

# Risk and Risk Communication Issues and Advice related to Seismic Risk for Commercial Buildings in Canterbury

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In the aftermath of recent earthquakes in the Canterbury region, there are significant challenges in both fully understanding the evolving risk landscape and communicating with stakeholders about these risks and how they may affect them. This short document aims to provide a quick snap-shot of relevant principles, drawn from a variety of experts in the fields of crisis management, risk management and risk communication that are particularly relevant for those managing and communicating about seismic risk to commercial buildings in Canterbury.

1. **Make sure you start with clearly defined objectives for what you are trying to achieve through this recovery.** Rebuilding and recovery are incredibly complex and if you don't have a clear set of objectives that clearly articulate what it is you are trying to achieve at the end of the recovery process then it becomes that much more difficult. From a risk management perspective, a defined set of objectives is vital. Your recovery objectives set the context against which risks can be identified and assessed and, as there are few risk free options, enable the balancing of risks across competing priorities.
2. **In the absence of a clear articulated forward plan, people are more likely to become mavericks.** Recovery is a complex beast and independent initiatives to speed recovery in one area can have knock-on consequences to can slow recovery overall. If you want a coordinated recovery, then you need to communicate the master plan as soon as possible or at least tell people the process you are following to develop one. If people get a sense that there is no plan (and none to be forthcoming in the near future), then they will simply go ahead make their own.
3. **Building long-term trust is all important.** Trust takes a long time to build up and a very short time to lose; without trust any future measures you try to implement are destined to fail. Resist the temptation to let immediate priorities get in the way of doing what is right for building long-term trust. If you do need to move quickly on particular issues (which sometimes has to happen), then make a conscious effort to fully explain things afterwards.
4. **Communicate more and more often than you think you need to.** In periods of crisis or significant uncertainty people are hungry for information and it is far better to 'feed the beast' with information than to allow a perception to develop that information is for some reason being withheld or spun for a particular purpose. Once a perception of poor communication has formed you need to swing the pendulum the other way – over communicate until that trust is restored.
5. **A risk assessment doesn't make decisions, people do.** It is incredibly tempting to tell the public to wait for the "experts" to complete their analyses and tell us what we should do. Any sort of expert analysis however only provides information on which to base a decision on, that information then needs to be evaluated against a complex mix of values and competing priorities to decide what the outcome should be. In the same vein, while a risk assessment will provide information on the size or level of a risk – communities then need to decide if that that level of risk is acceptable or not, and the amount they are prepared to invest in reducing it. What this means is that rather than focus on keeping affected

communities/stakeholder groups 'informed' you need to find ways to enable them to be legitimate partners in your decision making processes.

6. **Don't wait until you have all the answers before you start communicating.** Talking with people about the process you are going through to make a decision is just as important as the outcome of that decision. If you don't have the required information for people right now, then tell them what you are doing to get that information and when you expect to get it to them.
7. **Be clear about uncertainties and what you don't know.** People get that there are complex issues involved and they would far rather you be open and honest about the issues being grappled with. Rather than falling into the trap of saying that "everything is complex and uncertain", try to tease out those things you can give people certainty about, and what are the key bits of information you are waiting on to reduce the uncertainty on other issues.
8. **When talking about risks make sure you cover three topics:** 1) describe what might happen and how important that might be to different audiences, 2) the chances that the above might take place within a certain timeframe, and 3) explain what options are available for managing the risk and the implications of those options and how they might impact on other risks. Missing one or more of these key areas reduces the effectiveness of your risk communication message.
9. **Let people know what they can do to manage the risk themselves.** People tend to feel more anxious about risks over which they feel that they have no personal control. Whenever you are talking about risks that affect people, make sure that you focus on the things that they can do to help manage that risk. Also bear in mind the anxiety created by people feeling disempowered over decisions affecting their future; giving people an opportunity to have visibility of and input into the decision making process is a really important element of helping them to come to terms with the outcome of such decisions.
10. **People need to feel heard.** It is important to listen and provide tangible evidence that you have heard what people are telling you. Risk communication isn't about telling people what to think, it is about engaging people in a two-way dialogue about risk issues that affect them. This two way communication approach can take many forms e.g. a representative stakeholder advisory group for overall strategy design, face to face meetings in their space or premises [not yours], personal networking, quick phone or e surveys, a workshop to get input [not just to 'present facts' as such]. Also take time to look at your organisation from an external perspective – would someone from outside be able to easily find the right people to talk to?
11. **Not all risks are equal.** Be careful about using risk comparisons that ignore distinctions that people find important. Look for factors that might significantly increase or decrease people's perception of a particular about the level risk – factors such as personal control, the voluntariness of risk exposure, familiarity, natural vs manmade sources of risk, how memorable the risk is, how dreaded the consequences are etc. These are all significant drivers of how people respond to different risks and their relative acceptability.
12. **Probabilities are difficult for the human brain to comprehend.** Not only do the vast majority of the public (and many experts) have a fairly weak understanding of probability and statistics, but some probabilities are just really hard to understand. Very small probabilities (such as  $1 \times 10^{-6}$ ) don't mean much to most people and conditional probabilities (the probability of something happening given that something else has already happened)

