeat the question. Don’t be defensive.
- Be honest. Admit “I don’t know.” Admit “I don’t understand your question.” Concentrate on what you know. Don’t wing it. Don’t lie or make it up as you go along. Don’t try to give an answer if you don’t understand the question or if you don’t know the answer.
- Work at getting your ideas across. Have confidence in your preparation, your style, and your speaking skills. Organize your material. Practice aloud.
- Use simple language. Use short sentences. Be concise. Be clear. Edit yourself. Don’t worry about being too simple. Don’t complicate your text.
- Express yourself... in the most dynamic way you can. Be positive. Talk with pride.
- Practice the rhythm of eye contact. Be attentive to your audience’s signals. Don’t ignore the audience’s needs, expectations, or wants.

Source: Excerpts from Lustberg, 2008, “Chapter 16: The ‘Selling Yourself’ Handbook.”

#### D. Recovering from a difficult-communications event

The recovering stage begins when a crisis or emergency has started to abate, but while news media are still tracking it and stakeholders are still showing interest and attention. The recovering stage includes continued communications with stakeholders and internal efforts to review and evaluate the management effort (Coombs, 2010, p. 26). Table 10 summarizes the recommendations for actions during this stage.

The crisis itself is often considered resolved by this time, but efforts continue to manage its effects. Post-crisis communication should be seen as an “extension of crisis response communication coupled with learning from the crisis” (Coombs, 2010, p. 45).

One important activity during this time is for the commission to deliver any information it might have promised during the height of the event. This applies whenever the answer to a question was, “I don’t know; I’ll have to get back to you on that.” It is recommended that spokespersons (or other team members) be vigilant in noting every such promise and then following through (Coombs, 2010, p. 45).

Other recovering-stage activities involve feedback from communications partners and stakeholders and organizational self-reflection. The recommendation is that at least a handful of team members participate. Experts recommend that the team include participants from various departments, and that the review include information from a wide range of both internal and external stakeholders. Information from the commission’s monitoring systems can be included in this review, too.

Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 51) recommend conducting “postmortem” meetings on both crises and near misses. They highlight the importance of using such meetings to concentrate on improving monitoring and reporting and on crisis prevention, rather than for assigning blame. Coombs (2010, p. 46) relates,

[O]rganizations are reluctant to learn from crises. People get defensive and resist intensive investigations... . Reviewing what happened and why becomes a threat as people fear blame and punishment. ... Management must model and promote an open climate that focuses on lessons learned that is not blame oriented. Learning must be rewarded and evaluated.

**Table 10: Recommendations for Recovering from a Difficult-Communications Event**

<input type="checkbox"/> Follow through on any promises made during prior meetings and interviews.
<input type="checkbox"/> Assign a team to lead the process of reviewing and evaluating both outputs and outcomes of the event-management efforts. <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate feedback from the commission’s monitoring systems, internal participants and managers of the event, and external communications partners and stakeholders.
<input type="checkbox"/> Analyze available information about outputs and outcomes to consolidate lessons learned and glean insights to help the team best prevent, prepare for, and respond to any similar future events.
<input type="checkbox"/> Thank communications partners and stakeholders and give them appropriate feedback about their responses. <input type="checkbox"/> When warranted, praise partners and stakeholders publicly, and admonish them privately.
<input type="checkbox"/> Address the longer-term psychological impacts of major crises for both internal and external stakeholders.

As Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 2) report, the review should attempt to examine both outputs and outcomes. The outputs will be easy to identify. Outputs are the press releases, interviews, and other documents issued by the team. Outcomes are harder to gauge with any certainty. Hon and Grunig explain,

Outcomes measure whether target audience groups actually received the messages directed at them...paid attention to them...understood the messages...and retained those messages in any shape or form. They also measure whether the communications materials and messages that were disseminated have resulted in any opinion, attitude, and/or behavior changes on the part of those targeted publics to whom the messages were directed. (Ellipses in original)

Example 5 shows some of the results from a comprehensive review of two weather-related emergency situations that occurred in Kentucky in 2008 and 2009. Note in this example: (a) the emphasis on emergency-preparedness drills; (b) the need to develop and maintain current contact lists; (c) efforts to identify and test communications systems prior to an emergency situation; and (d) the coordination and defining of roles among multiple organizations.

Measuring and evaluating outcomes is often difficult, complicated, and expensive compared to measuring and evaluating outputs, but at least some effort is warranted. The goals should be to learn as much as is practical about the value of the various event-management efforts, consolidate lessons learned, and glean insights that will help the team prevent, prepare for, and respond to any similar future events.

Remember to thank the communications partners who helped manage the situation and the stakeholders who responded positively to the commission's communications. If possible, acknowledge and thank these participants publicly. If the review identifies any failures or shortcomings in responses and opportunities for improvement in future events, think about providing corrective information privately.

