

The Army, NEPA, and Risk Communication

Mike Flannery and Keith Fulton

In the short period of two or perhaps three days of training, you can become aware of and practice the skills required to incorporate risk communications into your management philosophy. Risk communications training, to be effective, must incorporate role-playing and include the following: effective listening; a stress on nonverbal communications; conflict handling modes; trust and credibility; dialogue; and positional and principled negotiation.

Learning by doing is the best axiom in developing these oral communications skills. And while these skills are related to public relations, they are very different from public affairs skills you may have been exposed to such as dealing with media "sound bites." Besides, most public relations are handled by the public affairs office. Risk communications is for when you're on your own.

Seek out this training for yourself or even your entire environmental staff so that your effectiveness as an environmental manager is enhanced. You will never be able to win emotionally charged activists over to your position. However, by employing risk communication skills in addressing their opposition in public meetings, you will have a positive impact on open-minded, undecided individuals who witness this exchange.

You will most likely win them over to your position and thereby incrementally increase those who support a reasoned, balanced, and environmentally sound decision. © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Mike Flannery, REM, CESM, is an Army regional environmental coordinator from the Army Environmental Center's Western Regional Environmental Office, in Denver, Colorado. His area of responsibility includes Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. Army regional environmental coordinators communicate, facilitate, and coordinate the Army's environmental program with state and federal regulators and the other services. Keith Fulton, of Fulton Communications, in Houston, Texas, is a mechanical engineer and former plant manager for a well-known petrochemical company. He is a dynamic instructor in the field of risk communication, cross-cultural communication and public outreach. He and Fulton Communications have assisted the Army and the other military services in addressing cutting edge issues of high concern to the public.

“They don’t care that you know until they know that you care.”
- Will Rogers

As an environmental manager, how good are you at risk communication? You may even be wondering, “what’s risk communication?”

Well, maybe you have been in charge of a public meeting to “scope” an environmental impact statement. You probably had your National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) “purpose of and need for” declaration down pat—with plenty of charts and graphs and a hired “expert” to back you up. Or maybe you were presenting the results of an environmental assessment (EA), which, of course, pointed to a finding of no significant impact.

What do these activities have to do with risk communication? Their common thread is: *you are communicating in a high-concern, low-trust situation*. There are many other examples, which may come to mind from personal experience, especially if you have been in the environmental management business for a while.

Now assume you are in the Army, or perhaps working for the Army as a civilian environmental manager. Emotional responses to environmental matters are sometimes ballistic. Some are convinced the military is the absolute worst polluter of all time. They just know that for a fact. How can the government be so callous towards our children’s health? Why *not* return the ground water and contaminated soil to its original condition—you people and your out of control weapons ranges created the pollution in the first place!

Sound familiar? It’s hard to communicate with a group in a public forum or an official meeting where the atmosphere is so rarefied that a poor response could detonate the meeting and maybe truncate your career. If you haven’t yet found yourself in a high-concern, low-trust environmental meeting, it’s just a matter of time—to be forewarned is to be fore-armed. If you have already suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in a public relations disaster of environmental proportions, the concept of “risk communications” will be even more relevant.

Here is a case in point. Let me tell you about military readiness and environmental concerns at Makua Military Reservation (MMR), in Hawaii. Consisting of a 4,190-acre fire and maneuver range, MMR lies just west of Schofield Barracks, on the leeward (that is, the dry and western) coast of Oahu. It is mostly on ceded land, taken over by the military during World War II. There are firing ranges located on Schofield Barracks; for live-fire *and* maneuver training of up to company-size units, Makua is used by units of the 2nd Infantry Brigades and the Aviation and Artillery Brigades of the 25th Infantry Division (Light), on Oahu. The Marine Corps uses MMR for live-fire exercises, as do units of the Hawaii Army National Guard and the Army Reserve’s 9th Regional Support Command. Therefore, the continued accessibility of Makua is imperative to the combat readiness of these troops.

NEPA documentation required in planning for a USMC amphibious over-the-shore exercise into MMR a little over two years ago met with



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objections by native Hawaiians and the exercise did not take place. Some two years ago, a combination of events, including wildfires resulting from weapons firing during a particularly dry season, caused the division commander to temporarily close MMR to live fire and maneuver. An out of court settlement of a citizen suit resulted in the Army agreeing to conduct an EA for the operation of MMR.

