

Early, Often and Clearly: Communicating the Nuclear Message – 10447

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ABSTRACT

Communication is crucial to those in the nuclear business who work with a wide variety of stakeholders. Key components of an effective communication strategy include an organizational structure that emphasizes the importance of communication, a philosophy of openness and transparency, communicating early and often, and clarity. These points are illustrated by insights and examples from senior communicators at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

INTRODUCTION

It is critical that those in the nuclear business – whether in industry, government or academia – be able to communicate with the public in a clear and concise manner. Clarity of communication is central to informing the variety of stakeholders for whom overall health and safety is a common concern. So too is openness and transparency. Senior communication experts at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) have developed insights into what basic elements of an integrated approach are particularly important to establishing and maintaining an effective communication program. These insights are based on combined decades of experience working for this independent federal agency whose primary responsibility is protecting people and the environment. The insights are highlighted in the following section together with practical examples.

APPROACH AND APPLICATIONS

An integrated approach to effective communication can be described as consisting of two framing principles and three keys to success. These individual components are outlined below.

Framing Principles

Organizational Emphasis

A strong organizational commitment is vital to effective communication. The NRC is organized in a way that emphasizes the importance of communicating with a wide range of stakeholders at both the national level and in the field.

In Washington, DC, the two key offices responsible for communicating information about NRC policies and programs, and often about specific plants are: the Office of Public Affairs and the Office of Congressional and Industry Relations. Both report directly to the Chairman, which reflects the importance the agency places on assuring that the public and the rest of the

government across federal, state, and local levels, are kept aware of NRC activities in a timely manner.

For national-level issues, NRC headquarters typically communicates with reporters, discussing broad policy issues and matters involving the Commission and its actions. The Office of Public Affairs largely focuses on these interactions with the news media, and to a lesser degree deals with direct communications with the public. The headquarters counterpart Office of Congressional and Industry Relations is responsible for communicating with members of the legislative branch through their offices in Washington and sometimes also in the states from which the members come.

In addition to communication responsibilities at the national level, the Office of Public Affairs also coordinates four field offices responsible for communicating on the ground. Located at each of the regional NRC offices, these public affairs personnel typically handle questions about individual plants. They also provide backup communications support to headquarters and logistical assistance as needed, such as when the NRC Chairman or a commissioner is traveling.

One of the practical observations of seasoned communicators at NRC is the benefit of bringing directly relevant expertise to an organization, built from years of experience under similar responsibilities elsewhere. For example, the Director of the Office of Public Affairs began his career as a reporter before transitioning to government service nearly 20 years ago, while the Director of the Office of Congressional and Industrial Relations gained extensive experience in Congressional Relations at the Department of Defense before joining the NRC.

Openness and Transparency

The NRC operates on a policy of openness and transparency. This philosophy is applied in all communications, regardless of whether the subject is a policy matter at NRC headquarters or a problem with a particular nuclear plant in the field. Those who have long served as nuclear communicators have found that as a practical matter, giving the public the broadest possible view of operations is the surest way to build trust – trust with the news media, trust with public officials, trust with the general public, and from the perspective of a regulator, trust with those being regulated.

The importance of this point was captured well at a recent Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) forum on communications that was held in Japan. At this forum, the newly appointed NCR Chairman gave a compelling description of openness and transparency:

“Openness from the perspective of the United States and from a regulatory body involves the idea of access to information. We have a large number of statutory responsibilities that dictate how we provide information to the public about the actions and the activities that we undergo. I believe openness is an easy thing for a regulatory body to control. We can measure it. We can determine how well we're doing it-- providing information to the public. But providing information is just the first part.”

He then added:

“It is the second part which goes a long way toward public confidence. ... For me transparency means clearly explaining the decision-making process and how we use the information that we have. Both of those things are crucial for the public to understand the conclusions in the decisions that we make. Not only does the public need to have access to the same information that we have, but they have to have access to understand the decision-making process we use as a regulatory body. And that is really where transparency comes in.”

Nuclear issues are, in many respects, different than other political or scientific topics. You can't see radiation. You can't smell it. You can't easily touch it (unless you're changing a smoke detector, eating a banana or chewing on a Brazil nut). Certain nuclear issues by their very nature are ephemeral. But proven communications techniques can be used to give effective messages to the public, as highlighted below.

Keys to Success

There are three keys to being successful in nuclear communication, or at a minimum breaking even in the court of public opinion. The first two are no surprise to anyone who has heard of the joke about how elections are won in Chicago. For years it used to be said that the way to succeed in Chicago politics was to be sure that your supporters did two things: vote early ... and vote often. Success in communications also hinges on communicating early and often. The third key to success is clarity. The value of each of these factors is illustrated below.

Communicating Early

Particularly in the nuclear arena, it is absolutely essential that the message get out quickly. Members of the government do not want to read bad news in newspapers. They want to know about it first. They do not like to be surprised. And reporters itch to come up with something salacious on a nuclear plant or an issue. So the key is to reach out early to stakeholders most likely to influence public opinion. This is doubly true when the news to be delivered is negative. It is very important to own the message and make it yours. As an example, last fall the NRC needed to deliver uncomfortable news about a technical review of a specific reactor design. The Commission conducted outreach both to members of Congress and to the news media, so that control of the message was maintained.

