

# LET'S TALK:

## COMMUNICATION DURING TOUGH TIMES



**Session Premise:** You will be involved in a crisis during your career.

**Objectives:** Don't have any.

**When Things Start to Unravel, Remember This Stuff**

Serious Accident Investigation Training  
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## When Things Start to Unravel, Remember This Stuff

- **You understand you need to communicate.**

If you don't communicate, someone else will. Keep in touch the agency administrator and employees, as appropriate. Make sure local elected officials are apprised of what you're doing. Involve the community to the degree that you can.

- **Always have a message.**

A message is simply what you want people to remember. It should be truthful and concise. Each member of your team should be aware of what the messages are.

- **Keep calm. Be courteous. Never lose your cool.**

Be calm, courteous, calm, polite, professional, and calm.

Remember, too, as a member of a team, that you might be dealing with people who are upset or perhaps even in shock, and that includes reporters, agency employees and local officials. Your calm, professional and sympathetic approach will help them – and you – to get through the rough patches.

**“Make yourself calmer than you feel, force yourself to pretend you're calm ... you'll be able to figure out a way to get out, if you remain calm.”**

*Rudy Giuliani, in an interview with CNN, after 9/11*

- **Keep it simple.**

We tend to talk in code and acronyms. Watch out for the jargon. Provide enough information, but not too much.

**“Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers.”**

*General Colin Powell*

- **Honesty is still the best policy.**

Honesty works. The public generally has a good sense of when someone isn't truthful. In this day, with so much information readily available, if you fib, you're going to be found out.

As public employees, we also are rightfully held to a higher standard of ethics. That's okay. That's the way it should be.

**“Always tell the truth. That way, you don't have to remember what you said.”**

*Mark Twain*

- **Show genuine concern for people and their plight.**

As investigators, you're going to be dealing with facts. But you are also stepping into a world of swirling emotions. If you try to eliminate or minimize the human element of tragedy, you will not be as successful in your quest for facts and straightforward opinions. It's okay to be sympathetic and reassuring. Some people are going to need that. Maybe all of them.

Here is a template for showing concern for people and their plight in a public setting.

- *Express your concern:* “We know that many people are hurt and are having a difficult time dealing with the events that this community has experienced.”
- *Take action:* “We're here to help identify facts and find out more about what went wrong. We'll issue a preliminary report in a week. We have all received advanced training in investigations and we are here to help.”
- *Provide perspective:* “Working outdoors can be dangerous, especially in firefighting. Safety is non-negotiable. We hope that our work here identifies what needs to be changed so that everyone who works in the fire community is safer in the future.”

*Hint:* Can this be overdone? Yes. You can't fake sincerity. It doesn't work.

*Statement:* This is not a formula. We do not reduce tragedy to that. But it is a starting point, a reliable guide that can serve you when you aren't sure where to begin.



## Bonus: Food for Thought. The Times, They are a'Changin'

We're living in a time when old media is in significant decline. New media is ascending. Consider that everyone you talk with beyond the team probably has the capability to upload quotes, documents and photos in about five minutes.

Within ten years, it's estimated that 80 percent of the population will get their news *entirely* from a handheld device. We need to change our thinking about what the media is and who reporters are.

### Notes

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## Summary of the Session

- You need to communicate. If you don't someone else will. Keep in touch.
- Remember, always have a purpose and a message for your communications.
- Stay calm.
- Your job as a member of the team is to find facts, but you must deal with the emotional needs and conditions of those affected by the circumstances, from family to friends to employees to the community at large.

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