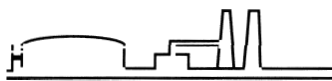
Here are some of the complicated issues involved. The Oahu tree snail, as well as 27 plant species found on the island, has been identified as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In conformance with Section 7 of the ESA, the Army consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in July 1998. This resulted in certain restrictions to training and the requirement to develop a wild land fire management plan. Milestones for the plan were established, and the plan will be implemented prior to resumption of live firing. Additionally, the Army developed a plan on biological actions to stabilize the endangered species, which will require expenditures both on and off the range for many years. EPA Region IX is expected to approve delayed closure of the Open Burning/Open Detonation site for dud rounds. Also a pilot phytoremediation project to address groundwater contamination is to be funded under the Agricultural Biological Remediation Program.

And finally, in accordance with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, a native Hawaiian structure, known as Ukanipo Heiau, located near the shoreline, has been opened for religious use to aboriginal Hawaiians. The Army is working with native Hawaiians on a long-term management plan.

So, at a public meeting called by the Army last December, all the study and substance surrounding these environmental issues were to be made known to the concerned citizens of Waianae. This is an economically underdeveloped town on the leeward coast just to the south of MMR. They wanted no part of it. The Army's plan to resume training met fierce resistance from a coalition of residents and environmentalists who asserted that military training, particularly with live weapons fire, is destroying the valley's cultural, historic, and environmental legacy. "Our problem with the military is they don't understand the significance of Makua Valley," said one leeward coast resident and outspoken opponent of the Army's plans. "They're bombing the Earth Mother."

What happened? Simply put, they didn't care what the Army knew until they knew that the Army cared. The issue had become entwined in local politics, the nascent sovereignty movement, and concerns over economic development on the relatively impoverished leeward coast. After more than two years of study, the Army announced that it planned to resume training, though in a more limited way, with units of more than 100 soldiers conducting operations and firing weapons in narrowly drawn zones.

The 25th Division's spokespersons argued that they had designed the training to minimize, if not eliminate, the effects on Makua Valley's historic sites and environment, but the plan provoked a new round of protests and a new lawsuit. This time, the residents contended that the



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Army had failed to conduct a more rigorous and expensive environmental impact study (EIS). The less time-consuming EA, they said, did not consider a variety of issues, including whether there were alternative sites for military training.

"There have been a significant number of impacts from the training that the Army has just not considered fully," said a lawyer for Earthjustice. After protests that included a follow-on raucous community meeting in January in the town of Waianae—held to hear what the citizens were concerned about—the Army withdrew the plan, saying more time was required to consult with residents and others. The Army also tried to have the lawsuit dismissed, but on March 1, a federal judge in Honolulu refused.

Unit commanders say the prolonged suspension of training in the Makua Valley has caused what one officer called "a slow degradation" of readiness. Last year only 8 of the division's 18 companies completed the annual live-fire training exercise the Army requires.

As mentioned, Schofield Barracks itself has firing ranges, but the commanders say only Makua has the space to allow a company of soldiers to maneuver through the terrain while firing their weapons and experiencing the thunderous impact of artillery and other weapons exploding near them.

"You don't want to experience that sensation for the first time in combat, with all of the other stress you face," said the division's assistant commander.

The general maintained that the Army had gone to great lengths to protect the environment at Makua, despite the fires. Evidence of the fires is still visible in the scorched trees along the valley floor. The division has a team of scientists monitoring the plants and trying to propagate the rarest of them, and an archaeologist working to protect the ruins from the troops.

But a physician from Waianae and one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit said the Army still acted as it had in the past, refusing to consider alternative ways to simulate combat. "This is the 21st century," he said. "I think if they can break out of that cold-war mentality, they could find there are other ways to train."

So what can be done? Let's talk about "risk communications." This is a unique skill set required for communicating about safety, environmental, health, and other issues with the public. This is particularly difficult for the military when communicating with those who do not trust us and have concerns about us.

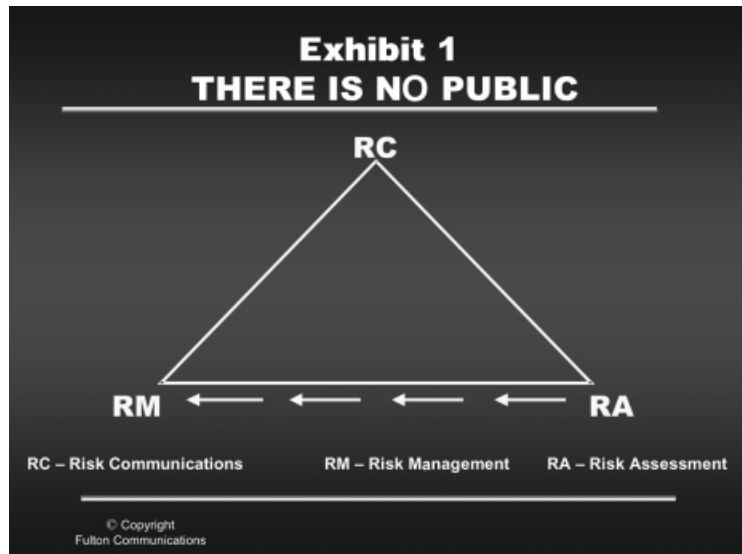
The field of risk communications is relatively new compared to its two related fields of risk assessment and risk management (see **Exhibit 1**). Risk assessment and risk management have been around for many centuries. Even building the Egyptian pyramids probably required some risk assessment and risk management along with the availability of labor to meet a certain schedule.