are often misinterpreted. If you need to discuss likelihood, see if it is appropriate to use frequencies (e.g. one in a thousand people or a 1 in 15 chance per year) which people can imagine much more easily, or use several different ways of presenting the information.

13. **Never let your efforts to inform people about risks prevent you from saying that any death is a tragedy.** Whilst it isn't always easy to do, if you get it wrong or it just goes wrong, then an apology is often what is needed. Although our Building Codes are designed with the implicit acceptance that there are events of a certain magnitude where failures are likely to occur, make sure that you avoid distant, unfeeling language about potential deaths and injuries.
14. **Recognise there is a difference between individual and societal risk:** Individual risk is the risk to an individual taking part in a particular activity and societal risk is the risk to society from that particular activity. Depending on the perspective you take can give vastly different assessments of the risk. Make sure that both perspectives are considered when evaluating if a risk level is acceptable.
15. **Find ways to use vocal antagonists in a productive way.** If a lack of trust seems to be an issue, seriously consider ways to involve your critics as part of your team. Use them as devils advocates, get them involved in designing your process, ask them the questions they really want answered, and use them to pre-test messages. Not only will they add value to your decision making process by identifying a whole suite of unintended consequences you hadn't thought about, but they also provide the public with confidence that there is sufficient robustness, accountability and transparency in the process.
16. **Use a variety of approaches for getting your message out there.** Don't assume people are reading your website; be proactive to get messages out there and where possible tap into existing networks that people have rather than trying to create new ones.
17. **Don't assume people are hearing what you are saying.** Pre-test messages before releasing them and proactively ask your stakeholders if they are getting all of their questions answered.
18. **Stakeholders are inclusive.** It is not who you think needs information that is important. Your stakeholders include all those that feel that they should be involved and communicated with. There will also be people who need to be involved but who will not, for a range of reasons, see themselves as stakeholders. Be proactive in seeking out everyone who has a stake or interest.
19. **Partner with other organisations that already have credibility with your stakeholders.** Repetition of key messages is an effective way to get something into people's heads. It is even more effective if different people are saying similar messages or related. It is even more effective again if the people saying those messages already have established trust and credibility with the intended audience.
20. **You can't get around the fact that you will be judged in hindsight.** To avoid information overload we often become quite selective with which information to release to whom and it can also be tempting to 'let sleeping dogs lie'. Recognise that there are significant risks associated by this approach; people naturally place greater significance on information they feel has been withheld from them, and "You didn't ask so I didn't tell you" never proves a particularly good excuse in hindsight.
21. **Avoid saying something is "safe."** From a risk communication perspective 'safe' is a loaded word because it implies something is risk-free and we know that nothing is risk free. You

can say that something is safer than something else, but rarely is anything unequivocally safe.

22. **Don't try to over-reassure.** Providing empty reassurances about things you can't provide absolute guarantees over simply makes people suspicious. As Peter Sandman, a US expert in risk communication puts it "Your goal can't be to make the people of Christchurch feel safe as there are no guarantees of absolute safety. Your goal needs to be to help them bear this reality and the anxiety it causes. In order to do that, it helps if officials show that they themselves are bearing this reality and the anxiety it causes. A leader who is able to bear appropriate fear is a far more useful role model than a leader who keeps issuing empty claims that everything is safe and there is nothing to fear."
23. **Don't allow a focus on minimising liability to dominate.** In any crisis, liability issues soon raise themselves to the fore and it is easy to fall into the trap of allowing them to dominate, almost certainly resulting in sub-optimal solutions. Good crisis leaders soon learn that legal experts are just one of the many voices that need to be listened to – keep focused on doing the right thing to build trust and achieve your recovery objectives.

As discussed above many of these ideas have been drawn from best practice from a number of fields. To make it easily readable we haven't referenced the source for each idea, but if you would like further explanation or to talk through how the above principles might apply in particular situations, please contact Erica Seville on [erica.seville@rsrc.co.nz](mailto:erica.seville@rsrc.co.nz) and I can point you to the right people to talk with.