The Art and Science of Speaking Up and Being Heard

A Risk Communication Playbook for Insider Threat Professionals

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Sponsors

PERSEREC is a Department of Defense entity dedicated to improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness of DoD personnel suitability, security, and reliability systems. PERSEREC is part of the Office of People Analytics (OPA), which is a component of the Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA) under the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness).

The primary mission of the National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) is to develop a Government-wide insider threat program for deterring, detecting, and mitigating insider threats, including the safeguarding of classified information from exploitation.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) is responsible for policy development, planning, resource management and program evaluation. OSD includes the offices of top civilian defense decision - makers with regard to personnel, weapons acquisition, research, intelligence and fiscal policy, as well as offices the Secretary establishes to assist in carrying out assigned responsibilities.

THE ART

> Risk is a multi-nuanced, multi-faceted, multi-tenet thing across an entire organization. So, being able to describe what the risks are without giving everybody the sky-is-falling scenario is really critical.

—Ari Lightman, Director of the Chief Information Office Institute at Carnegie Mellon University

THE SCIENCE

An interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management.

—The National Research Council

Introduction: Risk communication is essential to the insider threat mission.

This Playbook supports the National Insider Threat Task Force guidelines and standards.

It recognizes that no two programs are alike, so the Playbook offers general guidance for all risk communicators.

What you'll read and learn must be adapted to the policies, recommendations, and requirements of your program.

When the subject is insider threat, communication needs to be different because you're talking about something that touches on our personal need for safety. No one approach works equally well for every situation. The best risk communicators recognize that they are leading a meaningful, honest, and respectful discussion between people.

Connecting the right people at the right time and in the best way possible is the challenge behind the art and science of effective risk communication.

Insider threat personnel must continuously build and advance a risk communication skillset to create stronger connections that lead to informed decision making, awareness, and cross-functional collaboration.

The study, practice, and persistence of persuasive risk communication brings positive outcomes across the insider threat mission, specifically:

- Faster risk-informed decision making in response to early warnings as well as red flags
- Greater confidence in the ability to engage decision makers
- Stronger cross collaboration in early intervention and mitigation steps
- Deeper awareness, trust, and appreciation of the program

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Why you need a risk communication skillset

Master risk communicators are:

- Agile and adept
- Aware and informed
- Assertive and empathetic
- Trustworthy and accountable
- Confident and humble

It's essential to our mission.

Communicating risk is part of the day-to-day—and, sometimes, minute-to-minute—cross collaboration of insider threat programs, hubs, agencies, and departments. Awareness of and guidance on the five Ws ("who, what, when, where, and why") of potential insider threats are critical to protecting our workforce and workspaces. Proactive mitigation of the potential harm of insider threats and workplace violence starts with purpose-driven communication.

It drives positive outcomes.

Communicating risk is not easy. But when you master the basic skills of risk communication, you are better prepared to select the right tools for the job. You'll know how to quickly engage the right stakeholders in critical conversations; you'll be able to break down complex information into clear, relatable context; and you'll bring trust and confidence to decision making to help others proactively address the uncertainty of risk.

It's rewarding.

Your skills as a risk communicator help guide others in detecting, mitigating, and preventing insider threats. Navigating the path from awareness to action is challenging when you're dealing with an evolving threat landscape, shifting technology, and a changing organization. But when your risk communication leads to a positive outcome, it's a reminder of why you do your job—to protect others from harm.

How to use this Playbook

Playbook Tips

Make a regular practice of reviewing and thinking through this guide.

Let it inspire more self-exploration of key topics and concepts.

Use it as the centerpiece of a peer discussion on best practices.

Treat it like a living document—we even encourage you to note new discoveries and techniques as you find what works best for you.

Inside this Playbook, you'll find a mix of insights, strategies, and tools to help you develop an effective risk communication strategy and skillset that best fit your needs.

Part 1: The Art of Speaking Up

Speaking up involves tailoring risk communication to fit a situation's purpose, audience, and outcomes. In Part 1, we'll cover communication fundamentals including ways to find your communication's purpose and audience and ways to influence the perception of risk across the insider threat mission space.