Risk assessment is the starting point. It is the science of assessing probabilities of risk. Risk management incorporates the risk assessment into decisions on facilities design, operating and maintenance procedures, soldier training, and emergency preparedness and response. In combat, Army commanders deal with risk management on a daily basis.



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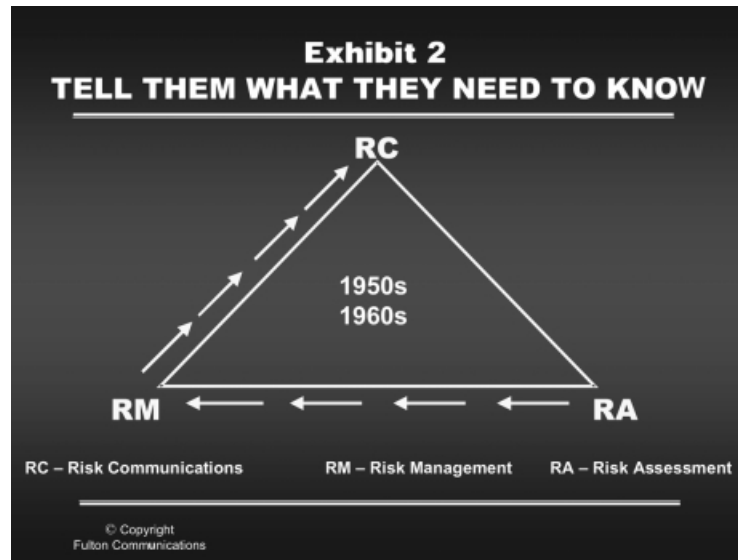
Exhibit 1.



Risk communications—call it a social science—is communicating risk assessment and risk management to affected groups such as employees, the community, the media, and other stakeholders. Risk communications is a field that primarily developed in this century and became more significant as the public became more interested and demanding about business and government activities that affected them, especially activities by the military. An example of this is right-to-know legislation and regulation, such as EPA’s Toxic Release Inventory, which is now being extended to include the use of military munitions.

The importance of risk communications is just beginning to become evident to today’s military. Even as recently as during the Cold War, much of the military’s risk communications consisted of “telling them if we think they need to know” (see **Exhibit 2**). The environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, combined with incidents like the notorious mid-1980s hazardous waste violations at Aberdeen Proving Ground’s chemical warfare “pilot plant,” began to change all that. Most recently the alleged groundwater contamination of the Cape Cod sole source aquifer by the Army National Guard at Massachusetts Military Reservation caused EPA—for the first time ever—to order a halt to military training. This set off alarm bells throughout the Pentagon. The public—mostly through the actions of environmental activist groups—demands more information, expresses concerns or outrage, and insists on more control over military operations. This means that the military suddenly has to operate in an area in which it is very uncomfortable—one which is foreign to their traditional mindset. Some avoided that. Others jumped in. It is a time of change, and change is usually stressful. In some instances, an uninformed but concerned public started influencing risk management decisions, which

Exhibit 2.



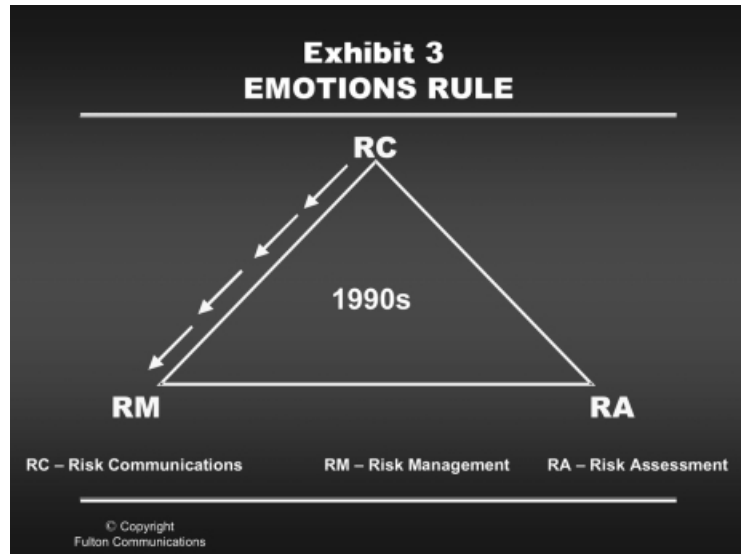
might not have been in the best interest of society. Risk communications generated by emotions and media attention, such as is currently happening at Umatilla Army Chemical Depot, drive the risk management decisions, bypassing the science of risk assessment (see **Exhibit 3**).

