**MESSAGE PREPARATION FOR**

**INTERVIEWS / PRESS CONFERENCES / PRESS RELEASES / BRIEFINGS**

**YOU HAVE THE ADVANTAGE!**

In most interviews, you have control of the situation – you decide whether you’re going to talk, what you’re going to talk about and how you’re going to talk about it.

You decide exactly how you’re going to respond to every question.

You can turn most questions to your advantage, or at least lessen the impact of a difficult question by how you respond to it.

You can also head off embarrassing, difficult or confrontational questions by asking those questions out loud yourself, then answering them your way.

**PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW OR PRESS CONFERENCE**

Respond promptly to media requests and respect media deadlines. Keep your promises.

*Submit information to the EOC and any other group that the information may impact*, BEFORE sending it out to all media and the general public. Give them time to prepare for public response to the message.

Be friendly. Remember…the reporter is your conduit to your “Target Audience”.

Ask the reporter exactly what angle he/she is taking on the story and how you fit into it.

Tell the interviewer what ground you will cover – what you will and won’t be talking about.

Define, don’t defend what you do.

Coordinate any requests to tour the scene with the Incident Commander before making any promises to the media.

**PREPARE YOUR STATEMENT AND TALKING POINTS**

Decide what your key message is and write it down. Add a few points.

Practice out loud – but don’t memorize.

Start off by summarizing the entire story or issue in one sentence – then elaborate on it. It’s just like summarizing the headline on a press release. Add your key message.

Journalists are likely to ask six questions in a crisis (who, what, where, when, why, how) that relate to three broad topics: (1) what happened; (2) What caused it to happen; (3) What does it mean.

Specific Questions, and their variations, are listed below. **Anticipate the hard questions and have answers prepared. Questions will vary, depending on who is speaking.**

**MESSAGE GUIDELINES**

**Decide what your key message is.**

**Start off by summarizing the entire story or issue in one sentence** – then elaborate on it. It’s just like summarizing the headline on a press release. Add your key message.

**Don’t over reassure.** The objective is not to placate, but to engender, calm concern.

**Don’t share personal identifying information** about those involved with the event unless you’ve been cleared to release the information. This includes staff, victims, volunteers, bystanders, etc.

**Acknowledge uncertainty.** Offer what you know versus what you don’t know. Show your distress and acknowledge your audience’s distress regarding the uncertainty of the situation. “It must be awful to hear we can’t answer that question right now . . .”

**Express that a process is in place** to learn more. “We have a system (plan, process) to help us respond (find answers, etc).”

**Give anticipatory guidance.** If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect. Example: side effects of antibiotics. If it’s going to be bad, tell them.

**Be regretful, not defensive**. Say “we are sorry, saddened . . .” Or “we feel terrible that. . .” when acknowledging misdeeds or failures from the agency. Don’t use “regret,” which sounds like you’re preparing for a lawsuit.

**Acknowledge people’s fears**. Don’t tell people they shouldn’t be afraid. They are and they have a right to their fears. Don’t tell them they are foolish for their misplaced fear; acknowledge that it’s normal, human to be frightened. They aren’t experts.

**Acknowledge the shared misery**. Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, feeling hopeless and defeated. Acknowledge the misery of a catastrophic event and then help move them toward hope for the future through the actions of your agency and actions they too can take.

**Express wishes.** “I wish we knew more.” “I wish our answers were more definitive.”

**Stop trying to allay panic.** Panic is less common than imagined. Panic doesn’t come from bad news, **but from mixed messages**. If the public is faced with conflicting recommendations and expert advice, they are left with no credible source to turn to for help. That level of abandonment opens the door to charlatans and mass poor judgment. Candor protects your credibility and reduces the possibility of panic, because your messages will ring true.

**Commit to continued Communication.** Keep communication channels open, create a webpage with current and past press releases, background information and videos, etc., and always announce the date/time of the next update.