Part 2: The Science of Being Heard

Being heard requires identifying and understanding emotional factors that encourage or inhibit effective risk communication. In Part 2, we'll cover how to practice active listening, use your emotional intelligence, and build trust to deliver simple, but effective, risk communications.

Part 3: Tools for Communication

The last section, Part 3, includes a collection of helpful resources broken down into two categories:

1. Techniques and tips for communicating risk to stakeholders
2. Exercises for personal skill development to hone your risk communication skillset

Part 1: The Art of Speaking Up

- Mapping out your risk communication
- Guiding your audience to the desired outcomes
- Acting as an insider threat risk influencer
- Understanding the essential elements of a simple and effective risk communication

> "Effective risk communication is a complex art that requires skill, knowledge, training, and practice."
>
> —World Health Organization

Mapping out your risk communication

Risk communication is more than the point-to-point transfer of information. You need to carefully map out your best steps with an understanding of context, from purpose to audience to outcomes, along the path from discovery to effective response.

It's important to recognize the internal and external compliance factors that shape your risk communication:

- Laws and regulations
- Permissions and constraints
- Rights and protections
- Ethics and accountability

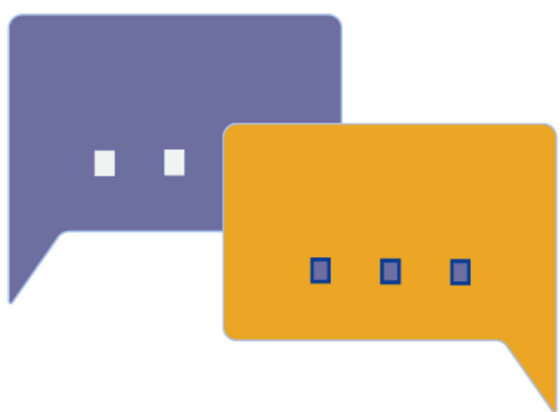
Step 1: Start with purpose.

Focus on your "why."

Go deeper than "I'm helping someone make an informed decision about risk." Try to keep yourself and others out of the equation and center on what matters most.

Clarify your purpose with these questions:

- Why do I need to share this information?
- What is the most important thing I need to share?
- What could happen if I didn't share this information?



Jump to tips

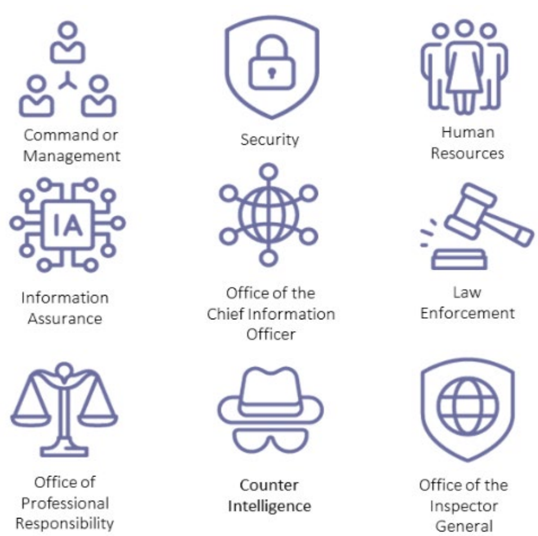
Step 2: Pinpoint your audience.

Once you define your purpose, you can move on to the next critical question: Who are the stakeholders that need to be on the receiving end of my risk communication?

- Who needs to know?
- Who needs to be involved?
- Who could be upset if not involved?
- Who is likely to be affected?
- Who may perceive they will be affected?
- Who has experience with this or a similar issue?
- Who could bring an unbiased perspective to decisions and next steps?
- Who could I engage for support?
- Who would make discussions difficult?
- Who would be most receptive to recommendations?
- Who would be least receptive to recommendations?

A stakeholder is anyone interested in or affected by the issue.

Common Stakeholders Include:



Step 3: Meet your audience where they are.

Learn and understand your audience. How much do they know about the situation, the insider threat program, and you?

