

Use of language during health crisis situations

Resource: **Better Practices – Use of language during health crisis situations**

In considering health crisis communication, it is crucial that the right language is used. This is true for written and verbal communication. In this section, an overview is provided that should be of help to effectively communicate with various target audiences. The overview should assure that the message is heard, understood and trusted. It is based on the STARCC principle for providing messages: Simple, Timely, Accurate, Relevant, Credible and Consistent. The overview is presented in the form of 13 rules.

Objective:

STARCC basic rules

Rule 1. Do not assume

It is important to communicate the matter at hand fully. Do not assume that your target audience knows or understands the issues surrounding the matter that is to be communicated. It is better to say or write what may seem the obvious rather than risk that the audience does not understand what is being communicated.

Rule 2. Keep the language simple and plain

Do not use complicated language; do not use specialized language, acronyms or short forms of names. Using such language is a sure way to loose contact to your target audiences. In health crisis situations this may cost lives.

Rule 3. Keep it short

It is always better to use two sentences than one long sentence. Run on sentences can have the effect that by the time the sentence is completed, the intent is no longer clear. Also, when two or more ideas are intermixed without splitting them into two parts, it may lead to confusion and loss of interest.

Rule 4. Cover one idea in a sentence

To be well understood, cover only one idea in a sentence. This prevents misunderstandings, especially in a dialogue situation.

Rule 5. Use paragraphs

Separate your ideas and thoughts into paragraphs. It is better to use more paragraphs than less. In a spoken language, separate ideas with pauses. Just as with run on sentences, the danger is that the ideas will be lost when buried within lots of sentences.

Rule 6. Use double space

In written communication, it is always better to use double rather than single spacing, simply because it is easier to read.

Rule 7. Be honest and transparent

It is better to say “we do not know at this time” than to say “it appears that we may ...”. In being honest, always communicate the need to be on the side of safety. This precaution is especially valid when human lives are involved. State clearly and in simple words the justification for actions to be taken.

Rule 8. Do not shy away from uncertainty

If confronted, communicate that scientific advice is based on the best available data, but that this advice is not perfect.

Rule 9. Say only what is necessary

Disclose everything that is needed to be said about a specific issue. This does not mean however, to unnecessarily create insecurity amongst the public or worse, to create panic. This means to be aware of the overall context within which the statements are made.

Rule 10. Be precise and accurate

Check the information sources and the written content for accuracy before release. It is advisable to use clear words, or words that fit the particular situation. Generally, it is better to avoid words such as “may”, “could” “should” and replace them with words such as “do”, “can”, “will”.

Rule 11. Use positive statements

Positive messages are better than stating a current negative state of affairs. It is better to say “scientific advice is being continually improved” or even “scientific advice is not perfect” rather than “scientific advice is imperfect”. It is sufficient to say that “scientists and all that are involved, are working hard to solve the current crisis” or to say “we have no answers at the moment”. But it is not necessary to say “scientists have no idea what is going on” or “I am afraid we are working completely in the dark”.

Rule 12. Use positive verbs

Positive verbs have the power to show that action is being taken to remedy a situation. For example, use words such as do, act and investigate. As an important by-product active verbs help to create an appearance of competence and control over a given situation.

Rule 13. Express empathy

In a crisis situation, it is crucial to show, through words, empathy to those who are suffering. This creates credibility and enhances trust.

Note that overuse of positive statements and verbs can be counterproductive, especially if it becomes clear that no real actions or solutions are forthcoming. It may in fact lead to erosion of trust. It is thus important to balance honesty with (over) confidence.