As a last step in the recovering stage, consider addressing the longer-term psychological impacts that often result from a major crisis event. Mitroff (2005, p. 16) highlights the tendency for there to be "deep and prolonged psychological impacts of all major crises." Such effects sometimes involve deeply held emotions such as alarm, anger, depression, despair, fear, grief, remorse, shame, shock, and sorrow. Both internal and external stakeholders can be affected. These impacts are often best addressed by an organization's top management, such as the chairman of a commission. People sometimes need to hear some reassuring words to help in the process of recovery and start to return to a normal, post-crisis mode. It is recommended that the commission's event-management team at least consider whether this type of communication is called for. If it is, the team can help determine the appropriate content.

Coombs (2010, p. 24) compares the present status of difficult-communications research and practice to the ideals of "evidence-based medicine" and recommends "mov[ing] toward an evidence-based focus." He expresses concern that "we may have reached a plateau with current case studies." Commissions, however, are particularly well-positioned to advance the practice of difficult communications, because they experience so many similar situations. For example,

weather-related events and utility-equipment accidents or failures often result in potential emergency situations, and at least some interest groups are likely to be dissatisfied or feel aggrieved because of commission decisions. Commissions can readily share information with one another about their experiences with difficult communications and what has worked best in the past, and build on that information to develop and share best practices. Thus, a final step in the aftermath of any significant difficult-communications event could be to consider developing case-study information to share with other commissions.

### **Example 5: Follow-up Efforts to Consolidate Lessons from a Significant Event**

After serious weather emergencies in 2008 and 2009, the Kentucky commission sought closer coordination with utilities. Here are just a few of the more than 60 findings and recommendations that resulted from this commission's efforts to learn from the 2008 and 2009 events, and apply those lessons to improving planning and communications for future events.

A number of utilities indicated that prior participation in local, regional, or state emergency-preparedness drills was valuable to them as they responded to the 2008 wind storm and 2009 ice storm. The ability to immediately identify key emergency management personnel with whom utilities must coordinate in weather emergencies and other disasters can and does help utilities obtain needed assistance... . The Commission strongly recommends that all jurisdictional utilities avail themselves of opportunities to participate in emergency planning exercises. The Commission also encourages organizers of such exercises to solicit utility participation....

Utilities should exchange and update emergency contact information [with local emergency management personnel] on at least an annual basis in order to maintain adequate lines of communication....

Advance warning of severe weather is essential to emergency preparedness. It would be beneficial for all jurisdictional utilities to familiarize themselves with the weather data the [National Weather Service] provides in advance of and during major weather events... .

Many customers had trouble contacting electric utility customer service centers following the two storms.... Electric utilities should take the necessary steps to improve customer access to customer service functions.... Utilities should provide for backup power in order to maintain call center operations in the event that the utility offices lose power....

The PSC is not positioned to function as an information clearinghouse for local officials. ... Utilities bear the primary responsibility for communicating effectively and working with state and local officials until the restoration operations are completed....

Source: Kentucky PSC. (19 Nov 2009). *Ike and Ice: The Kentucky PSC Report on the September 2008 Wind Storm and the January 2009 Ice Storm*. <http://psc.ky.gov/IkeIce/Report.pdf>.

### III. Recommendations for Commissions for the Five Major Types of Difficult Communications

Part 3 of this paper turns attention to each of the five major types of difficult communications identified in Table 1 and the stages identified in Table 2, to identify specific guidance relevant to each particular type of difficult communications.

#### A. Recommendations for emergencies and crises

As Olinic and Toia (2011, pp. 8-9) report, a crisis can sometimes become a “window of opportunity” for an organization. In the best of circumstances, a crisis situation can help focus attention on problems that have otherwise been ignored, and lead to developing and applying new prevention strategies. The following recommendations, summarized in Table 11, are intended to support such positive outcomes.

**Table 11: Specific Recommendations for Emergency and Crisis Difficult Communications**

<p><b><i>Responding to:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Tailor messages based on the stage of crisis and assessment of audience perceptions of blame and responsibility.</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Recovering from:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Consider continuing reputation-repairing messages, depending on the extent to which the commission’s reputation might have been damaged.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Use image-restoration and renewal messages to rebuild stakeholder confidence over time.</li></ul>

No additional specific recommendations exist for the preventing or preparing stages of emergency and crisis communications. That basic guidance is summarized in Parts 2.A and 2.B, and Tables 3 and 4.

Those responding to an emergency or crisis can benefit from a more detailed understanding of the different stages of a crisis situation, however. Actions can be tailored based on the unfolding stages and characteristics of the particular crisis, and based on analysis of the crisis using situational crisis communications theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2010, pp. 38-42). The upshot of understanding these different stages and characteristics is to help the crisis-event managers plan to deliver the right kinds of messages at the appropriate times, varying the mix among instructing, adjusting, and reputation-repairing messages.

Jordan-Meier (2011, pp. 49-51) describes four different stages to an ongoing crisis, reflecting differences in stakeholder and news-media attention and focus. She terms those four stages (1) fact finding; (2) unfolding drama; (3) blame; and (4) fallout/resolution. The recommended approach is to lead with instructing information and then blend adjusting and reputation-repairing messages as the stages progress.



