
Health Canada

Study of Risk Communications within the Pest Management Regulatory Agency

Research Highlights
for
PMAC Working Group on Communications
April 28, 2005

Agenda

- Research Purpose and Method
- Research Highlights – PMRA
- Research Highlights – Other Organizations
- Recommendations
- Considerations for Discussion on Working Group's Purpose and Workplan

Research Purpose

- Decision Partners was asked to conduct research and provide advice and recommendations regarding how risk communications within PMRA related to pesticides and pesticide regulation can be improved.
- A focal point for this initiative was identifying opportunities for improving risk communications in a way that could build public confidence in the regulation of pesticides and meet current responsibilities, as well as the requirements and opportunities presented by the new Pest Control Products Act (PCPA).

Research Method

Research Method:

- Data collected through in-depth, confidential interviews with PMRA and non-PMRA senior managers with an interest or specific expertise in risk communications.
- Interviews were designed and conducted using the mental models research method.

Mental Models:

- Decades of research demonstrate that people's judgments about complex issues are guided by "mental models".
- Mental models are tacit webs of belief that all people draw upon to guide their decision-making and behaviour.
- Mental models can only be determined with empirical research.

Research Method

Understanding Thinking In-depth

- Mental models research is often the preferred approach when it is necessary to understand people's thinking in-depth. When done well, mental models research enables researchers to:
 - Identify attitudes, impressions, and primary influences on decision-making and behavior.
 - Discover and characterize in-depth salient beliefs and the underlying rationale for those beliefs, i.e. what people believe and why they believe it. (Unlike opinion research that tests what people believe against a preset list of variables.)
 - Identify different modes of expression.
 - Identify sources of information and influence.
 - Identify possible tradeoffs individuals are prepared to address.
 - Test hypotheses concerning people's beliefs and behaviors.

Research Method

Characterizing Mental Models

- When analyzing mental models interviews, research analysts assess:
 - What do people seem to know now about the topic that is correct?
 - What do people seem not to know that, if they did know, would help them make better informed judgments?
 - What misunderstandings do people have about the topic, especially about cause and effect relationships?
 - What novel ideas do people seem to have?
 - What do people want to know?
 - What criteria are people using to judge the trustworthiness and competence of actions and messages? Who do they trust and what communications processes do they trust?

Research Details

- Interviews were conducted between March 3 and March 17, 2005 with senior PMRA people and external communications experts:
 - Janice Hopkins, Assoc. Director, Alternative Strategies and Regulatory Affairs Division, PMRA.
 - Trish MacQuarrie, Director, Alternative Strategies and Regulatory Affairs Division, PMRA.
 - Edith Lachapelle, Communications Officer, PMRA.
 - Richard Aucoin, Acting Chief Registrar, PMRA.
 - John Worgan, Director, Re-evaluation Management Division, PMRA.
 - Elaine Chatigny, Director, Public Affairs Division, Communications, Marketing and Consultation Directorate, Health Canada.
 - Sandra Lavigne, Executive Director, Public Affairs, CFIA.
 - Anne Lindsay, Deputy Director, Office of Pesticide Programs, US EPA.
- Interviews totaled more than 9 hours, averaging 70 minutes in length, ranging from 45 to 95 minutes.

Research Highlights - PMRA

Summary of PMRA Self-Assessment

- There is pride in the quality of the technical work done by PMRA based on the Agency's world-class risk assessment and risk management.
- Some aspects of risk communications are seen as effective, but all PMRA interviewees believed that there is opportunity for improvement.
- The status quo is unacceptable, but there is uncertainty about how to improve effectiveness.

Research Highlights – PMRA

Current PMRA Risk Communications

- PMRA's current communications culture is one of information dominated by subject matter experts.
- Risk communication is seen primarily as informing people – primarily stakeholders – of PMRA's product risk assessments.
- Stakeholders are seen to comprise a relatively small number of informed individuals within key groups.
 - Consultation with these individuals and groups comprises essentially an expert level exchange of information and views.
- Publications of highly technical risk assessment information and decisions are considered to be the dominant content and method of communication.
 - They are believed by PMRA staff to be largely inaccessible; that is, not understandable to laypeople.

Research Highlights - PMRA

Current PMRA Risk Communications

- The new Pest Control Products Act is thought to make more data from PMRA's risk assessment process publicly available, potentially opening decisions to greater scrutiny and creating expectations for improved risk communications and stakeholder engagement.
- Many believe that improved risk communications is key to improving public and stakeholder judgment of PMRA and its management of pesticides and related issues.
- Experience suggests that PMRA's information-centric approach to risk communications may lead to a technically correct but ultimately ineffective strategy of being more open and transparent primarily by providing more information.