A big part of understanding your audience is gauging their awareness and acceptance of the insider threat mission and program. It will help you dial in your message to the best possible reception point. Tailor your message using terms and phrases your audience finds familiar. Help them understand your purpose by aligning it to their purpose.

Contact your program manager for more detailed information on stakeholders and reporting requirements within your program.

Your goal is to speak to your audience in a way they will understand.

New Audience?

Introduce yourself and provide background on the program and your passion for the work.

Strong Supporter?

Skip ahead to the critical facts and focus on building and keeping a strong relationship.

Opposing Force?

Find out why they mistrust the insider threat mission or do not see the value of the insider threat program. Then, work to overcome those issues.

Wavering?

Clarity helps overcome uncertainty. Ask how you can make things clearer. Make it an easy conversation using common terms and avoiding jargon.

Guiding your audience to the desired outcomes

"Communication is not just about devices—it has to do with how you convey information, whether in writing, visually, or orally. It is also about the subliminal messages conveyed 'between the lines.' And it is about the communications climate you create, as in 'no concern is too small' or 'the door is always open.'"

—Barbara Roberts, Conservator and Hazard Mitigation Consultant

Mastering persuasive communication techniques is an effective way to motivate leaders to adopt risk mitigation strategies and counter potential resistance. One effective communication strategy is a benefits-first approach. Focus on positive outcomes by putting yourself in the shoes of the person on the receiving end and asking, "What's in it for me?"

When I communicate risk, I am helping to:

- Increase awareness of the benefits of early intervention
- Influence proactive actions around informed decision making
- Promote the value of the insider threat program
- Manage, avoid, minimize, or mitigate insider threats
- Fulfill the function and promise of the insider threat mission
- Bring trust and transparency to the risk assessment and advisory process
- Create a safe and secure work culture where everyone has a voice

Acting as an insider threat risk influencer

When you communicate risk, you shape how your audience perceives that risk. At a minimum, your role as a risk communicator includes decision support for intelligence and advice, awareness and education, and cross collaboration. Because risk comes in many forms, you must serve many functions and address many needs. In the end, you must understand how your communication guides the perception of risk across different roles and areas.

Key factors for improving stakeholders' perception of risk

Familiarity

Is the risk a new situation or is this something with which they are familiar?

Control

Do they feel like they have some control over the risk or decisions related to it?

Benefits

Is there a direct benefit to mitigating the risk?

Risk communication for intelligence and advice

Building accurate perceptions of risk starts with a careful approach to risk analysis. It's important to document the goals, practices, and procedures that lead to the best mitigation response when sharing information and advising on that information.

When communicating risk for intelligence and advice:

- Deliver clear, concise risk counsel that persuades decision makers to act on recommendations.
- Ensure recommendations are in line with the protection of employee privacy rights and civil liberties.
- Follow up to ensure messages get through and the right steps are in place.
- Call in reinforcements by engaging the support of program leaders, stakeholders, law enforcement, and others.

Risk communication for awareness and education

No two programs are exactly alike, and insider threat personnel and employees often move between agencies and departments. To effectively shape risk perception, it's important to educate analysts, investigators, and other employees on the program's unique structure and mission.

Insider threat programs and agency leadership should socialize the program to the workforce to increase awareness and be as operationally transparent as possible. Leadership and agency heads who are visibly involved in promoting program awareness drive positive change toward a supportive organizational culture.

Building employee support for the insider threat program is an essential component of shaping risk perception. In this case, risk communication fosters a sense of community and raises awareness of the program as fair and respectful of employee reputations. It also positions the program to include employee well-being and risk assurance.

When communicating risk for awareness and education:

- Create awareness of insider threat programs and promote the benefits of early intervention and risk mitigation.
- Educate employees, insider threat personnel, and public and private partners on program policies, regulations, and responsibilities.
- Strengthen the proactive posture of the department or agency through an ongoing insider threat strategic communication campaign.
- Highlight the protection of employee privacy rights and civil liberties.
- Promote open discussion about organizational vulnerabilities including workplace environment and technology use and risks.