SCCT involves focusing on the audience for communications in order to best understand how that audience is: (a) perceiving the crisis, (b) reacting to the crisis-response strategies, and (c) reacting to the organization in crisis. SCCT uses that information about the audience's viewpoint to help the crisis-event managers decide how to design and target the most appropriate messages, especially focusing on how much adjusting and reputation-repairing communications might be necessary. SCCT proposes gauging audience reactions in part on "the frame that stakeholders are using to categorize" the crisis. The theory differentiates three basic frames: the organization in crisis can be understood to be either a victim of the crisis, associated by way of an accident, or associated by intention. As a victim, the organization is perceived as having little, if any, responsibility for the crisis occurring. If the crisis is thought to result from an accident, the organization is perceived as having minor responsibility. If associated by intention, the organization is perceived as having major responsibility. SCCT adds to this basis analytic framework "two intensifying factors... (1) crisis history and (2) prior reputation." Generally, when past crises exist or when an organization has a negative prior reputation, audiences will tend to attribute greater crisis responsibility (Coombs, p. 39).

In the early stages, "SCCT argues that every crisis response should begin with instructing and adjusting information." "Instructing information," Coombs explains, "tells stakeholders how to protect themselves from a crisis." Adjusting information means expressing concern and sympathy or empathy for those negatively affected, providing basic information about the occurrence, and explaining any corrective actions that are being taken to help avoid a repeat of the crisis (Coombs, 2010, p. 40). Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, pp. 120-121) recommend:

Always respond first and primarily to the *emotional* needs of others (customers, clients, suppliers, employees). Later, and only later, respond rationally by giving reasons for your actions or supporting evidence.... Respond to the emotional needs of others as *they* perceive them, *not* as *you* perceive them. (Emphasis in original)

The import of the SCCT analysis of audience perceptions is to gauge how much and what types of reputation repairing to apply. The gist of the recommendation is that the more blame and responsibility are assigned to the organization in crisis, the more consideration should be given to including in messages some combinations of accommodations and apologies.

Recovering from an emergency or crisis event can again place more emphasis on reputation repairing. Depending on the extent of the crisis, reputation repairing can continue even after the event has fully abated. This is especially true for messages based on image-restoration and renewal themes.

As Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 95) explain, the organization and individuals involved in a crisis should consciously decide whether and when to come forward to admit blame or reveal culpability. They report, "[N]o one can guarantee that coming 'absolutely clean' will stop a crisis dead in its tracks." When warranted, however, the best advice to encourage public forgiveness is to forthrightly admit any guilt and accept responsibility while promising sincerely to correct culpable behaviors in the future, and then "follow through on those promises."

## **B. Risk assessments**

When ideas about risk trigger a difficult-communications situation, it is almost invariably because different people hold divergent views about facts, means, and ends. The facts as one group sees them can be very different, even diametrically opposed, to what another group sees. In many circumstances, asymmetry can exist between benefits and costs: Benefits may accrue to one group while costs are visited on another. A commissioner or staff member can easily be involved in such a circumstance when difficult communications accompany newly discovered facts about existing policy or technology, changes in policy or technology, or both.

The importance and role of risk communication is confounding. Sometimes, the public is not particularly alarmed or is even apathetic about a risk that is serious. In that case, the role of communication is to try to alert people, raise the level of concern, and get people to act. A relevant example is trying to convince people to seek shelter when there is a severe weather threat in the area. Other times, the public can be overly agitated about a minor risk, and the goal of communication is to try to calm and reassure people. Sandman (1993, p. 2) explains:

Most people, most of the time, are apathetic about most risks, and it is very hard to get them upset. But as many [practitioners] in industry and government know from personal experience, once people are upset it also is hard to get them apathetic again, to force the genie back into the bottle.

With either of the two types of risk communications—trying to alarm people or reassure them—a first instinct is usually to try to resolve differences of opinion by finding and communicating what “experts” believe to be the facts, the truth, and the sound science supporting that point of view. That approach is based on the idea that members of the interested public have some knowledge “deficit” that can be “cured” by providing certain information (Cotton and Devine-Wright, 2012; Devine-Wright, 2009). This approach typically presumes a distinction between expert and public knowledge of an issue and concludes that the public holds “scientifically erroneous perceptions” (Upreti and van der Horst, 2004, p. 62).

Technical translation and education can sometimes prove helpful, and technical information “is often a vital concern” in a variety of crises (Coombs, 2010, p. 34). However, the dynamics of risk communications are usually more complex, and strongly held public opinions will work at cross-purposes with this approach. Mitroff and Silvers (2010, p. 21) point out, “If someone is deeply committed to an assumption or a belief, then all of the evidence and arguments to the contrary are often of little use in causing the person to abandon them.” In fact, there is even some evidence that attempts to educate can be counterproductive in such circumstances, causing committed nonbelievers to further harden their opposition.

As Sandman (1993, pp. 6-12) explains, the public perception of risk is fundamentally different from the traditional actuarial definition of risk. The actuarial definition, used by risk assessors and other “experts” in risk assessment, is “a multiplication of two factors: magnitude (how bad it is when it happens) times probability (how likely it is to happen).” Sandman terms that product “hazard” but then adds a second term he calls “outrage.” He uses the term “outrage...because it suggests strong emotion but also suggests that the emotion is justified.”