Research Highlights - PMRA

Current PMRA Risk Communications

- PMRA's current risk communications strategy appears to be based on a belief that PMRA knows the science best. Many others are poorly informed.
- The predominant communications theory of many interviewed appears to be: if they only knew more about who we are, what we do, and how well we do it, they would think more highly of us.
 - This fails to address the issues of quality of information provided and quality of the engagement process.
 - It also fails to address the problems of what to do if people still do not see things "as we do" and, consequently, do not judge PMRA and its efforts positively, even after being fully informed.

Research Highlights - PMRA

Current Challenges

- **Challenges to effective risk communications:**
 - There is a need for practical help in designing understandable communications.
 - There is no shared understanding of PMRA's risk communications objectives.
 - There is uncertainty about whether improved communications require more non-stakeholder communications.
 - Stakeholder engagement is seen mainly as exchange of information, primarily with subject matter experts.
 - There is no clear process for conducting effective, proactive risk communications.
 - Currently, PMRA communications don't communicate about risk. They inform people of the risk assessment process and decisions but not about the qualitative or quantitative risk that people face from pesticides.
 - Communications professionals feel that they are poorly equipped to offer risk communications advice and essential services, acknowledging a lack of necessary training, skills, capacity and tools to be effective.

Research Highlights - Other Organizations

CFIA Risk Communications

- The nature of risks regulated by CFIA are significantly different than those regulated by PMRA, but there is opportunity to learn from some of their risk communication practices:
 - Clear roles and responsibilities for Communications professionals.
 - Developing and pretesting templates for communications.
 - Testing communications products with stakeholders in order to improve their understandability.
 - Using technical terms carefully and strategically, enabling the public to learn some of the essential terms. Using these frequently with the media and others, to bring them into the public vocabulary.
 - Conducting post mortems with stakeholders to evaluate risk assessment, communication and management activities. The goal is continuous improvement.

Research Highlights - Other Organizations

EPA OPP Risk Communications

- The nature of risks regulated by OPP and their approach to risk management and risk communications seem nearly indistinguishable to that of PMRA.
- Within OPP risk communications and stakeholder engagement are seen as relatively effective.
- They attribute their success to:
 - Structured communications efforts that are engaged “early and often” allowing people to be brought into the process gradually.
 - A culture that embraces effective communications, enabling staff through training and encouragement.
 - Stakeholder engagement that is tailored, not a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

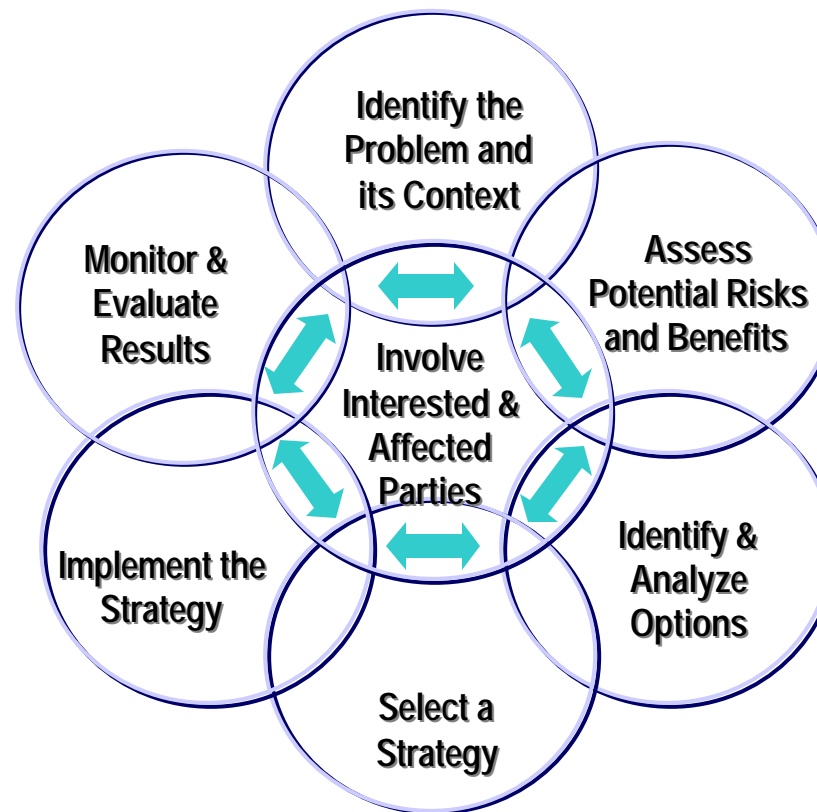
Research Highlights - Other Organizations

Health Canada Project Overview

- **Project Objective:**
 - To develop a Risk Communication Framework for Health Canada to:
 - Improve the Department's ability to support informed decision-making and communications;
 - Help Canadians make well-informed decisions on health related topics;
 - Build internal capacity.
- **Project Outline:**
 - Organize appropriate teams.
 - Simultaneously:
 - Identify unmet needs, interests and priorities for effective risk communication
 - Draft the Framework, including Guiding Principles, and get input
 - Develop appropriate process, methods and tools
 - Pilot applications to address immediate issues, get input
 - Provide support for people using new process, methods and tools
 - Finalize and publish the Framework.
 - Operationalize the Framework through training.