Risk communication for cross collaboration

Prevention and intervention work best in active collaboration. Insider threat working groups and other stakeholders come from multiple operational points, so they may bring competing goals and conflicting perceptions of risk. Helping these groups communicate with each other to identify shared goals can bring everyone together.

When communicating risk for cross collaboration:

- Focus on information sharing and work together to reach a consensus.
- Establish a universal language to overcome the challenge of diverse and overlapping terms.
- Center discussions on a common purpose and a shared responsibility.
- Give everyone an equal voice and create opportunities to learn from one another.
- Work with stakeholders to identify key information sources and to refine thresholds and triggers within evolving threat, work, and technology environments.

Understanding the essential elements of a simple and effective risk communication

"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."
—Albert Einstein

Start with what matters most.

Whether you're speaking or writing, your first sentence should capture what's most important. Remember the acronym BLUF: Bottom Line Up Front.

Keep it simple; make it clear.

Use simple language and common terms that are easy to understand. Use short sentences and keep to one idea per paragraph.

Stick to the facts.

Just the facts. If you don't know something, be honest and say, "I don't know, let me see what I can find out."

Make it easy.

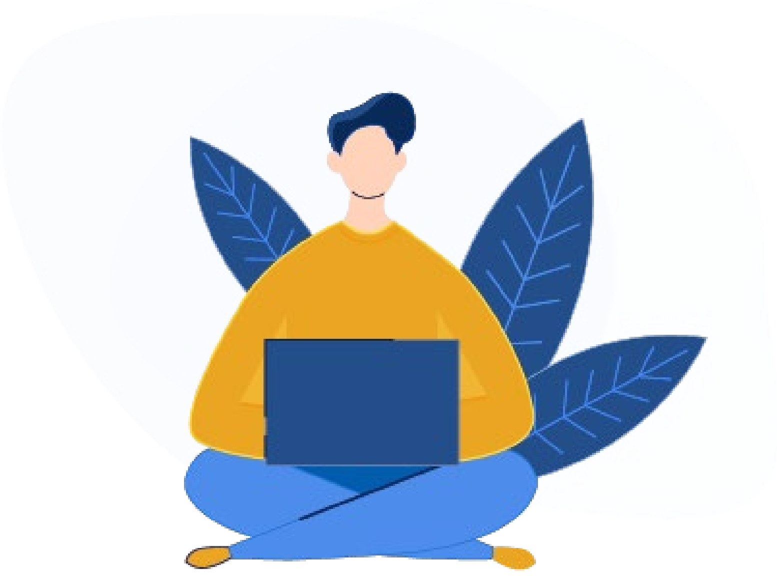
Read your message out loud or ask a peer to review. If your message requires more than one read to be clearly understood, you need to rethink your approach.

Jump to tips

The Power of Pause

Pausing can be a powerful and effective tool when you are communicating risk. Uncertainty activates people's "fight-or-flight" response. This activation of the nervous system can impair your audience's ability to understand your message. Pausing gives your audience time to reflect and gives you time to organize your thoughts and the opportunity to consider the audience's reaction to your message.

The pause can range from 3 to 5 seconds and should be used at key moments in your conversation (e.g., following emotional or abstract phrases). For example, "We know it's difficult to learn about these concerning behaviors, [pause] but we have some recommendations that can help."



Jump to tips

Part 2: The Science of Being Heard

- Listening to be heard
- Communicating with emotional intelligence
- Building trust

No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Listening to be heard

You're ready to rush in and offer recommendations. You've got your facts lined up. You're prepared to offer assurance and instill confidence. What do you do now?

Stop—wait—listen.

By allowing others to speak first you can get a better read on where they are. You can look for clues that signal how they perceive the situation. Are they

- Risk averse?
- Downplaying the situation?
- Uncertain or confused?
- Nervous, wary, or afraid?
- Well-informed and competent?
- Under-informed and overly confident?

Use active listening.

