

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

RISK COMMUNICATION IN A PANDEMIC

Glyn Jones, a partner at EHS Partnerships, explains why it is essential for safety professionals to perfect their risk communication skills in the midst of a pandemic.



It should be pretty clear to everyone by now that the COVID-19 pandemic is not going away any time soon. In spite of the effort and the great success in flattening the curve, it seems that, in as little as a few weeks, the infection can spread and the curve can turn up again. The risks are real, the data can be confusing and the science is often conflicted. It is now generally agreed that until a vaccine is developed and broadly made available, we will continue to have flare-ups. COVID-19 is likely to be with us for some time to come.

With this in mind, safety professionals and practitioners had better brush up on their risk communication skills. Talking about the COVID-19 risks and the necessary controls is a challenge. Part of the problem is that the 'round-the-clock media-based society we live in spreads risk information like wildfire. The information is not always complete and sometimes its presentation is clearly out of context. This often results in overwhelming fear

and it is a major cause of what has become known as cognitive noise. This cognitive noise can be deafening, and it can certainly get in the way of our best efforts to clearly communicate our plan to manage the real risks.

The other part of the problem is the true science of COVID-19 is still emerging and the experts appear to be misaligned on some of the best practices and, even worse, they seem to sometimes change their minds about best practice. Case in point is the use of face masks. At first, they said they were unnecessary and that they might make cross-contamination worse. Now, they say everyone should wear them. What is the average person to make of this change?

There are two typical responses to risks such as COVID-19 that are hard to exactly understand. People either think the risks are overstated and want to ignore the issue or people respond with fear. This dichotomy of denial and fear needs to be recognized and it makes for additional risk communication challenges.



Glyn Jones
EHS
Partnerships

When dealing with the people that think the risks are overstated, action is needed and immediate communication is required to educate and explain the procedures that need to be followed. It must also be explained that these are being followed out of an abundance of caution. For the others who are fearful, the risk communication process needs to speak to both the real hazards and the hazards perceived by the stakeholder group. A person's perception is their reality, and this may be influenced by a number of individual factors such as their education, upbringing and life experiences. This is a worst-case scenario and requires all hands on deck with respect to mobilizing the risk mitigation team. When the risks are high — as in the case of COVID-19 — and fear is also high, communication needs to be constant and consistent.

Words may not be enough when you are communicating complex health risks such as COVID-19 to a concerned audience. Often, trust is an issue. In times of high concern and low trust, your body language is intensely noticed and negatively interpreted. Before you go live, check your non-verbals. Have a colleague record your responses to tough questions on video. Look closely at your physical reactions. Check your eyes, hands and posture. Then run the recording in fast-forward to highlight any repetitive behaviour. Remember, your goal is to maintain and build credibility for yourself, your organization and your risk messages. This will require that you get the senior leadership team involved. High-profile risk issues benefit from proactive involvement of the senior risk management team with all stakeholder groups.

Risk communication requires us to: examine the facts; speak with the stakeholders; understand their bias; provide more information to them; and help them to adjust their bias to be more in line with the current thinking. Risk communication has a lot to do with people, how we think (and fear) and what we are able to easily understand about the risks. Risk communication is about understanding people's bias and helping to adjust it consistent with the rest of us and the facts. It is no little feat but one worth championing. [CBS](#)

Glyn Jones is a partner at EHS Partnerships in Calgary, and he is a consulting occupational health and safety professional with 30 years of experience. He also provides program design and instructional support to the University of New Brunswick's OHS and leadership development certificate programs. He can be reached at gjones@ehsp.ca or you can follow him on Twitter @glynjones_ehsp.