He further notes that the term “outrage” is ambiguous, applying to “both the circumstances that provide the public’s response and the response itself.” Thus, his assessment is that the public perception of risk is a function of hazard and outrage. Sandman’s diagnosis of the major communications difficulty about risk (1993, p. 8) is this:

The public often misperceives the hazard. The experts often misperceive the outrage. But the overarching problem is that the public cares too little about the hazard, and the experts care too little about the outrage. Both are preoccupied with legitimate but incomplete definitions of risk.

Sandman observes (1993, p. 9) that “agencies and companies...often do a terrible job of managing outrage.” He recommends listening better to the public concerns that result in heightened outrage and taking action to reduce it. Sandman (1993, Chapter 2) identifies many factors that help determine the extent of public outrage, and recommends strategies for managing them. Though the details of Sandman’s analyses, explanations, and recommendations are beyond the scope of this introductory paper, his work does provide cogent examples of the major issues that can result in heightened public outrage and useful ideas about how outrage might best be understood, acknowledged, and, where possible, reduced.<sup>5</sup>

Basic recommendations for difficult communications about risk are provided in Table 12.

Journalism researchers have long expressed concerns that news reporting, particularly reporting on science, plays an ongoing role in fueling disagreements about risk. In an effort to provide so-called “balanced” reporting, news reporters frequently find and quote equal numbers of “pro,” “con,” and “other” perspectives in equal numbers, irrespective of any preponderance of scientific thought. Exposure to such reporting can often leave the public less than fully informed and possibly confused about the current state of the art in understanding risks (Burkholder, 2000). Presently, researchers believe such bias is worsening due to the public’s increasing self-selection for exposure to self-reinforcing points of view, by way of social media and the Internet. People are increasingly exposing themselves to networks of likeminded individuals, leading to further polarization (Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy, 2012; Kent, 2008, p. 36). This is what Sunstein (2009, pp. 50-51) calls “biased assimilation.” As Sunstein (2009, p. 81) explains:

With the Internet, it is exceedingly easy for each of us to find like-minded types. Views that would ordinarily dissolve, simply because of an absence of social support, can be found in large numbers on the Internet, even if they are understood to be exotic, indefensible, or bizarre in most communities.

There are even groups that Sunstein (2009, pp. 32-33) calls “polarization entrepreneurs,” who deliberately work to intensify objections and foment protest.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.psandman.com/index-OM.htm>.

**Table 12: Specific Recommendations for Risk-Assessment Difficult Communications**

<p><b><i>Preventing:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Design, test, and deliver educating communications.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review procedures and, where possible, design or redesign them to apply collaborative, interdisciplinary planning processes, open to all stakeholders.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Prepare and deliver clear explanations of procedures, so that interested parties can know when, where, and how their views will be heard and considered.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If decision makers other than the commission will be involved, prepare or obtain and deliver explanations of their procedures, too.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Preparing for:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Anticipate the situations and have spokespersons practice the role of active, compassionate listeners, ready to help defuse confrontations.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Responding to:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Apply Lustberg’s recommended techniques during public meeting and interview performances.</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Recovering from:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review the experience with an eye toward improving performance in future events.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Repeat the efforts for preventing and preparing for future events, considering whether any changes are needed to improve the outcomes.</li> </ul>

The typical result is for public opinions to be “hardened into skepticism and even hostility” (Upreti and van der Horst, 2004, p. 62). In such circumstances, Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 87) go so far as to emphasize: “One should never—repeat never!—give technical explanations or impersonal statistics to assuage the fears of consumers.”

Depending on the circumstances, commissions and staff are likely to play one of two roles in risk-assessment communications: (1) educating (or ensuring that education takes place); or (2) simply listening empathetically, really hearing peoples’ concerns. Educating has most relevance in the preventing and preparing stages. Educating is reviewed in this paper in the New News category, where the primary emphasis is translating technical information for a lay audience and teaching. It is the second role, empathetic listening, that is the more important focus of risk-assessment crises. Though it is possible to blend these two roles successfully, doing it well requires something like a tightrope walk; it must be done with care and finesse, and even then it will not succeed with everyone.

### **1. Preventing difficult communications about risk**

Educating communications can be helpful in preventing difficult communications about risk, but, again, that approach is reviewed in this paper under the category of new-news communications. A second approach is providing transparency about how decisions will be made, by whom, and based on what kinds of evidence or proofs. People fundamentally want their views to be heard and considered. Clearly explaining when, where, and how that will

happen can go a long way toward calming the heightened sense of outrage that often leads to difficult communications.

Where possible, it is recommended to review procedures and redesign them if necessary to apply collaborative, interdisciplinary planning processes that are open to all stakeholders. Experts suggest that effort will reduce eventual conflicts. For example, Agterbosch, Meertens, and Vermuelen (2009, p. 404) report that many stakeholders welcome “frequent and informal contact with the competent authorities.” Agterbosch, Meertens, and Vermuelen (2009, p. 404) further identify some ability for “negative institutional conditions and problems due to the complex legal framework [to be] neutralized by processes of open deliberation, . . . short communication lines, and collaborative arrangements. . . .” Mazur (2007, p. 3) recommends “going the ‘extra mile’ in planning and design to ensure that stakeholder/public concerns [are] addressed.” He says (2007, pp. 6, 11-13) that procedural managers should strive to identify and prioritize stakeholders, structure public involvement, and identify and prioritize commitments to that process.