Active listening is one tool you can use to understand others and help them feel heard. Here are a few active listening tips:

- Be open-minded: Suspend judgment and listen for points of agreement.
- Be curious: Consider communication as an opportunity to learn from your partner.
- Be patient: Don't interrupt, even with questions. Write down your questions if you are concerned you will forget.
- Be intentional: Identify the meaning behind what is said and look for patterns between what is said and what is left unsaid.

Jump to tips

Don't be afraid to start a conversation.

Open-ended questions

Some questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

This type of question can be used to encourage people to provide details of their experience and perspective.

When communicating risk, aim for a collaborative approach. Both sides need to work toward a mutual understanding.

Ask open-ended questions to see where they lead (e.g., what else do you think is important for me to know?). The answers could reveal critical gaps in understanding. Sometimes, improving communication can be as simple as using different terms to describe the same thing. Model openness and honesty. When people sense that you're being genuine, they are more inclined to reflect that back to you.

Effective communication is a give and take.

- Use language people will understand. This is not the time for jargon.
- Talk openly and honestly about the reality of the concerns and recommendations being reported.
- Ask questions that tease out perceptions or knowledge shortfalls.
- Dig deeper to uncover misguided rationales.
- Help steer decision makers away from easy excuses.
- Make a difficult conversation easier just by saying, "Wow, I imagine this is difficult for you."
- Make people feel safe opening up about their fears.
- Let people know that it's not unusual for decision makers to experience uneasiness, doubt, or fear in these situations.

Follow up.

It’s easy to forget to follow through once you’re past the point of urgency. But your follow-up communication may be more important than your first.

- Be proactive in supporting stakeholders in developing short- and long-term goals.
- Find opportunities to collaborate with other stakeholders who can offer deeper insights into future considerations that should weigh into current directives.
- Let decision makers know they can reach out to you any time with questions or if they need a sounding board.
- Make a regular habit of checking in and circling back. Even a short, casual conversation is a reminder that you’re always available and ready to offer support.
- Pass along articles, reports, or other resources you think will be helpful.

Test your emotional intelligence:

[Here's a fun online exercise for testing how well you can read people's emotions.]

Communicating with emotional intelligence

Insider threat program analysts must carefully weigh all the influencing factors related to their risk communication. Emotional intelligence refers to a person's ability to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others. Being able to recognize anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and anger in others is at the center of an analyst's ability to effectively communicate recommendations.

Emotional intelligence helps an insider threat analyst choose the context and style of messages that fit a given scenario. Here are some questions you can ask to use emotional intelligence when tailoring your communications:

- How do I convey a sense of urgency without creating fear?
- How do I offer assurance without promise?
- How much can I push a reluctant decision maker?

Be assertive.

"Sell" your recommendations confidently, but always show trust, honesty, and respect to your audience. If they hesitate, show them how your recommendations can make them feel more confident and in control.

Be empathetic.

Insider threat is a human problem. Addressing this risk is a human dilemma that often comes with human emotions. Be sensitive to how your messages are delivered and received.

Be reassuring.

Your goal is to offer assurance in the form of ongoing support and honest guidance, but remember the promise of prevention and mitigation will never be a fail-safe guarantee.

Be positive.

With any exchange, and especially in risk communication, your mood can create calm or chaos in others. Even when you're dealing with serious concerns and uncertainty, you can send a positive message of support.

Be perceptive.

You're dealing with a people program, so every message relates to sharing information about someone. You're helping others make informed decisions about safety and security; you need to take extra care in thinking about the person on the receiving end of your conversation.

Jump to tips

Building trust

"Trusting people requires us to trust in both their skill and their intentions, and the same holds of trusting what they say: this requires us to trust in people's knowledge, and trust in their honesty."

—Katherine Hawley, PhD, Professor of Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews

Being heard is about understanding perceptions and emotions and fostering trust. It's about sensitivity and empathy. It's about meeting someone where they are—recognizing what they know and what they need to know to guide them to a place of assurance.

Relationships built on shared understanding and trust are ideal, but in many risk scenarios you must encourage others to trust you without the advantage of an established relationship.