Some have argued that examples of this bypassing of risk assessment included the huge expenditures programmed and funded for cleanup of Rocky Mountain Arsenal and Aberdeen Proving Ground. Many of those decisions were risk management decisions driven more by emotional, political, and social factors than by science. Thus, they had the effect of diverting billions of dollars from more important military needs.

If the military spends billions of dollars to clean up and improve something that has a small incremental value to improving society, what is the alternative use of those dollars that might have benefited the military or society more? For example, could some of the billions of dollars for asbestos cleanup by the Army be instead used for building new family housing for military families? As an aside, much of the current controversy over greenhouse gases could lead to premature decisions for the developed world before policy makers understand the risk assessment of world climate history variations, deforestation impact, carbon dioxide ocean sink impact, and so forth.

What to do about this? The Army and the other services must become more active in the risk communications business if it wants to avoid wasteful decisions that affect its bottom line and society's bottom line. The Army cannot simply blame environmental activists and the media if risk management decisions are driven by emotional risk communications. The Army must play a more active role with all stakeholders in the risk communications business. In other words, the Army needs to take the

Exhibit 3.



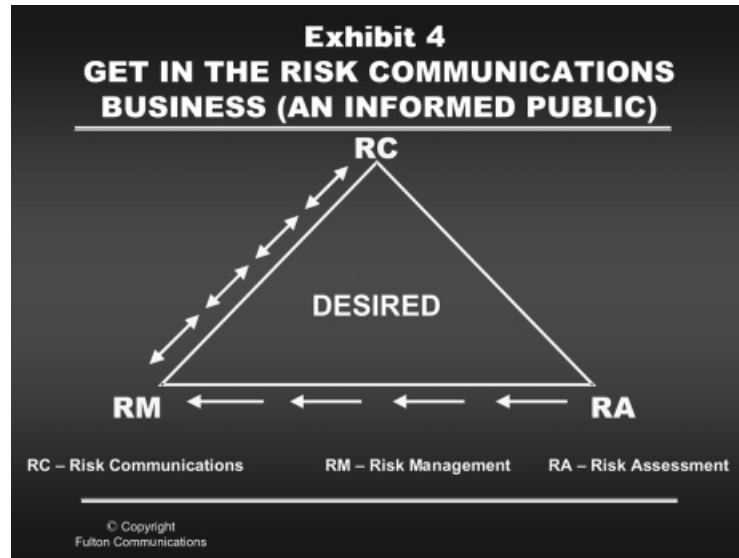
science (risk assessment) then consider alternatives (risk management) and be willing to discuss (risk communications) these alternatives with all stakeholders, even some stakeholders that actively oppose us. This also means the Army must be willing to go into an iterative process and retest some of its risk management decisions based on input received in the risk communications process. In other words, the Army must be willing to move back and forth on the left-hand side of the triangle (see **Exhibit 4**).

Here's how the military can become more active and effective in risk communications.

First, recognize and admit that some of the mistrust of the military has merit. The Army is not always open about issues, which leaves the impression of not caring and in some cases seems downright arrogant. When the Army makes mistakes as an organization, it is frequently unwilling to admit them. Also, the Army does not often admit that some of the improvements in safety and environmental controls and emissions reductions came about because of government regulations. The Army should certainly take credit for these improvements, but not make it sound like they were done strictly on the installation's own initiative.

Second, obtain risk communications skills through training and practice. Risk communications skills are not about spinning your messages and they are not about being a great public speaker. Risk communications skills can be acquired by almost anyone. Risk communications skill development is like riding a bicycle. It takes a while to develop the skills, but if you practice, it becomes automatic. If you don't practice, you will continue to wobble and fall off.

Exhibit 4.