Similar to the circumstances surrounding the Not My News category, a commission will sometimes have a limited role, if any, in choices about risk. If that is the case, the commission can at least explain where, when, and by whom those choices will be made, and help interested parties learn how to present their views to those decisionmakers. In other cases, commission procedures will be constrained by fixed administrative hearing and due-process rules and concerns. Even then, the commission can often reduce communications friction and public outrage by clearly explaining the procedural issues and then helping dissenting groups to understand how best to present their requests for changes. The following example, from the Kentucky commission, demonstrates how clearly explaining existing procedures and constraints can significantly reduce public anger.

## **2. Preparing for difficult communications about risk**

Preparing for difficult communications about risk frequently boils down to anticipating the situations and practicing the role of active, compassionate listener, ready to help “defuse confrontations” (Lustberg, 2008, pp. 117-118). Spokespersons are advised to practice the basic messages about the situation at hand. One can never prepare for every confrontation contingency, but practicing will help. Lustberg (2008, pp. 119-127) provides detailed, specific guidance about how best to answer “hostile or loaded questions,” not repeating any “lethal buzzwords,” and giving “honest, positive, and caring” responses in “simple, brief, clear, and easy-to-understand language” while avoiding “words meant to impress that don’t.” Repeated practice is the best means by which to ensure that when a spokesperson is in the heat of a difficult communications situation, he or she can readily activate these techniques.

## **3. Responding to difficult communications about risk**

Once a difficult-communications event appears, however, it is time to focus on responding with empathy. This is where Lustberg (2008, p. 118) provides cogent guidance. In the heat of the difficult communications situation, those who feel aggrieved by what they perceive as an existing or pending risk are in no mood to listen to any lecture about why anyone

else thinks their point of view is incorrect. A spokesperson confronted by this situation should not try to change that person's mind. Recognize that people whose opinions are already hardened are extremely unlikely to change their point of view based on whatever you could say.

### **Example 6: Reducing Public Outrage by Clearly Explaining Procedural Issues**

The Kentucky PSC has prepared a YouTube video, a narrated slide show that explains the “process the Kentucky Public Service Commission (PSC) follows in the review and approval of coal-related environmental compliance costs incurred by electric utilities.” That video has been viewed more than 660 times (<http://www.youtube.com/user/KYPSC>).

When the pass-through of environmental costs has been an issue in recent cases, the Kentucky PSC has held public comment meetings in affected communities. (See, for example, [http://psc.ky.gov/agencies/psc/press/032012/0330\\_r01.PDF](http://psc.ky.gov/agencies/psc/press/032012/0330_r01.PDF).) Those meetings are bifurcated proceedings. In the first hour, commission staff presents information about the fundamental underpinnings of the case, including reviewing the statutory boundaries and how existing legislation limits what the commission can and cannot do in response to a utility's application for the recovery environmental-compliance costs. Following the staff's explanation of the proceedings, the commissioners join the hearing and receive the public comments.

The Kentucky PSC used that two-stage meeting process last year, for the first time. Previous meetings for these kinds of cases were often contentious, with sometimes emotional, hostile audiences. Some members of the public directed blatantly angry comments towards the commission and utilities. Following the extensive explanation of the statutory limits on the commission's action, however, public anger has been largely diffused and the tone of comments has been noticeably different.

Lustberg's guidance (2008, pp. 119-136) is to simply remain calm and collected, listen intently, and really hear the concerns being expressed. Then, let the person know, as much as you can truthfully say, that their concerns have been heard and are being noted, and tell them how their concerns will be addressed. For example, you might say,

The purpose for today's meeting is to hear the views of all interested parties. It is not to have a debate or argue with one another. The court reporter is keeping a record of everything said here, and the commission will review that record carefully prior to making any decision. Therefore, I simply want to ask you to let us know what your concerns are, and why.

If a spokesperson does decide to provide any countervailing information in that setting, they should recognize that they will not change the aggrieved person's mind. They will be talking to the aggrieved person, and will do their best to maintain friendly, non-threatening eye contact, but they are really addressing the other people in the venue whose minds are not already made up on the subject. Follow Lustberg's guidance to remain calm and be the voice of reason.

#### **4. Recovering from difficult communications about risk**

The best recommendation following a difficult-communications event of this type is to review the experience, with an eye toward improving the performance in future events. The commission spokesperson can do this alone, but other staff and trusted communications partners and stakeholders can also be helpful in assessing the performance and making recommendations for future events.

Then, circle back in a feedback loop through the stages of preventing and preparing for difficult communications about risk. Consider whether disseminating educating information will help reduce future confrontations. Is there some way that educating messages can be made more compelling? If yes, consider follow-up to prepare, test, and deliver those messages. Review the procedures again, with an eye to the possibility of reducing future conflict through procedural changes or by better explaining the existing procedures. Consider whether any changes are needed in spokesperson responses to this or similar future situations, and repeat the opportunities to practice.