Communicating Often

Communicating often is also essential. “Often” means continuing to drive home the message across the spectrum of communication avenues available. Such followups can range from taking an editorial writer to lunch or buying a cup of coffee for the beat reporter, to sitting down with the congressional staffer or, if need be, with the member of Congress. It is important to keep all parties up to speed. As a case in point, the NRC recently faced an issue in Vermont where public opinion near a plant was, in some quarters, quite negative. Two days of intensive visits with local Congressional staff and the news media, followed by a steady stream of speeches to civic club

pancake breakfasts and chicken lunches, made an appreciable difference in the community's understanding of who the NRC is, what the agency does, and where its responsibilities lie, as well as areas in which it does not have responsibilities.

As a practical pointer from a veteran communicator, when on travel it is useful to make a point of stopping at the local newspapers and radio and television stations, not to seek news but to build relationships. These relationships can turn out to be vitally important, because the trust built up during those visits can pay dividends later in times of real or perceived crisis. This is especially valuable for regional public affairs professionals who are in constant contact with reporters near plants. The NRC communicators are always ready to explain issues, help place them in context, and reach out to the news media if something unusual is going on at a plant, to be sure those groups have the perspective of the regulator. This practice extends from the field to headquarters, all the way to the director's level, where regular "touching base" interactions with Washington reporters continue to sustain important relationships. These long-standing relationships can prove invaluable when situations arise that require a quick response to get a message out.

With respect to nuclear power plants, dedicated NRC communications staff in the Congressional Affairs office make it their job to stay in touch with Congressional staff and elected officials at both the national and local level. Staff in each regional office make it a point to maintain contact with local government officials in communities around nuclear plants, to serve as an ongoing resource for those officials and the community as a whole.

The Congressional Affairs office applies the same basic approach as the Public Affairs Office in terms of reinforcing the message. Messages are coordinated from the outset to ensure both headquarters and field personnel are communicating the same theme. NRC works diligently to provide Congressional staffers a "heads up" on issues before news becomes public. This helps avoid the uncomfortable scenario of a reporter asking a Senator's press spokesperson a question about an event that the Senator's office has not been briefed on. Following these initial notifications, NRC makes its communication experts available to discuss the implications of the given event to assure there are no outstanding questions on the issue.

In addition, the Office of Congressional and Industry Affairs staff regularly meets with Congressional staffers for courtesy visits and briefings. Last year alone, more than 220 courtesy visits were paid and 68 briefings were presented to Congressional staffers in Washington, DC. Recognizing that nuclear topics are important "backyard issues," NRC Congressional communication personnel also met with Congressional staff in their hometown district offices. Last year, the staff travelled to California, Vermont, New York, and Chicago and met with Congressional staffers based in the district offices, to also provide those individuals an opportunity to ask NRC questions about issues of concern to them and the local constituents.

This extensive suite of measures to provide timely communication and sustained interactions helps stakeholders understand the many issues NRC faces. The NRC is committed to ensuring that the public is informed, is aware of the agency's mission, and knows how to reach NRC if questions arise. Clearly, "early and often" are central to effectively communicating about nuclear matters.

Clarity

The third cornerstone of a successful communication program is clear, understandable communication. When communicating nuclear information, many have learned the hard way that a broad chasm can exist between having a position that is scientifically defensible and having a position that is politically supportable. Clarity of communications to help build public trust and shape public perception is a critical element.

For example, imagine you are given responsibility for rolling out a new policy or program direction. You can line up experts who are “on your side” as far as the eye can see. You can hire the best lawyers and lobbyists. But if you cannot communicate your position in a clear, simple, understandable manner to both policymakers and the public, you are behind the curve and liable to end up on the wrong end of both public opinion and the finish line.

One of the communication issues faced by agencies such as the NRC is inherent to working in a highly technical field. That is, what is common knowledge for the agency staff can be unintelligible science to politicians and the general public. For example, in the legislative body, only a handful of the 535 members have had formal scientific training. Thus, it is critically important for communications to be clear and understandable. An age-old phrase that has often been used is: “Put it in words your mother would understand.” Although many of today’s mothers understand science and engineering concepts, the point is to consider an audience unfamiliar with underlying technical details when developing your message. This point is illustrated by the following example.

At a meeting last year in California, the NRC was describing to residents who lived near a nuclear plant how the plant had performed during the previous year. This meeting happened to closely coincide with an earthquake that had struck two days earlier, about 80 kilometers (50 miles) away, at a magnitude of 4.5. Slight ground motion could be felt at the plant. After the presentation on plant performance, a local resident stood up to ask a simple question: “How large an earthquake does it take to shut the plant down?”

Unfortunately, the response was not similarly brief and to the point. The engineer who stepped forward began to elaborate about G forces, and vertical and horizontal acceleration forces. After about five minutes, a local official in the audience who happened to know the answer finally stood up and stated simply: “It takes a 7.0 or better earthquake to shut the plant down.” This was the answer needed – a clear and targeted response, not five minutes of scientific details that had still not reached the bottom line.

As a result of that meeting, where it took 20 minutes and about as many slides to give the main message to the residents -- “The plant operated safely last year” -- steps were taken to redesign the structure of such meetings. Now, within about the first 30 seconds of a meeting, the local residents hear the core message in a crisp form – such as: “Your plant operated safely last year” (and/or with words that describe how it operated). The NRC the talks about what the agency will be doing next, for example in the way of inspections during the coming year.

SUMMARY

The practical insights gained from years of experience at NRC can be distilled into three main recommendations for communicating nuclear information:

- Deliver the message early,
- Deliver it often,
- And deliver it in an easily understandable fashion.

The bottom line is that communicators who stick with these core principles – communicating early, often, and clearly -- will be most likely to succeed in building trust and getting their message across. By combining these simple keys to successful communication within a structure that emphasizes the importance of communicating, and a philosophy of openness and transparency, agencies and other organizations involved in the nuclear arena can achieve effective communication programs.