When you cannot rely on an established relationship to foster trust, you can develop a sense of trust by

- Using your emotional intelligence to demonstrate your understanding of the situation
- Monitoring your words and actions to convey meaningful and timely recommendations
- Sharing your experience, your passion, and your story

Part 3: Tools for Communication

- **Communicating risk — techniques and tips**
  - Message mapping and planning
  - Storytelling in persuasive risk communication
  - Handling difficult conversations
  - Presenting recommendations to leaders
  - Using bridging phrases
  - Applying plain language guidelines to risk communication
  - Ensuring effective correspondence
  - Reviewing your risk communication
- **Developing personal skills for risk communication**
  - Practicing active listening
  - Fostering focus
  - Cultivating emotional intelligence
  - Using breath work and visualization
  - Reflecting on everyday conversations
  - Online resources

> The insider threat is a dynamic problem set, requiring resilient and adaptable programs to address an evolving threat landscape, advances in technology and organizational change.

—NITTF Insider Threat Program Maturity Framework

Communicating risk — techniques and tips

There are many excellent mapping templates and tools developed by risk communication experts and various organizations (e.g., Center for Risk Communication).

Techniques such as message mapping, storytelling, and using plain language are just a few of the tools that will help you identify the purpose of your message and communicate it in a way that your audience can understand.

Message mapping and planning

The art of speaking up is not a paint-by-numbers process, and the science of being heard doesn't follow a set script or secret formula. But you can use message mapping to help zero in on the key factors and essentials of clear, concise, and effective risk advisory, awareness, education, and response.

Primary steps for making a message map:

1. Clarify your purpose. Why are you sending this risk message?
2. Identify the interested or affected parties (i.e., stakeholders).
3. List the questions or concerns your stakeholder might have about the risk you are communicating.
4. Organize and identify common themes from the list of questions or concerns you generated in the previous step.
5. Prioritize your theme and identify a maximum of three key messages that address the theme.
6. Outline no more than three supporting details that target the question or concern's main theme.

Return to topic intro

Example message map

Message Map's Purpose: Warning of security compromise in another agency that could impact other agencies/departments

Stakeholder: Agency/Department Head

Question or Concern: Should we be concerned about a recent compromise of confidential personal data that resulted from an insider attack at another agency/department?

Key Message 1: Bad actors targeted the organization using a sophisticated phishing campaign.

- Supporting Detail 1: Analysts identified the breach within 30 minutes of the download.
- Supporting Detail 2: Analysts had been advised of concerns related to the employee, so user activity monitoring is in use.
- Supporting Detail 3: The agency/department is in the process of determining the potential harm of the compromise.

Key Message 2: The breach is believed to be isolated to the targeted agency/department.

- Supporting Detail: Preliminary investigation indicates that the breach impacts employee records at agency/department.

Key Message 3: You will receive ongoing updates on status until full resolution of the case.

- Supporting Detail 1: Analysts identified the breach following multiple reports of suspicious emails.
- Supporting Detail 2: The origin of the email has been linked to members of international hacking groups listed on the Federal Bureau of Investigation Cyber's Most Wanted list.

Compassion, Conviction, Optimism Template

Good for High-Emotion Situations

When you communicate risk, be sure to use language that is compassionate, shows conviction, and is optimistic. Below is a template to help you organize your risk communication with these elements in mind.

Compassion

Example: "It is difficult to learn of concerning information regarding … but we have identified …"

Conviction

Example: "We are confident that these are the best possible intervention steps

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Optimism

Example: "Proactive interventions offer support that helps bring positive outcomes like …"

The 27/9/3 Rule

Good for High-Stress Emotionally Charged Situations

Emotions and uncertainty can get in the way of risk decision making. When people are stressed or upset, they often struggle to hear, understand, and remember information.

The 27/9/3 Rule is one way to ensure that you've constructed a message that is short, clear, and easily understood.

Make each message 27 words or fewer

Example: Bryce Smith may be at risk of self-harm.

Ensure your message takes no more than 9 seconds to speak or read

Example: Risk of suicide calls for immediate intervention.