##### **C. “Bad” news**

This paper classifies bad-news situations as one of two types. In both types, the expectation is that some stakeholders will perceive the news as negative. The first is when the bad news results from a commission or regulated-utility action. Examples might include rate increases, facility closures, and worker layoffs (often at a regulated utility company, but this could also happen at the commission itself). The second type is when there is alleged or known bad behavior on the part of a commission or its staff. That could be any kind of mistake or accident, but it could also be because of some purposeful misconduct on the part of anyone closely associated with a commission or regulated utility.

Bad-news situations can often be anticipated by studying the history of commissions and other organizations. Examples of the first type are more likely to be specific to public utility commissions and the industries they regulate, but examples can also be gleaned from other kinds of government commissions and regulatory agencies. The second type can represent practically any kind of human failing. One good source of ideas about these types of bad-news events is reports about professional sports and celebrities, where we eventually expect to see practically any kind of bad news that can afflict an organization.

It is a fact of life that sometimes bad things happen, and bad things happen to good people. Preventing all of the kinds of situations that can result in bad news is impossible, but that should not stop commissions from exploring what can be done to prevent at least some bad-news situations. The best means involve looking to the future and anticipating the events that are likely to lead to bad news. The commission’s monitoring and reporting systems should help provide early warnings when bad-news problems are coming to the fore.

Continuing training can also go a long way toward preventing bad-news situations. For example, new employees should receive training and more seasoned employees should receive

reminders, and refresher training as necessary, regarding the commission’s expectations about preventive behaviors, such as ethics, maintaining health and wellness, and safety.

In the case of difficult communications about bad news, there is little specific to add to the basic recommendations for preparing for and responding to events. Table 13 presents recommendations for managing bad-news communications through the preventing and recovering stages.

**Table 13: Specific Recommendations for Bad-News Difficult Communications**

<p><b><i>Preventing:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Use the monitoring and reporting systems to help provide early warnings.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Train new employees and remind more seasoned employees of preventive behaviors.</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Recovering from:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Have bad news, if any, come from the commission itself, or its staff.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Accept blame or responsibility, if applicable.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Emphasize renewal communications, talking positively about what is being done now and will be done in the future to prevent a repeat of the circumstances that caused the current problems.</li></ul>

Recovering communications can utilize specific techniques for bad-news events. For one, research demonstrates that it is best for bad news to come from the organization itself (Coombs, 2010, p. 28). Additionally, with bad news, renewal communications can be most appropriate. The emphasis in renewal communications will be on the future and on recovery from the perceived crisis. The overriding message would be to acknowledge the bad news, accept whatever blame or responsibility there is for the current situation, and then talk positively about what is being done now and will be done in the future to prevent a repeat of the circumstances that caused the current problems.

A general rule of thumb in bad-news circumstances is to tailor responses, as much as possible, with the goal of protecting and enhancing the commission’s brand. A focus on the commission’s brand is relevant to any difficult-communications situation, but it is perhaps most important during bad-news situations. It is generally preferable for a commission staff person or utility spokesperson to shelter the commissioners themselves from being seen by the media (and therefore by the public), as being the bearers of the bad news. When possible, the commissioners should be the bearers of good news. For example, in an extended outage situation a commission or utility spokesperson can deliver the generally more negative messages about the numbers of consumers that are out of service and the delays in restoration. A commissioner can then be the person to express empathy and provide the most positive messages about where and how consumers can take advantage of the available shelters and assistance programs.



The following example is one type of recovering message. It demonstrates how information that could be received as bad news can be explained in a more positive light. Notice the emphasis on the customer refund and the limits on customer costs through 2017.

### **Example 7: Recovering Message for a Potential Bad-News Situation**

TALLAHASSEE, Fla., Feb. 22 – The Florida Public Service Commission issued the following news release:

To help maintain more consistent rates for Progress Energy Florida (PEF) customers in the coming years, Florida's Public Service Commission (PSC) today approved PEF's multi-year Settlement Agreement (Agreement) with the Office of Public Counsel and other intervenors.

The Agreement provides a customer refund of a portion of Crystal River 3 Nuclear Plant (CR3) replacement fuel costs and rate certainty related to PEF's proposed Levy County nuclear project and base rates.

"This Agreement offers customers continuous, reliable electric service and rate continuity during a still tough economy," said PSC Chairman Ronald A. Brise. "PEF and the other parties to the Agreement also addressed the utility's nuclear projects and strategies to keep rates down."

The PSC-approved agreement:

- Provides a \$288 million customer refund of replacement power costs associated with the CR3 outage;
- Removes CR3 from base rates while PEF decides on options for the plant;
- Limits customer costs through 2017 for the proposed Levy County nuclear project; and
- Provides for a base rate increase of \$150 million in January 2013.

