



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

## LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: *Anticipating and Responding to Stressful Events*

“When people are stressed and upset, they want to know that you care before they care what you know”  
— Will Rogers

### Background

How leaders behave and communicate during stressful situations, such as the response to a disaster event, can make significant differences in how people respond and react. It may also influence whether leadership is strengthened or diminished.

This communication can take many forms including written messages, formal and informal talks, and ritual development and participation.

### The Leader

Strong leaders know and care about their people.

Caring is demonstrated in everyday activities and interactions and can be especially powerful at key times. Optimally, leaders also know the characteristics of their people, what they have experienced, the nature of the work they do, and how they respond best to the efforts of leaders. Effective leaders capitalize on this informed compassion during events when people may be especially vulnerable or needing of support and reassurance.

### Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a function of many internal and external factors. Strong leaders are continuously vigilant in identifying factors that have the potential to negatively affect people (such as times that remind people of loss or trauma). They are also aware of those factors that can reduce vulnerability (such as health status, peer and leadership support, and a healthy organizational culture).

### Message Development

There are many factors to consider in optimizing communications in times of increased or high stress. Many of these principles, like the ones presented here, derive from the field of risk and crisis communication.

How leaders behave and communicate during stressful situations, such as the response to a disaster event, can make significant differences in how people respond and react.

Additionally, how you deliver your message will often have an even greater impact than what you actually say or do.

- Consider and craft messages beforehand. The advantage goes to those who prepare.
- In high stress situations, people process information differently

(e.g., inattentive, distractible); messages need to be short, simple, and repeated.

- Under stress, people focus on negatives more than positives, so positive messages should outnumber negative messages, ideally 3:1.
- Don't be afraid to say, “I don't know.” Make sure to commit to finding out and following up.
- A helpful and valuable model is Compassion, Conviction, Optimism (CCO): Compassion (statement demonstrating that you care/empathize with the intended audience); Conviction (statement demonstrating commitment to helping/supporting/solving); Optimism (statement indicating a positive view of the future).
- People are most likely to remember things they have heard in a specific order, based on primacy and recency: first, last, middle. Your most important message goes first and next most important goes last. Prioritize messages this way to enhance understanding.

### Further Resources

- Covello VT. Best practices in public health risk and crisis communication. *J Health Commun.* 2003;8(Suppl. 1): 5–8.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communications Guidance for Public Officials. Department of Health and Human Services Web site. <http://www.hhs.gov/od/documents/RiskCommunication.pdf>. Published 2002.
- Vineburgh N, Ursano R, Hamaoka D, Fullerton C. Public health communication for disaster planning and response. *Int J Public Pol.* 2008;3(5/6): 292–301.