Include no more than 3 (brief) points

Example: Alex Doe will support you on next steps. Please call today at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

One Negative Equals Three Positives

Good for Breaking Bad News or Stating a Negative

When you need to report bad news or a negative message it's best to immediately follow with at least three positive, constructive, or solution-oriented messages.

Bad News or Negative Message

You need to be aware that Kerry Jones is currently under watch as a potential insider threat. Risk warnings connect to verified accounts of alcohol abuse inside and outside of the workplace. The concerning behavior appears to be linked to recent personal struggles following a divorce.

Example: POSITIVE 1

A co-worker did the right thing by speaking up to report Jones' concerning behavior so that it could be addressed early to prevent potential escalation.

Example: POSITIVE 2

Our insider threat awareness campaign to encourage reporting of concerning behaviors helped the co-worker feel safe in speaking up, and now we can activate support efforts to prevent escalation and potential harm.

Example: POSITIVE 3

Your active communication and collaboration with the Human Resources Department and the Employee Assistance Program in mapping out an intervention and support strategy will ensure the best preventive steps to keep Jones, our workers, and our workplace safe and secure.

Storytelling in persuasive risk communication

"When data and stories are used together, they resonate with audiences both intellectually and emotionally for a lasting effect, you need to persuade the rational brain but also resonate with the emotional brain."

—Jennifer Aaker, PhD, General Atlantic Professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business

Stories are part of our daily communications and can be used to better illustrate an idea. People are more interested in an idea when they perceive it has meaning. We establish meaning by connecting the idea to a story. Stories encourage active listening, elicit emotional responses, and create experiences. When people experience an idea instead of just hearing it, they gain a deeper understanding of the message. When implemented effectively, storytelling can even change behavior.

Story design best practices:

- Start with a clear purpose. Your story needs a single, focused goal. Be clear what action you are trying to drive.
- Know your audience. Make your story something your audience can relate to and connect with.
- Good stories tell of overcoming a conflict: The beginning of the story sets the scene, the middle conveys obstacles to overcome, and the end shares the resolution.
- Incorporate something your audience will always remember. Props, dramatizations, statistics, and visuals are a few of the many ways to do this.
- Give the audience 2+2, not 4. The audience will pay closer attention and feel respected if you let them draw their own conclusions.

Handling difficult conversations

In situations where conflict exists, don't expect stakeholders to "like" your position, rather work to ensure they understand and perhaps "accept" your position.

- Focus on the facts.

  I can imagine how difficult it must be to hear this about your employee, can you tell me what you remember about that day?

- Give people space.

  This is a difficult topic. Should we take a moment to regroup?

- Avoid extreme words like "always" or "never."

  I understand this has happened a few times. Do you have a sense of how often?

- Ask clarifying questions.

  I'm not sure I understand what … means. Can you explain it to me?

- Give your conversational partners the opportunity to explain events according to their perspectives.

  I would like to understand more about …. Can you tell me more from your perspective?

- Focus on concrete examples when emotions are high.

  Are those who know the employee concerned about a specific target?

- Remind them that they are not alone.

  This is not easy, and we will work together to find the right solution.

Presenting recommendations to leaders

- Attach your recommendations to the goals of their organization.
- Provide actionable suggestions and highlight ways to make the lift easier.
- Provide resources and references, but don't harp on them.
- After you present the primary action item, ask how they feel about the course of action.
- Offer a few choices by providing at least one but no more than three alternatives to your call-to-action.

Using bridging phrases

Think through potential exchanges so you'll be better prepared to

- Redirect a conversation
- Return to your key points
- Build trust by being honest when you don't know the answer

You can use bridging phrases in verbal communication when you want to return to your key points or redirect the conversation.

For example:

- **If you are asked to provide personal opinions**

  Q: "What do you think or know about…?"
  A: "I can't speak about…, but what I can tell you about..."

  Q: "Critics say X about the insider threat program."
  A: "I can't speak for them, but I do know that..."

  Q: "Agency X has said...Do you agree?"
  A: "I can't speak for…. What I can tell you..."
  A: "I agree that..."