The Agreement is effective with the January 2013 billing cycle. When all Agreement provisions are calculated, a PEF residential customer using 1,000 kilowatt hours a month will see a \$4.93 bill increase, from \$123.19 to \$128.12. The total 2013 customer bill might fluctuate somewhat when additional billing components, such as annual fuel, energy efficiency, and environmental costs, are reviewed by the PSC in November. ...

PEF, the state's second largest utility, serves more than 1.6 million homes and businesses in Florida.

For additional information, visit [www.floridapsc.com](http://www.floridapsc.com). Follow the PSC on Twitter, @floridapsc.

Source: Florida PSC. (23 Feb. 2012). "PSC Holds Down Customer Costs; Approves PEF Rate Settlement Agreement." *Targeted News Service. Infotrac Newsstand.*

#### D. “New” news

New-news situations sometimes result in difficult communications because any change can be disturbing to some people, and because of the way in which changes are framed. A commission can find itself in the role of having to frame or reframe a change, to prevent fears associated with the change from escalating into a risk communications situation. Thus, the focus for new-news situations will be on education and framing. Table 14 includes recommendations for new-news communications.

**Table 14: Specific Recommendations for New-News Difficult Communications**

<p><b><i>Preventing:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Clearly understand expected changes and how they are likely to be perceived by the relevant communications partners, stakeholders, and target audiences.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Keep communications channels open and use monitoring systems to identify potential difficulties.</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Preparing for:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Learn about the coming changes in detail, and consider how to frame them to achieve widespread acceptance.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> For major changes, use market analysis and research techniques like focus groups to develop a plan for new-news communications.</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Responding to:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Recognize the roles for regulated utilities and other groups, in addition to the commission.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Coordinate messages with all participating organizations.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that regulated companies employ best practices in managing new-news communications.</li></ul>

In the preventing stage, the recommended goal is to clearly understand expected changes and how they are likely to be perceived by the relevant communications partners, stakeholders, and target audiences. Open communications with constituent groups and continuous monitoring will help identify potential difficulties.

Preparing for new-news events means learning about the coming changes in detail, and considering how to frame them to achieve widespread acceptance. For major changes, market analysis using research techniques such as focus groups can be necessary for developing a meaningful new-news communications plan.

For responding during new-news situations, it is recommended that the commission recognize the appropriate roles to be filled by regulated utilities and other groups, in addition to the commission itself. It is seldom necessary for the commission to shoulder the burden itself; rather, the commission will be one actor among others. In such cases, all participating organizations can be asked to work together to coordinate messages. The commission’s main

role can be simply to ensure that the regulated companies employ best practices in managing the new-news communications.

Recovering from new-news situations simply means following the recommendations for reviewing and learning from the event-management efforts.

In the following example from the Idaho PUC, notice how the press release gives a clear explanation of decoupling, which is a subject that can be difficult for lay readers to understand. This press release also explains, for those readers who want to learn more, how to find the full docket on the Idaho PUC website.

#### **E. “Not my” news**

The difficulty with not-my-news issues is in providing answers that convincingly correct misquotes and false reports, or educate and explain about jurisdictional responsibilities, without sounding overly defensive or being viewed as dodging responsibility or passing the buck. Recommendations for not-my-news situations are presented in Table 15.

Preventing misquotes is best accomplished by establishing ongoing relationships with news media partners and providing messages in pre-edited form. Misquotes are much less likely when the news media edits from prepared messages. In addition, prepared messages create a definite record that can be used, if necessary, to demonstrate when misquoting has occurred. Establishing ongoing relationships with news media partners and providing regular communications will also go a long way toward helping to educate reporters, thereby making misquotes less likely. Misunderstandings can best be prevented by preparing educational messages that clearly describe the commission’s jurisdiction and responsibilities.

Monitoring systems can help alert the commission quickly if false reports, rumors, or urban myths start to circulate. When a problem is identified, correcting messages can be disseminated quickly through all of the commission’s communications systems.

Once a difficult not-my-news situation arises, responding is straightforward. Misquotes and false reports can be corrected quickly and calmly. There is always some concern that a news-media correction will not receive as much play as the original mistake; corrections are not always delivered to everyone who witnessed the initial mistake. One of the benefits of access to new media is that the commission can take advantage of the opportunity to present corrections through its own media channels and make those corrections available and less disposable compared to traditional news media.

When there is confusion about jurisdictional responsibilities, it is recommended that the commission consider issuing a correcting message and helping to explain both where the responsibilities do reside and the procedures available to interested parties for bringing their concerns to the responsible agency.

There are no particular recommendations for recovering communications specific to not-my-news situations.

## Example 8: Explaining New News

### **IDAHO PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION**

Case No. IPC-E-11-19, Order No. 32505

April 2, 2012

Contact: Gene Fadness (208) 334-0339, 890-2712

### **Decoupling mechanism made permanent, but adjustments coming**

An Idaho Power Company pilot program that allows the utility to recover its fixed costs of providing power no matter how much revenue is lost as a result of energy conservation is being made permanent.

The Idaho Public Utilities Commission is allowing the Fixed Cost Adjustment mechanism (FCA), formerly a pilot program, to continue as a yearly adjustment to the rates of Idaho Power's residential and small-business customers. The FCA has lowered rates once and increased them three times since 2007, though adjustments have been fairly minor. However, the commission is asking Idaho Power to file a proposal within six months to address how reductions in consumption that aren't directly related to energy conservation should be treated.