**At some point, be willing to address the “what if” questions**. These are the questions every person is thinking about and wants to hear answers from experts. It’s often impractical to fuel “what ifs” when the crisis is contained and not likely to affect wide numbers of people; it is reasonable to answer “what ifs” if the “what if” could happen and people need to be emotionally prepared for it.

However, if you do not answer the “what if” questions, someone with much less at risk regarding the outcome of the response will answer them for you. If you are not prepared to address “what ifs,” you lose credibility and the opportunity to frame the “what if” questions with reason and valid recommendations.

***Empathy, expertise, dedication and follow-through are the elements that build trust.*** As a spokesperson, you need to quickly build trust and credibility.

Ask a subject matter expert for assistance developing answers to the questions;

emergency manager, police, fire, public works for

**General Who/What/When/Where/Why/How**

* What is your name and title?
* What are you job responsibilities?
* What are your qualifications?
* Can you tell us what happened?
  + What is the extent of the emergency?
* When were you notified that something had happened?
* When did your response to this begin?
* When did it happen?
* Where did it happen?
* Why did it happen/cause?
* How long will it take to end?
* Who is responsible/to blame?
* Who is in charge?
* What is being done in response to what happened?
* What responses have you received?
* What are you doing now?
* Who else is involved in the response?
* Are all those involved in agreement?
* What is the worst-case scenario?
* When will we find out more/get more information?
* What does this all mean?

**Victims/Survivors**

* Who was harmed/impacted? How many?
* Are those that were harmed/impacted getting help? How are they being helped?
  + Family Assistance Center (deaths/injuries)
  + Local Assistance Center (earthquake, flood, etc.)
  + Identify the types of services being offered and the organizations involved.
* Can you be specific about the types of harm/injuries/impacts that occurred?
* What are the names of those that were harmed/impacted? (Check with police/hospital/legal and the family/individuals for permission to share this)
* Can we talk to them?
* What effects will this have on the people involved?

**Instructions**

* What are you advising people to do? (Keep away from the area, Wash hands, social distance, evacuate, wait for further instructions, etc.)

**Trust**

* How certain are you about this information?
* Have you told us everything you know?
* What are you not telling us?
* What are you telling your own family?

**Public Safety**

* Is the situation under control?
* How many people are engaged in rescue/relief efforts? Special equipment?
* How certain are you that the situation is under control?
* Is there any immediate danger?
* Who is conducting the investigation?
* What are you going to do after the investigation?
* What have you found out so far?
* Which laws are applicable?
* Has anyone broken the law?
* How certain are you about whether laws have been broken?
* What precautionary measures were taken?
* What steps need to be taken to avoid a similar event?
* Have these steps already been taken? If not, why not?
* Is there any continuing the danger?
* Are people out of danger? Are people safe?
* What are you doing to protect people?
* Has this ever happened before?
* Can this happen elsewhere?
* What can be done to prevent this from happening again?
* What else can go wrong?
* How was property saved?
* Any acts of heroism?

**Opinion – *don’t give opinions, only facts***

* Are people over reacting?
* Do you think those involved handled the situation well enough?
* Why was more not done to prevent this from happening?
* What is your personal opinion?

**Blame**

* Did you have any forewarning that this might happen?
* Why wasn't this prevented from happening?
* If you are not sure of the cause, what is your best guess?
* Who caused this to happen?
* Who is to blame?
* Could this have been avoided?
* Has anyone made mistakes?
* How certain are you that mistakes have not been made?
* Do you accept responsibility for what happened?

**Empathy**

* What would you like to say to those that have been harmed/impacted and to their families?
* What assistance is being provided?

**Damage/Impact**

* How much damage occurred? Estimated value?
* What other damage may have occurred? (hidden damage pending building inspections, etc.)
* How certain are you about damages?
* How much damage do you expect?
* Insurance protection?
* Previous emergencies in the area?
* Other property threatened?
* Significance of the damaged property?