Here are some of the risk communications “bicycle skills”:

- Recognize that facts and data are secondary and tertiary messages to many community stakeholders. This is a difficult adjustment coming from a military background. It is much different from the way the military commands, controls, and performs risk assessment and risk management. And for that matter, it is much different from most of our daily interpersonal relationships. It is a form of communication that is unique and quite different. In the military, facts and data are usually primary.
- In risk communications with many community stakeholders, if your facts and data are primary, your trust level may actually decline. When a small group confronts you after a public meeting concerning their view that environmental pollution by a military installation may have caused a friend’s death from cancer, asking “What kind of cancer did your friend have?” is the wrong response. By instinctively beginning to work the problem, as most military officers are trained, they are likely to get so angry at your immediate need to get facts that they will probably walk away in disbelief. You should put yourself in their shoes—empathize—and genuinely tell them that you are sorry they lost a friend.
- Never be defensive or “push back.” By pushing back, you initially put the responsibility on them. For example, if you are told, “We don’t think you’re telling the truth about those numbers,” instinctively you might respond, “Why do you feel that we aren’t telling the truth?” This is “pushing back.” That’s the way the



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military would communicate at work. Instead, say something like, "Our numbers are accurate. Perhaps we haven't done a good enough job in explaining them. Could you help me understand a little more about your concern?"

- If asked if you think that it was fair that people were exposed to the military's safety risks, responding with "What do you mean when you say fair?" would get them even more upset. Say something like, "We're here tonight to hear your concerns about safety and look for ways of responding to your concerns. What I believe is fair is that we do a better job of doing that. Can you help me by telling me more about what you think we should do?" By responding in this manner, you usually get specific suggestions, many of which could be acted on. That's how to reduce their concerns and build trust.
- You must empathize, particularly in emotional situations. Empathy is not sympathy or agreement. It is simply understanding why they feel the way they do. The world's best negotiators are tough and firm. But, they have excellent empathy skills.

In risk communications, *how* you say it (the nonverbal) is usually more important than *what* you say (the verbal). This is because people communicate emotions nonverbally; they communicate facts and data verbally. Communicators must tune up their nonverbal skills, which include control over body language, vocal inflection, space, dress, barriers, and location. Try saying, "I'm glad you're here tonight," in a positive way, then in a negative way, and you will quickly see the power of nonverbal communication. Role-play this situation: *Have someone say to you an emotional statement such as, "I think the Army's chemical plant caused my child's cancer." Before you respond, have the person stare at the ceiling or look down at the floor for a second. If they do this, their words won't matter.*

There are many other aspects to risk communications with the public that Army public communicators need. What is important is for the Army to be willing to get even more involved in the risk communications area. Otherwise, military readiness will be adversely affected because emotional perceptions rather than the risk assessment will drive risk management decisions more. It is up to those in Army leadership to turn that around. They have the resources to do it.

This article covered the need for risk communications skills.¹ Equally important is an effective community outreach strategy and plan.² Risk communications would be but one component of such a plan. Communication with the media is another, quite different skill set. Legal advice and representation, which is often necessary, is also a consideration. An effective community outreach program focuses on stakeholder identification, determining stakeholder concerns and interests, message development, creation of a communications tool kit, and communications skills development.

Ultimately, an effective community outreach strategy finds ways to provide concerned and interested stakeholders with more control of the issue, more familiarity with the military, and more recognition of the benefits the military provides. ❖

NOTES

1. Six step model for risk communication interaction

1. Express EMPATHY
2. Provide CONCLUSION
3. Provide ONE FACT supporting conclusion
4. Provide SECOND FACT supporting conclusion
5. Repeat CONCLUSION
6. Describe FUTURE ACTION

2. Challenges, such as the ones at MMR in Hawaii and the Massachusetts Military Reservation (the other MMR), are known broadly around the Pentagon as “encroachment issues.” They have simmered for years, but in the last decade they have become more frequent and more intense. Bases across the country are facing legal and political challenges.

The Navy has a crucial problem with the bombing range at Vieques, in Puerto Rico. The Marine Corps are feeling environmental pressure at Camp Pendleton, the last remaining green space between Los Angeles and San Diego, California. Until timely intervention by Congress last year, the Air Force was facing the prospect of a sweeping lawsuit that would halt low-level training flights nationwide until a comprehensive study could be done on their impact.

And many believe the challenges will only increase as environmental awareness grows, as American Indians demand greater respect for traditional homelands, and as suburban sprawl reaches once-remote bases, sharply increasing complaints about noise, safety, and health.

“It is a problem that is real,” Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld said at his Senate confirmation hearing in January. “The United States needs bases. It needs ranges. It needs test ranges. And it cannot provide the training and the testing that people need before they go into battle unless those kinds of facilities are available. And each year that goes by, there are greater and greater pressures on them.”

A classic risk communications scenario.