Regulated utilities have a built-in disincentive to invest in energy efficiency and conservation programs because they lose revenue when electric consumption declines. To remove that disincentive, the Fixed Cost Adjustment, which can be no higher than 3 percent, is designed to ensure the company recovers its fixed costs of serving customers regardless of the amount of energy conservation. Often referred to as "decoupling," the FCA decouples the link between energy efficiency and energy sales.

If the actual fixed costs recovered from customers by Idaho Power are less than the fixed costs authorized in the most recent rate case, residential and small-commercial customers get a surcharge. If the company collects more in fixed costs than authorized by the commission, customers get a credit. ...

All parties participating in the case endorsed making the program permanent, but commission staff proposed that the FCA balancing account be equally shared between customers and company. ...

Since implementation of the FCA, energy savings have increased from 62,544 megawatt-hours in 2007 to 163,315 MWhs in 2011. The amount of energy saved during 2011 was enough to power more than 12,900 average homes. ....

A full text of the commission's order, along with other documents related to this case, is available on the commission's Website at [www.puc.idaho.gov](http://www.puc.idaho.gov). Click on "File Room" and then on "Electric Cases" and scroll down to Case No. IPC-E-11-19.

**Table 15: Specific Recommendations for Not-My-News Difficult Communications**

<p><b><i>Preventing:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Prepare educational messages that clearly describe the commission’s jurisdiction and responsibilities.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Establish ongoing relationships with news-media partners.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide regular communications to help educate reporters on the commission’s roles and responsibilities.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Provide messages in pre-edited form.</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Preparing for:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Use monitoring systems to help alert the commission quickly if miscommunications do occur.</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Responding to:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Correct misquotes and false reports quickly and calmly.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> In addition to seeking corrections through traditional news media, present corrections through the commission’s new media channels.</li></ul></li><li><input type="checkbox"/> For confusion about jurisdictional responsibilities, consider issuing a correcting message and helping to explain both where the responsibilities do reside and what procedures are available to interested parties for bringing their concerns to the responsible agency.</li></ul>

#### **IV. Conclusion: Developing and Mastering the Recommended Communications Techniques**

This paper began by recognizing the many kinds of difficult communications situations that commissions can face. Difficult situations regularly affect commissions, because commissions grapple with some of society's most difficult problems, which researchers term "ill-structured" or "wicked" problems, or "messes." In dealing with difficult situations, a commissioner or staff member is often called upon to play an important role, for example, as arbitrator, coalition builder, conciliator, defender, disputant, educator, mediator, opinion leader, or persuader. All too frequently, difficult events happen suddenly, with little if any warning, and commissioners or staff can be caught off guard if they have not been engaged in a systematic effort to anticipate, plan, prepare for, and even practice the roles to be filled in such situations.

The recommendations included here will help commissioners and staff better prepare for and reduce—or possibly even avoid entirely—at least some of the situations that result in the need for difficult communications. But no matter how well-prepared a commission and its staff are, at least some difficult communications situations are almost certain to arise. Readers are to be discouraged from expecting any shortcuts; each communicator will need at least some study and practice, and then will learn from experience. When difficult situations do happen, prior exposure to the ideas offered in this paper will help arm commissioners and staff with the basic tools and techniques for approaching difficult communications, leading to increased competence and therefore confidence.

The essence of the guidance in this report is the recommendation that commissions systematically develop and exercise their agencies' difficult communications capabilities before crisis or emergency situations arise. Experience in a wide variety of organizations demonstrates that the benefits from pre-planning, organizing, and practicing are likely to exceed the costs of not being thoroughly prepared. The recommended efforts include assembling the team that will work on this process; identifying the different kinds of problem situations that the commission might face; developing scenarios for each major type of crisis or emergency that might arise; and preparing preliminary plans for addressing each scenario. It is further recommended that commissions repeat these steps from time to time, to reflect changes in the regulatory environment and to keep staff up to date on any threatening situations.

Spokesperson selection and training is also emphasized. The recommended goal is that commissions identify ahead of time a cadre of spokespersons associated with each major difficult-communications scenario. Then, the recommendation is to help the spokespersons to become comfortable, by helping to make sure they understand the commission's preferences, goals, and organizational culture, and by providing basic training and opportunities to practice their spokesperson role.

Another prominent theme in this paper centers on using new media, including the commission's website and social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Recommendations include establishing commission policies and a commission presence and then using the new media to communicate positive information, prior to any difficult-communications situation. This is a rapidly changing area, though, in which there is much to learn, and continuing attention

is recommended as necessary to make adjustments over time that will best take advantage of the capabilities of each communications platform.

Finally, this report encourages commissions to develop and maintain cultures of evidence-based practice and continuous learning about difficult communications. Commissions all over the country grapple with similar difficult communications issues. Sharing experiences and lessons learned among commissions will help accelerate progress for all, and thereby help reduce or even avoid the kinds of situations that lead to difficult communications in the first place.

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