

Submission to "Consultorio Politico"  
The Politics of Disasters  
By Jane A. Bullock and George D. Haddow  
September 2003

The frequency and severity of natural, technological and manmade (terrorism) disasters have increased significantly in the past decade. These events place extraordinary pressures on individuals, communities and countries. They also present critical opportunities for political leaders to help the people they represent.

Disasters are political events. They attract significant media attention, often result in distribution of large sums of money in the form of disaster assistance, present difficult, and sometimes conflicting issues and challenges, which test the leadership capabilities of municipal, provincial and national political leaders. One critical key to dealing effectively with any disaster situation is effective communications. In addition to working with emergency management officials to manage the response and recovery operations, political leaders must assume the public role of communicating information to the citizenry.

Communicating with the public in the midst of a disaster can be difficult. There are often conflicting reports on casualties and damages and usually some level of confusion among responders. Add to this, the expectation of the public to get information almost instantaneously and the demands made by the new 24-hour news culture.

The provision of timely and accurate information directly to the public and to the media is critical to the success of any response and recovery effort. An effective communications strategy allows public officials at all levels of government to provide information and comfort to disaster victims and, at the same time, manage expectations. Regular communications with the public and the media helps ensure that accurate information is being disseminated and reduces the chances for misinformation and rumors. Monitoring direct communications with victims and media reports helps to identify potential problems with misinformation and rumors and allows emergency officials to address these issues before they become too widespread and damaging...

The lessons we learned in responding to over 3000 major disasters as part of the United States' Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), identified four simple principals that political leaders should follow in communicating to the public during disasters that will best serve their citizens, their communities and their countries:

1. **Be Prepared:** Have a communications strategy and a communications infrastructure (trained staff, technology) in place before the disaster. Get to know your emergency manager and ensure that the emergency management operation in your government is effectively staffed and equipped. Establish a partnership with the media BEFORE the disaster happens so you will have credibility during the event. Once the disaster strikes use your infrastructure to collect as much information as possible about the disaster so that you can present yourself as the best source of information.
2. **Be Available:** Schedule regular press conferences and updates to inform the public through the media. Be responsive to media calls and ensure that your public affairs operation works closely with the media in providing vital information. If there are significant casualties, remember to give special consideration and priority communications to the families of the victims so that you provide the information to the families and not the media.
3. **Be There:** As soon is practical, within the first 12 hours after an event occurs, go to the location of the disaster and meet with victims and response officials. Make sure you do not get in the way of the response and recovery efforts but go to the disaster scene as soon as you can to demonstrate your concern for their needs, and reassure your constituents that you are leading the recovery effort.
4. **Be On Message:** Your job is to get response and recovery information to the public through the media. This includes specific information on how and where victims can receive assistance. Your regular press conferences and updates should address what has been done, what is being done and what will be done to help people and communities to recover. This gives you an opportunity to manage and set expectations. Do not be afraid to recognize problems but counter this with your plan for addressing the problem. Don't forget to recognize and praise individuals and institutions that are leading the recovery process. After the event, talk about what went well and what didn't and what you will be doing to correct the situation before the next event.

None of the above activities differ significantly from the everyday activities of a political leader. The real difference is that in a disaster situation, political leaders have the full attention of the public and the media. What you do with it is up to you.