

## Risk Communication: A Brief Guide to Communicating Clearly in Difficult Circumstances

As the study of human behavior, psychological science offers insights into effective ways to convey information about urgent, complex, uncertain, or controversial issues with significant consequences, such as climate change or global pandemics.

**Best Practices in Risk Communication:** [Risk communication](#) may be defined as “the exchange of real-time information, advice, and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic, or social well-being.” Poor risk communication can result in people underestimating or overestimating risk, both of which can have undesirable consequences. We offer key findings from psychology on best practices to effectively communicate about risks and engage audiences to take appropriate action.

*Create communications that are clear, concise, and relevant.*

### Problem:

Science-based information is often complex and difficult to understand for lay audiences. Moreover, if audiences perceive information as inconsistent or uncertain, they can dismiss the provided facts, relying instead on personal experience and feelings to make decisions. Many communication efforts would gain better traction if they were both comprehensible and compelling.

### Solutions:

- Translate complex information into [simple, clear messages](#).
- Focus on [local risks](#) that are [relevant](#) to the target audience.
- Provide examples that are local, timely, and [personally meaningful](#).
- Ensure that all provided information is consistent and not contradictory.
- If it is necessary to communicate uncertainty about possible outcomes, emphasize that taking risk-reducing action even when the outcome is not 100% guaranteed is more effective than disengaging.

### Example:

The National Climate Assessment, a report produced by the [U.S. Global Change Research Program](#), was originally structured around climatic events and ecosystem impacts, which some users found hard to engage with. After soliciting feedback, the report ([NCA4](#)) was restructured to focus on climate change impacts on vital human activities (e.g., agriculture, transportation, energy production, urban systems, international trade), and concerns (e.g., health, safety, protection of vulnerable populations), broken down by region (e.g., Northeast, Southern Great Plains) and type of ecosystem (e.g. forests, coastal).

*Identify and address barriers to engagement.*

### Problem:

Providing information is often not enough to motivate action. People may be aware of certain risks, but nevertheless fail to take preventive steps. Obstacles that stand in the way of action are often related to people's needs, habits, group norms and identities, and beliefs.

Solutions:

- Learn about the needs, goals, values, and constraints of your target audience.
- Identify barriers to understanding or engagement. Ask about:
  - **Norms** – prescriptions about what people can/should and cannot/should not do.
  - **Motives** – other pressing realities people might prioritize over reducing risk.
  - **Values** – guiding principles for decisions.
  - **Identities** – sense of group belonging that people will protect and defend.
  - **Constraints** – limitations that might prevent people from responding to risk.

Example:

[OPower](#) pioneered the practice of including social information in monthly home energy bills about how a household's energy use compares to that of their neighbors, with recognition offered to energy efficient customers. This approach sets a new social norm for lower electricity consumption, draws on group identity to motivate a reduction in energy use, and leverages values to maintain lower usage. The strategy was developed through extensive research and pilot testing with utility customers and has been successful in achieving an ongoing 2-5% average reduction in energy use based on data from 50 million households worldwide.

***Provide solutions, motivate, and empower action.***

Problem:

Communicating about risk can elicit fear and anxiety. A certain degree of fear can be important in persuading people to pay attention to particular risks; however, too much fear can leave them paralyzed. Feeling threatened can lead to the rejection or denial of risk information, especially when people don't know what to do to address the problem.

Solutions:

- Be careful not to stimulate too much fear and anxiety; do not overwhelm recipients.
- Foster engagement through solutions:
  - Follow threat-related information with action-oriented solutions.
  - Provide a feeling of efficacy.
  - Create a sense of shared purpose and community with other stakeholders.
  - Empower the audience through appreciating their strengths, capacities, and experience.

Example:

Countries such as the United States are characterized by an ideological divide in the acceptance of human-caused climate change. However, [communication framed around solutions](#) - such as investment in clean energy, reduction in carbon emissions, and implementation of energy efficient measures – is more effective than communication emphasizing the existence of the problem. Similarly, messaging emphasizing the social and economic benefits of combating climate change [can be a powerful motivator for action](#) in countries around the globe, across the political divide, and independent of whether people believe that climate change is important.

***Tell compelling stories through trusted messengers.***

*Problem:*

Many audiences may not perceive factual, science-based information about climate risks as compelling, engaging, or trustworthy.

*Solutions:*

- Combine facts with narrative approaches.
  - Tell stories about situations and people to which the target audience can relate.
  - Use scenarios to illustrate risks and potential action steps so the audience can reach their own conclusions.
  - Provide examples of individuals or groups who have achieved solutions.
- Engage trusted messengers.
  - Engage leaders, authorities, or messengers with an established relationship with the target communities to deliver risk messages.
  - Select communicators who are trusted, respected, and perceived to be unbiased (e.g., scientists, public figures, trusted organizations).

*Example:*

[The Climate Matters program](#) recruits local television meteorologists to incorporate information about the impacts of climate on health, safety, and economy as part of weather reports on live TV and via social media. Climate Matters has reached millions of viewers, highlighting the connection between climate change, quality of life, and weather and [improving viewer's understanding of climate change risks](#).

**Further Resources**

[The Psychology of Climate Change Communication](#). Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, Columbia University.

[Communicating Climate Change Adaptation – A Practical Guide to Values-Based Communication](#). Climate Outreach.

[Uncertainty Handbook: A Practical Guide for Climate Change Communicators](#). Yale Climate Connections.

[The SAGE Handbook of Risk Communication](#).

[Principles For Effective Communication and Public Engagement on Climate Change: A Handbook For IPCC Authors](#). Climate Outreach.

[Connecting on Climate: A Guide to Effective Climate Change Communication](#). EcoAmerica.

[Resolve Reports: Climate Science Communications Assessment](#). RESOLVE.

[Policy Brief: Behavioral Insights for Climate Action](#). Geneva Science Policy Interface