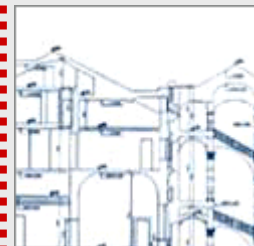# Risk communication or disaster recovery?
A few guidelines targeting critical environments

Ivano Canteri – Managing Director
Michele Livolsi – Project Specialist

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Risk and crisis: an analitic distinction

Reality mixes with perception

▸ The concept of risk is related with human expectations and can be described as a potential negative effect on a present condition which can be determined by a currently ongoing or a possible (future) event

▸ On the one hand risk is related with human perception, on the other hand it is related with real events and situations

▸ Risk can be assessed scientifically

We have to deal with a double-sided concern:
Emergency (crisis) vs. context (risk)

Crises bring (and dictate) changes

▸ In Chinese the word "Crisis" is composed by two ideograms: challenge and opportunity

▸ Using a figurative image, being in a state of crisis is like standing on a top of a peak: to reach the plains you can both fall down one the rocky side or walk down the side of the path
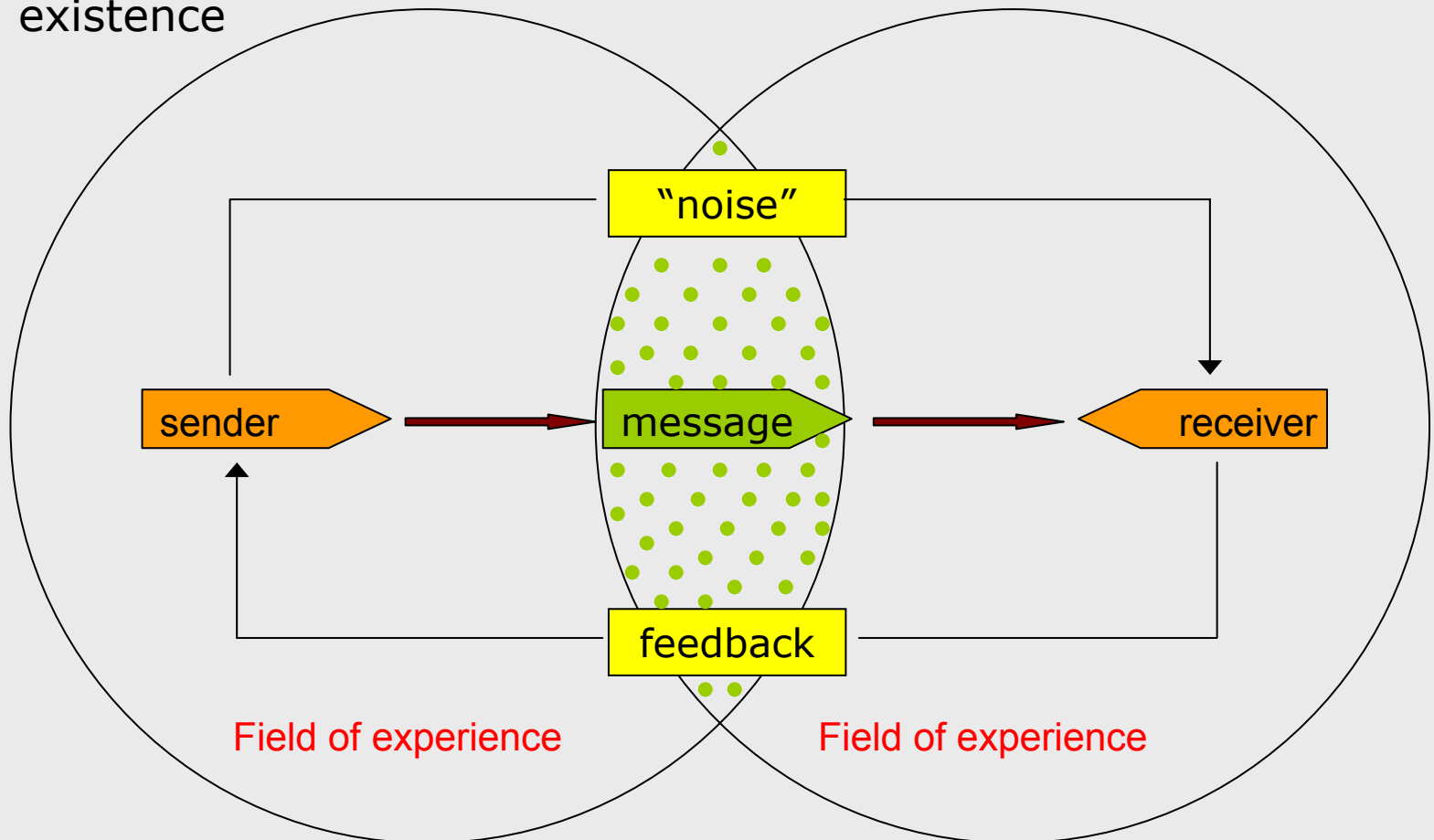
▸ In other words, a crisis is a turning point:

it is the time which prompts to a number of choices;
their consequences will determine the outcome of the crisis itself

Defining risk communication

The communication process

▸ To place bits of information in an individual's mind hoping to influence those future decisions/behaviour affecting our existence

The public perception is built on memories

▸ **The field of experience**:

- The key to the success of any kind of communication
- It is the result of the continuous aggregation and accumulation of perceptions and beliefs about facts, reality, situations, individuals, circumstances, images, sounds, feelings, stimuli of any kind
- It belongs to the receiver as well as the sender (!)
- All of these build up in a complex and convoluted network of mental association

The system of perceptions guiding the individual
in the choice for a product, a service or a brand

