

Communicating risk:

Bridging science, policy and practice



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This article distils a presentation at a seminar hosted by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee in partnership with the Hazards Forum on 22 January 2025.

The presentation, part of the session “Communicating Risk – What, Who, Why Does It Matter?”, underscored the critical interplay between scientific risk assessment, effective communication, and regulatory compliance. It highlighted systemic gaps in risk identification and the need for a cultural shift in how organisations perceive vulnerability.

The challenge of risk misconception

Many organisations and their people believe that serious incidents are unlikely because of existing procedures, training, and competent staff. This “it’ll never happen to us” attitude often stems from an incomplete understanding of risks. An article by Morgan and Fischhoff¹ noted that effective risk communication requires dialogue with stakeholders to identify their information needs – a process often overlooked in traditional science communication. Psychological research further reveals that individuals overestimate mutual understanding, leading to gaps in risk assessment.

Many examples illustrate the consequences of this oversight. In a case involving a construction company, repeated incidents of overhead cables being struck on the M6 motorway highlighted a failure to learn from prior events. Similarly, a rail accident investigation in Scotland exposed lapses in asset inspection and design adherence, despite assurances of robust processes. These are but two examples that support Dame Judith Hackitt’s observations in the 2022 Thomas Ashton Institute Annual Lecture,

“There are no new accidents just different people making the same mistakes because of a failure to recognise

the relevance to them of other people’s experience and therefore not learning.”

Not on my watch

Another tendency affecting leadership is what is known as “fundamental attribution error”. This is the inclination to judge others implicated in adverse outcomes as bad actors whilst underestimating the impact of other pressures. Organisations assume that in similar circumstances they would have experienced a different outcome: “We would have taken X action” or “we would have followed Y procedure”.

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Most organisations believe they learn their lessons, and that they have measures in place to ensure action points are followed up. They believe there is no falling between the cracks in their organisation. The truth is, across industries, often organisations are blind to their own vulnerabilities. Leaders think they know how managers, staff, suppliers and customers would act in hypothetical situations, but the reality is that real-world pressures often reveal different choices.

Expect the expected

There is another option. To mitigate this natural bias, leadership teams should promote a culture of “it might happen to us”. They need to sit comfortably with a level of vulnerability that fully appreciates risk, and places risk at the heart of the organisation.

Understanding risks that cut across sectors allows organisations to mitigate those risks. It opens the door to a tailored understanding of how risk can affect the organisation, whether that is a failure to plan, a failure to supervise, a failure to manage, workers undertaking tasks without the necessary skill or competence and with unsuitable equipment.

Considering potential points of failure such as these thematic strands moves the dial on the conversation around risk. Risk can be seen more positively, as a friend not a foe, that can be mitigated.

What is the risk?

Before this can be achieved, the first task is to properly identify the risk. To reduce the risk, you must see the risk. This is often where the gap exists; risks are not identified despite the allocation of resource to the assessment of risk and the presence of risk assessments and mitigation measures. A failure to identify the risk means an inability to rely on the

defence that the organisation did what was necessary, that it reduced the risk (in a health and safety context) to “as low as reasonably practicable.” Without identifying risk, an organisation cannot rely upon this defence *ex post facto* where a catastrophic event occurs.

Say the risk

A tailored and specific kind of communication is essential. Risk communication cannot be overly complex; it requires adopting simple language in multiple forms that communicates clearly how risks have been identified and reduced to, in the context of health and safety, “as low as reasonably practicable”. Overly complex reports are the enemy.

It is human nature to overestimate how well we understand one another. We overestimate our understanding of others and assume others’ emotional states align more closely with our own than they do. Without talking to one another both clearly and directly, there is no way of ensuring what we are attempting to communicate has been relayed and fully understood. Talk is not cheap, is it a necessary part of the communication process in getting our point across and align understandings.

The importance of plain English

Work-related risk must be communicated in a simple form. Scientists, engineers and other specialist professionals must be able to get to the kernel of the issue in language that non-technical colleagues can understand. They must speak in plain English.

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A failure to do so will mean that the company board, shareholders and others may never fully understand or appreciate the risk that presents itself. It may also mean that the individuals involved will

not be able to communicate easily with a regulator, a judge or a jury, should intervention or a catastrophic event ever materialise. Officials operating in overstretched regulatory authorities may not always know or have experience of the specific language of the industry.

In the dock

In this jurisdiction, we do not have specialist business courts hearing cases relating to workplace accidents or other regulatory breaches. Prosecutions brought for breaches of health and safety regulations are heard in the Magistrates and Crown Court, a forum that is more familiar with cases involving violent and economic crime rather than regulatory breaches such as workplace safety incidents. The need to explain the corporate defendant’s approach to risk in a language that will assist the Judge is critical to achieving the best outcome in such challenging circumstances.

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If the organisation and its leadership team want to challenge a prosecution, the case will be heard before a jury. Twelve ordinary people with no prior specialist knowledge will listen to the evidence and decide if the corporate and/or the individuals implicated are guilty, or if they can rely upon a defence. Again, the ability of senior management, board members and others involved or implicated to communicate what happened and how they managed risk in the organisation is critical to achieving the best outcome.

Communicating risk – learning lessons

There is a plethora of information and learning that is publicly available to organisations and leadership teams. But is it in a format that is readily understood?

At the start of 2023, the UK private sector had 5.51 million small businesses (0–49 employees) 99.2% of the total business population. Regulators such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provide a wealth of guidance designed to be easily accessible and readable. The UK government has undertaken several initiatives to simplify government publications, aiming to make them more accessible, transparent, and efficient for users, including public bodies, businesses, and citizens. Since 2003, the HSE have undertaken an exercise of simplifying their guidance. There is a balance between detail and simplicity which has presented some challenges and so this remains a work in progress.

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Public inquiries publish reports and executive summaries which often comment on leadership and management cultures and tendencies that gave rise to the issues at the heart of the matter they have been tasked with examining. Such reports can inform risk in a helpful and meaningful way. But are they published and promoted in a manner accessible to small businesses?

The importance of corporate memory

Organisations with direct experience of serious incidents demonstrate heightened risk awareness. Preserving corporate memory is a challenge as leadership teams change and that memory fades without institutional knowledge sharing. Will AI have a role to play in capturing the memory and in Communicating Risk?

Citations

¹ Morgan K, Fischhoff B (2023) Mental models for scientists communicating with the public. *Issues in Science and Technology*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2. Available at <https://issues.org/mental-models-scientists-risk-communication-morgan-fischhoff>