**Recovery**

* How long will it be before the situation returns to normal?
* What help has been requested or offered from others?
* Will there be inconvenience to employees or to the public?
* How much will all this cost?
* Are you able and willing to pay the costs?
* Who else will pay the costs?
* What lessons were learned?
* Were those lessons implemented?
* How can people help?
* What should people be doing now?

**Disbelief.** Those who do not need to take immediate action will be engaging in “vicarious rehearsal” regarding those recommendations and may need substitute actions of their own to ensure they do not prematurely act on recommendations not meant for them.

Simple actions in an emergency will give people back a sense of control and will help to keep them motivated to stay tuned to what is happening (versus denial, where they refuse to acknowledge the possible danger to themselves and others) and prepare them to take action when directed to do so. When giving them something to do, give them a choice of actions matched to their level of concern. Give a range of responses, a minimum response, a maximum response, and a recommended middle response.

**Ask more of people.** Perhaps the most important role of the spokesperson is to ask people to bear the risk with you. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. If you acknowledge the risk, its severity, complexity and legitimate people’s fears, you can then ask the best of them, to bear the risk during the emergency and work toward solutions.

As a spokesperson, especially one who is on the ground and at some self-risk, you can model the appropriate behavior - true willingness to go on with life as much as possible, to make reasonable choices for yourself and your family. Don’t be glib, but be stalwart. Your determination to see it through will help others who are looking for role models to help them face the risk too. Americans have great heart, a sense of selflessness, and a natural competitiveness. Sparking those inherent attributes will help people cope with uncertainty, fear and misery

**Donations.** The community is watching the emergency unfold and they want to help. You must get out ahead of the deluge of donated, and often unwanted, items by suggesting the best ways to help.

* Donate cash to a local nonprofit helping survivors.
* Collect clothing and other items, sell them at a yard sale and give the cash to a nonprofit.
* Explain that we give survivors cash so they can purchase items they need and re-establish some control in their lives. Collecting and sorting random donations takes a lot of manpower and storage space.

**Press Releases**

Press Releases are designed to quickly convey basic facts to the media, stakeholders, staff, and volunteers in a direct, concise manner.

In an emergency, pre-drafted releases can ensure that all relevant information is included and helps to speed up production. ***Appendix C2*** includes several sample Press Releases. These are specific for each hazard and are designed as “fill-in-the-blank” scripts to allow for immediate use. If time permits, these messages can be edited to better reflect the actual hazard.

Release (verified) information as quickly as possible. (Via all communication methods)

* *Submit to EOC and any other group the information may impact*, before sending it out to all media, stakeholders and the general public.

**Production Tips**

* Quickly develop a draft and obtain approval from your authority.
* Include a quote from a senior official if possible.
* Spell check!
* Always have a second person review the release before sending it out.
* Don’t be trivial – make sure the information is newsworthy.
* Get the release out as soon as possible – respect media deadlines.
* Use a pre-programmed fax machine with broadcast capability or computer faxing. (Most use email now)
* Use a media email distribution list or post releases to Organization website and provide media with link.
* Maintain a complete file of all releases.
* Routinely update media and stakeholder contact names, numbers and emails
* Do not call the newsroom to check on releases.
* Be prepared for immediate follow-up phone calls – keep relevant information handy.
* In follow-up releases, use new information as your lead (“second day lead”).
* Monitor coverage and compare to press releases. Adjust writing style as necessary.
* Always include a phone number or link to obtain more information.

**Format**

Press Releases are written in the “Inverted Pyramid” style: Crucial information up front followed by less important information. A factual lead sentence must be followed by prioritized information.

Format guidelines:

* Double Space
* Two-inch margins (for editors to make notes)
* One side of 8½ x 11 paper
* Not to exceed two pages
* Letterhead at the top
* Identified contact person, title and phone number
* Headline
* Dateline (organization name as originating agency) followed by two dashes
* At the bottom of the first page, center the term “-30-“ to indicate the end of the release or “MORE” to indicate additional page.