



Guidelines for communication in risk contexts

These guidelines help us to:

- Analyse the concept of risk and avoid taking it for granted,
- Understand how to act to avoid the damage caused by risks,
- Use communication as a tool for response and recovery during and after the time of crisis.

In the light of these opening remarks, the paper is divided into the following sections: the concept of risk, the concept of crisis management and risk communication in crisis contexts.

The concept of risk:

The strand of research related to the study of risk, originated in the Americas in the 1960s, with a long and rich history of paradigms, approaches, case studies and theories related, also and in particular, to projects, technology and globalisation.

Since the 1990s, the idea of risk has been extended to social, political and economic issues arising from the contemporary and post-contemporary age.

The concept of risk is therefore a socio-culturally based concept whose definition derives from knowledge and experience, also and mainly, shared with others.

Given the complexity of our lives, it is necessary to take into consideration a number of issues:

- most risks are not currently predictable,
- there is no single way of understanding, assessing and managing risks,
- responses to risk are not predictable: people react differently over time, depending on their contexts and interactions with others.

Against the backdrop of the crisis of modernity and distrust of rationality, culture intervenes in risk assessment, even if this is increasingly global and transversal in nature.

Globalisation, an increasingly competitive market, a society that lives interconnected but disaggregated, lead to environmental, technological and economic risks that people must face daily being aware that, as human activities multiply, so do the risks.

Since the 1990s, people have started to talk about '*risk management*' (A. Decataldo, A. Fasanella, M. Maggi, *La Comunicazione del rischio chimico. Sperimentazione e Valutazione nelle scuole di Roma*, Franco Angeli, 2006) intended as the management, control and communication of risks both at technical but also at social level, thus proceeding to assess the levels of anxiety, stress, fear and values in individuals since these are the factors through which individuals perceive, identify and define a risk when facing it.

Since the 20th century, the foundations have been laid for what Beck has called the '*risk society*' (U. Beck, *La società del rischio. Verso una seconda modernità*, Carocci, 2000).

Disenchantment with new technologies, concern and caution about progress, vulnerability of the environment and of humankind have characterised an entire century and continue to characterise the one in which we live today.

Closely linked to the notion of risk is that of 'vulnerability'; it is often referred to as '*social vulnerability*' (R. Cavallaro, *Lexicòn. Lexicon for qualitative analysis in social research*, CieRre, 2006) intended as the capacity of a group to prevent and defend itself from the consequences of a risk or a stressful event.

The concept of crisis management:

Risk management refers to the process, action plan and overall strategy through which an organisation/company intends to manage and handle a situation that threatens to damage its image, reputation, credibility, reliability, finances.

The process has three main phases:

- **Monitoring:** it is prior to a crisis, it is when prevention systems and action plans are drawn up, as well as crisis simulations; it is a preparatory activity for the organisation/company,
- **Recovery:** when a crisis occurs, the procedures and guidelines prepared in response to the crisis should be implemented,
- **Response:** when damage is minimised and repaired.

A good risk management plan takes into account the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the organisation/company.

One of the main factors involved in risk perception and assessment is *communication*: personal messages and those circulated online, in fact, contribute to building the risk's image and, therefore, the task of those who are responsible for and in charge of communicating risks, is very important.

The main objective of risk communication is to inform: in risk contexts, in fact, institutions and experts communicate in a top-down (bottom-up) logic to people.

Since who receives the information also makes decisions, one should always remember that who receives information is active.

The amount of information is now so boundless that the ever-increasing possibility of distortion of reality cannot be ruled out, hence official channels must promptly provide comprehensive and effective information.

In risk contexts, the most influential people and the most familiar faces in the organisation play a key role in communication. Often, the same decision makers are the ones who develop ad hoc arguments aimed at reassuring the public.

Among the characteristics of a reliable risk communication are:

- Clarity and non-contradiction,
- explaining the nature of the risk involved,
- the more communication on a given topic, the greater is the attention in the public opinion together with a higher level of risk perception.

In contexts where there might be a risk, even if only when perceived by the community, or where there is an actual confirmed crisis to be faced, communication plays a key role.

This is why we would like to point out the presence of a Community Manager, a figure who, increasingly often, is part of organisations/companies' staff and who, particularly in risk contexts, acts in the presence of threats and crises.

According to the definition of the Italian company Aruba.it: 'his/her role is to foster dialogue between the company and its target audience, creating the best conditions to convey a positive message about the brand. In charge of moderating comments, acting as a spokesperson for the company being dealt with'.

In particular, communication in a particular historical moment in which the organisation/company is experiencing a moment of crisis, requires some very specific characteristics and therefore, in such contexts, it is impossible not to be exposed or to pretend that the crisis did not occur/ did not affect us.

In terms of communication, it is essential to have both internal and external coordination.

The former can be achieved through meetings, discussions, dialogues with experts and with the organisation/company's internal staff in order to allow as much alignment as possible on the issues involved.

In simulating and anticipating moments of crisis - as indicated in the strategic plan - one can understand the thoughts and ideas of in-house staff, allowing everyone not only to express their point of view but also to reach an internal agreement, bearing in mind that it is precisely in moments of extreme difficulty that it is best to avoid internal divisions and separations that could otherwise fuel the crisis.

In terms of external communication, a plan can be implemented after having precisely coordinated internal communication and having carefully analysed the situation.

How to go about opening up, in terms of communication, to the outside world?

Examples are: the use of social media, press releases, public apologies through official channels of the organisation/company such as the website, specific emails. The tone to be used in these kinds of communications must be

- transparent: lack of clarity or display confusion should be avoided,
- empathetic: especially if the organisation/company is going through a moment of crisis, it would be contradictory and inappropriate to expose oneself with angry, arrogant or offended tones.
- sorrowful: showing regret for what has happened is always the best choice, as is being diplomatic and softening the tone of online and offline conversations.

Miriam Di Bartolo, UISG Communications Assistant

Contact: assistente.comunicazione@uisg.org