Communicating means retaining control

▶ **Keep negative peceptions to a minimum** and stress the positive values which are entailed in (or can be inferred by) the context

▶ Whatever the key message this does not exist until it finds a precise place in the individual's mind

▶ The ability to master as many communication variables as possible is a fine-tuning process extended in time based on:
  – Information integration
  – Consistency and continuity of message, style and tone of comunication

If time is key invest on it

- If all of this is a time-requiring exercise during crises time is the least available resource

As a consequence, if seen isolated

crisis communication is a recipe for certain failure

- If time is key let's use it to reverse the paradygm

Assume risk communication as a broad scale action incorporating crisis communication as a special-purpose integrated tool/procedure

Risk communication as a long term process

Risk communication entail integration as key foundation

▸ Risk communication can be defined as the process of:

– Informing people about the hazards of a specific location

– Helping them understand risk assessment and, above all, management

– Diffusing scientifically-based sound perception of the possible risks

– Allow communities to access techno-scientific knowledge through balanced language and contents

– Keep constantly related all the issues implied by risk

   ▸ Social, political, economical, institutional and cultural

– Create pre-conditions for and stimulate the community/stakeholders participation in decision making about how risk should be managed

A multi-year specific communication strategy and plan are essential

The basic facts 1.

▸ Analyse the audience
   – What they want to know
   – What is needed for them to understand
   – What is realistically achievable
   – What differences separate sub-groups

▸ Set your objectives with honesty ad realism
   – Don't downplay or overplay

▸ Earn trust and establish credibility
   – Be sure to understand people
   – Be accessible/available
   – Never assume without verification

▸ Learn of/from previous community involvement experiences
   – Assess existing perceptions and attitudes and expected behaviour
   – Establish the "degree" of the communication
   – Avoid re-inventing the wheel

The basic facts 2.

▸ Integrate risk strategy in the broader communication action plan of the local/central authorities
  – Fine-tune on tone, style of communication and content/message to which people are alread used to
  – Build credibility on a broader picture of "care" for the community
  – Segment messages depending on groups/stakeholders

▸ Assume the risk assessment process as the key message
  – Make understand differences and various degrees of risk
  – Get people involved through interest to learn their specific situation

▸ Hire a communication specialist to plan the process
  – In order to keep the right momentum and continuity to the action
  – Amateurial approach can result in lack of foresight and planning, thus incurring in a complete failure

What to do next: when risk turns into crisis

When crisis is manifest

▸ Every crisis is, by definition, unexpected and somehow unpredictable

▸ Nevertheless it is crucial to be prepared in advance, simulating the various emergency scenarios, creating and tuning up the guidelines for crisis communication

Managing crisis with effectiveness

▸ Quickness
  – a rapidly evolving situation requires a fast reaction

▸ One voice
  – crisis brings confusion, it is crucial to speak with one voice with no hesitation or contradiction

▸ Coordination
  – cooperation between all actors/stakeholders involved

▸ Emotive participation and compassion

▸ Acting / Communicating
  – no news blackout, no defensive strategy, but proactiveness and willingness

Managing follow-up to crisis

▸ Even though the first moments of a crisis are often decisive, it is also very important to manage what comes after

▸ From a communication perspective, it is recommended to monitor (with the appropriate surveing techniques) the perception of public opinion regarding the organisation behaviour and response throughout the crisis

▸ Furthermore it's also recommended to promote a communication campaign, devoted to underline the efficiency and the ability of the organisation in handling the crisis (if the handling of the crisis is successful, of course..........)

▸ A number of organisations gained standing and improved their public image after a successful crisis management, diffusing a sense of reliability and increasing people's trust

One example from a different story

Promptiness is not all what is needed

▸ In one of the most tragic aerial disasters of the last decade 747 TWA flight 800 from New York to Paris, exploded at high altitude still reaching to its cruising slot

▸ The disaster was appaling, TWA reacted quickly:
  – Within 13 hours the communication manager was in New York having been flown in from London that same night
  – In a matter of hours all TWA board was fully operative having recollected from a St. Louis venue
  – within 23 hours all the passengers relatives' were informed by person
  – within 24 hours the *TWA Trauma Team* – whose head flew in from his vacation in Southern California - was fully operative

▸ Nevertheless, all handbooks point to the TWA case as an example of completely failed communication practice.......

▸ Basically, TWA approach to media and publicity was inadequate:

– A unique and central crisis communication center was never constituted

– TWA had problems collecting, processing and handling internal information and updates (Twa managing director communicated a wrong number and year of construction of the plane)

– Twa homepage was replaced with a blank page reporting a brief press release, never updated for weeks after the plane crash

– Twa's crisis hotline received a huge number of calls, but noboby (relatives or journalists) was ever called back after the "crisis"

To summarise……

Some tips for action

▸ Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner
  - Information not persuasion
  - Build participation to create consensus

▸ Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts
  - Study, analyse, segment, conform, adapt

▸ Listen to the public' specific concerns
  - Be a credible referent

▸ Be honest, frank and open
  - …..but take care of cultural differences

▸ Coordinate and co-operate with all stakeholders
  - Local as well as central

Some tips for action

▸ **Know the media** (and learn to handle them!)
  – They like sensations and shouting more than truth and sound information
  – Clear and straightforward messages

▸ **Acknowledge sufferance** (physical and psychological)
  – Either feared or experienced

▸ **Track progresses** and evaluate your plan strengths and areas for improvement
  – Create a circular process of enhancement
  – Look at other experiences

Thanks for your time!

MKTP Marketing Territoriale srl
Via Bogino 9, 10123 Torino, Italy

t. +39/011815902
f. +39/0118134560

i.canteri@mktp.it
info@mktp.it