Risk communication

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Humans are poor at accurately assessing risks (and opportunities) [53]. We tend to focus intuitively on the biggest accident we can imagine – and overlook the daily hazards that are much more likely to occur. Just one example: Think of large-scale research facilities such as a nuclear research reactor: There is, of course, a danger that a very fast military jet could crash into the reactor and release large amounts of radioactivity. Or that genetically modified organisms might escape from a high-security laboratory. The probability of these things happening is not zero – but it is very low, at least in times of stable social conditions.

Of course, society reacts very differently to different risks: What is worse, a higher probability of a serious risk, or a very low probability of a catastrophic risk? There is no right or wrong answer to this.

The role of risk communication is to think through such scenarios before they occur. You need to develop strategies to provide appropriate information about these risks. You need to inform stakeholders about (a) the likelihood of occurrence, (b) the impact in the event of an emergency and (c) precautionary measures, and you need to (d) develop plans for crisis communication – i.e. for the event that the risk event actually occurs. However, the focus must not be exclusively on unlikely worst-case scenarios [54]. Those responsible for risk communication must also consider the much more likely complications and accidents: What about the fire in a laboratory building near the nuclear research reactor? The tragic and fatal work accident in the reactor building that has nothing whatsoever to do with radioactivity? All these things can happen – and they are much more likely to happen than a plane crash.

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Those who develop strategies for crisis communication within the framework of risk communication need a broad focus: employees, neighbours, authorities, partners and the media all belong on the list of potentially affected people and institutions [55].

Comprehensive, easily understandable and accurate information must be available to them at all times. Good risk communication also builds personal, trusting contacts with key people in this circle of relevant stakeholders. If the worst comes to the worst, they are the basis for effective crisis communication. Precisely tailored messages must then be communicated professionally by pre-defined contacts at any time of the day or night. Only with such a broad approach can the real risk in risk communication be minimised: the surprise in the event of an emergency.

Recommended reads:

- Adams J. (2011), *Not 100% sure? The 'public' understanding of risk. In Successful Science Communication: Telling It Like It Is*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511760228.009
- Ruhrmann G. & Guenther L. (2017), *Katastrophen- und Risikokommunikation. In Forschungsfeld Wissenschaftskommunikation*. Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-12898-2_16