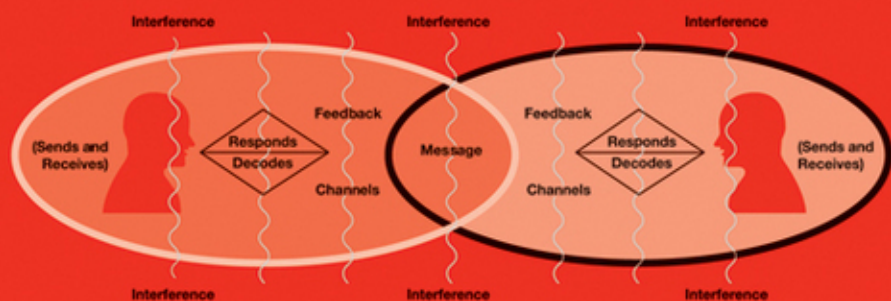


RISK AND CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Methods and Messages



PAMELA (FERRANTE) WALASKI

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by Pamela (Ferrante) Walaski

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PREFACE

I wish I could take credit for the idea to write this book, but I can't. Several years ago, I was in my office putting the finishing touches on some slides for an upcoming conference session on risk and crisis communications at the annual Professional Development Conference of the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) in San Antonio, Texas. An e-mail popped up in my inbox from an unknown person, who happened to be Bob Esposito, an associate publisher at John Wiley & Sons. He noted that he had seen and heard about several other sessions where I had presented on this topic at other major national conferences and wondered if I had ever thought about writing a book about it. While the idea of writing a book was one of my long-term goals, it never occurred to me that a publisher would think me ready to write one now. I had just finished writing a chapter for a book published by ASSE and had also continued the practice of publishing articles for print and online newsletters for several different organizations and associations. While I enjoyed writing and had been pleased with the articles that I had published thus far, writing an entire book was not something I thought I was ready for.

And to this day, I'm still not sure I was ready for it. As I have joked several times over the past 24 months, writing a 10,000-word chapter or a 2,500-word newsletter article is actually pretty easy and had become easier each time I penned one. However, a book with nearly 100,000 words turned out to be an incredibly daunting task—one that has, at turns, energized me, challenged me, and beaten me down, sometimes during the same writing session. When Bob asked me to write this book, I was flattered and, without really understanding what it would take to get it done, said yes. While I never doubted that I had much to say on this topic and believed that my ideas and those of others that I have collected and utilized for this book would be beneficial to my fellow safety, health, and environmental (SH&E) professionals, there have been times when I have had the (probably) universal tinge of doubt about whether or not what I had to say would be interesting to anyone but me.

This book is not intended to be a significant seminal work on the topic of risk and crisis communications. It is, and always was, intended to bring the topic down to the level of general safety practitioners who are looking to add more value to their professional skill set and ultimately to their employers. It is written for safety professionals who, like me, are passionate about what they do and want to better understand how to bring the message of safety to the audiences that make up their specific work environment. This book is filled with general concepts, theories, and practical applications that can be used by anyone in the field with some basic management responsibilities, and

even by those with no management level tasks who simply want to broaden their knowledge of this particular aspect of the practice of safety.

Everyone always has a list of people to thank and I am no exception. My first thanks go to Bob Esposito who, I think, took a bit of a leap with me and gave me a shot. My second thanks go to those who have been working in the area of risk and crisis communications for many more years than I and who have contributed greatly to the understanding of the practice. They include Peter Sandman, Vincent Covello, Kathleen Fearn-Banks, Regina Lundgren, and Andrea McMakin, whose body of work has contributed greatly to the pages that follow. I also want to thank Morgan Kelly for her invaluable assistance with designing some of the illustrations.

I also need to mention my children, Jason and Chloe, who have allowed me to hone my parenting skills on them. I am cautiously optimistic that I have gotten better at it over time; and I have learned more from them than I think they understand at this stage of their lives, although when they are parents, I do believe they will get it as well. And finally, yet most importantly, to my husband Jeff, the guy who fell in love with me while I was knee-deep in writing this book. Over the year and a half of our courtship and the early months of our marriage, he never failed to take a back seat without complaining when I needed to spend just one more evening (I promise!) or one more Saturday (I swear!) writing and editing it. When I almost gave up, he encouraged me to keep at it; and during the long hours of research, writing, and editing, he was always an unwavering guardian of my time, making sure the task never overwhelmed me. His patience, devotion, love, and support are gifts that I hold close in my heart.

PAMELA (FERRANTE) WALASKI

INTRODUCTION

More than 30 years ago, a seminal event in the field of crisis communications occurred at a nuclear power plant operated by Metropolitan Edison in Middletown, Pennsylvania, just outside of the state capital of Harrisburg. The plant, known as Three Mile Island (TMI), was the scene of an incident involving a stuck valve that resulted in the partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor. While TMI was not a serious accident in terms of human fatalities or injuries or release of dangerous radioactivity, it did identify serious gaps in the nuclear industry's ability to communicate during critical events and led to the establishment of the Kemeny Commission, whose tasks included writing recommendations on how nuclear utilities should improve their ability to communicate in the event of an accident.

As a young undergraduate student attending Shippensburg State College (now University), just outside of Harrisburg and Middletown, I remember the difficulties we had in understanding what was happening and how it might affect us at that time and in the future. Living in a college dormitory equipped with pay phones only in the main lobby and one television set for the entire residence of 200-plus students, the methods of communication available to let us know what was happening were extremely limited, leaving us in the dark, while National Guard troops pulled up on our campus as we prepared to take in evacuees.