Health Canada Framework

- 2000 Health Canada “Decision-Making Framework”
 - New Model (circular, inter-connected steps)



Research Highlights - Other Organizations

Health Canada Risk Communications

- There is significant, on-going work in Health Canada to improve the risk communications process through the development of the Strategic Risk Communications Framework and Handbook.
- The expert model developed for Health Canada and the mental models research results, illustrate the factors that influence risk management and risk communications in Health Canada.
- The results of our PMRA research indicate that many of these same influences affect PMRA's risk management and risk communications.
- The expert model and the Strategic Risk Communications Framework could readily form the basis of customized approach for PMRA.

Recommendations

- **Adopt a version of Health Canada's Strategic Risk Communications Framework customized to the needs of PMRA.**
 - Use this customized Framework to guide development of risk communications principles, and practices, as well as to focus applications (and resources) throughout the Agency.
- **Systematically move from the current information culture to a communications culture, where all employees take responsibility for being understood by experts and lay people alike, inside and outside the organization.**
 - Leadership will be key. A clear process for making this transition, including measurable objectives, performance goals at each stage, and appropriate recognition and reward for those demonstrating the attributes of the desired culture will be critical to success.

Recommendations *continued*

- Establish internal risk communications professional capacity, drawing on the support and expertise of Health Canada's Communications Directorate as appropriate.
 - Define clear roles and responsibilities for risk communicators within the Agency.
 - Ensure risk communicators have the appropriate skills, tools, and internal support to fulfill their roles effectively. The opportunity for continuous learning will be key.
- Strengthen the Agency's performance by integrating strategic risk communications with prioritized risk assessment into PMRA's formal risk management process.
 - Emphasize shared understanding through dialogue with a larger and more diverse universe of stakeholders.
 - Build on Health Canada's Strategic Risk Communications Framework – Guiding Principles, Practices and Process.

Recommendations *continued*

- Create a core group of strong scientist-communicators. Identify and train a select number of scientists with an interest in and aptitude for communicating.
 - Support them with appropriate coaching to build skills and enhance their confidence. Build on the experience of EPA OPP. Enable continuous learning and sharing results of communications experiences internally.
- Using the principles and tools in Health Canada's Strategic Risk Communications Framework and Handbook, come to a widely shared internal understanding of PMRA's stakeholders.
 - Define clear risk communications objectives.
 - Broaden stakeholder engagement efforts to achieve these objectives, focusing efforts on addressing the interests and priorities of specific stakeholders.

Recommendations *continued*

- Re-engineer current information production activities, incorporating appropriate training of current staff and testing of materials, to ensure information products are easily understood by, and are useful to, a wide range of users.
 - Design and test templates for layered documents, applying research and experience-based methods for effective communications on complex and potentially controversial topics.

Value of Improving PMRA's Risk Communications

- Improved effectiveness, staff productivity, cost-efficiency and return on investment into all forms of communications.
- Improved stakeholder relations leading to enhanced professional and societal contribution.
- Improved responsiveness as an organization to emerging challenges and technological developments.
- More effective leadership on pest product and pest systems risk management.
- Improved public judgment of PMRA and its leaders, scientists, communicators and their work.

Considerations for the Working Group on Communications

Strategic Risk Communication

- **Strategic Risk Communication = purposeful process of skilful interaction supported by appropriate information.**
- **Key Goal: Enable decision-makers and stakeholders to make well-informed decisions that lead to responsible and ethical risk management.**
- **Key Element: Stakeholders are part of the process of resolving risk issues and significant contributors to it.**
- **The Fundamental Challenge: When it comes to risk communication, the fundamental challenge is to decide:**
 - What best to do.
 - What best to say.
 - How best to do it.
 - How best to say it.

Health Canada's Strategic Risk Communication Process



Step One

Define the Opportunity

- As the Working Group defines its purpose and workplan, it might be useful to consider the following questions:
 - What are we trying to accomplish?
 - What are the constraints – time, people, money, expertise, etc.?
 - How will we know when we've succeeded? How will we measure success?
 - Why is the work of our Group important?
 - How will the results of our efforts add value to the broader values and strategies of PMRA?
- Write the Opportunity Statement.
 - The opportunity statement should focus on an outcome and clearly identify what is to be accomplished.
 - It should require specific actions and be achievable, measurable and driven by time lines.

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