- **If you are asked to provide a guarantee**

  Q: "Can you guarantee this will never happen again?"
  A: "Prevention is never a 100 percent certainty, but here is why it's still important to carry out these steps…."
  A: "We have conducted extensive..."
  A: "We will do everything it takes to investigate..."

  Q: "Isn't it better to be safe than sorry?"
  A: "We take safety very seriously. In this situation ..."

- **If you are asked about different scenarios**

  Q: "What if..."
  A: "I can't speculate, but I can tell you that..."
  A: "That's a hypothetical question. What we do know is..."
  A: "Unfortunately, we don't have a crystal ball. What I can say is..."

  Q: "Isn't it possible that this could be a false concern?"
  A: "Here's what we know right now..."

- **If you are asked to pick a position**

  Q: "So, what is your experience with this? Have you in fact dealt with this problem before? Do you take responsibility for this direction?"
  A: "Well, to answer your first (or second or third) question..." (Only respond to the questions that apply to your messages and pick the one you want to answer).

- **If you are asked to speculate based on past events**

  Q: "Didn't this happen before and wasn't it due to …?"
  A: "At this point, we are conducting an investigation so I can't provide a clear answer at this time..."
  A: "We learned a lot from the past incident and made improvements."

- **If you need to defer to the correct person**

  A: "I know you want updated information. The person who can give that to you is..."
  A: "I don't have the information you want. 'X' can give that to you. Here is the phone number."
  A: "The best person who can help you with that is..."

Additional universal bridging statements you can apply in different contexts:

- “And what’s most important to know is…”
- “However, it’s more important to look at…”
- “However, the real issue here is…”
- “And what this all means is…”
- “And what’s most important to remember is …”
- “With this in mind, if we look at the bigger picture…”
- “With this in mind, if we take a look back…”
- “If we take a broader perspective, …”
- “If we look at the big picture…”
- “Let me put all this in perspective by saying…”
- “What all this information tells me is…”
- “Before we continue, let me take a step back and repeat that…”
- “Before we continue, let me emphasize that…”
- “This is a critical point because…”
- “What this all boils down to is…”

Applying plain language guidelines to risk communication

Using plain language ensures that the recipient of your message understands the information the way you intended. It is important to mitigate inaccurate assumptions, perspectives, and translations of your message. Communicating with a vocabulary that your audience understands and that the broader population feels comfortable with is crucial. Risk-related messaging, in particular, needs to be communicated clearly and concisely.

Rules for communicating in plain language:

- Choose familiar words.
- Focus on the concrete—avoid the abstract.
- Use simple, direct, words—for example, use "given" instead of "accorded."
- Choose short words over long words.
- Use transitions between key points: "For instance…," "In contrast…," "To wrap up…"
- Keep to the essential details only.
- Ask someone to proofread your communication.

Visit plainlanguage.gov

Ensuring effective correspondence

Tip: Before you draft an email, make sure you are using the right communication channel for the situation.

Face-to-face communication is ideal, but may be unnecessary for low-impact, low-stakes risk.

If a message is urgent, but you cannot reach the person directly, text messages or emails can be used to instruct them to contact you immediately, but you should avoid lengthy, detailed messages.

Despite many new and unique communication platforms, email remains the most common. This has led to many feeling that they have too many business and personal email correspondences on any given day. Many people find themselves skimming emails or not reading them at all. Luckily, there are a few things you can do to increase the likelihood that your email is read and receives a response.

Below are some tips and an example email (the numbers on the flags correspond to the list) to help ensure your emails are clear, concise, and effective.

1. Include only the necessary recipients on the email.
2. Write a clear, direct subject line. Include the subject, purpose, and action needed (if appropriate).
3. Address the correspondence to the person you expect to respond to your message or to the party responsible for any action items.
4. Limit paragraphs to one to three sentences or use bullet points/numbered lists for important details.
5. Bold the takeaway messages or important points; avoid using multiple colors.
6. Include direct action items, next steps, or deadlines for the reader. Make sure you have given the reader enough time to complete the tasks.
7. Include a closing. Some examples are sincerely, regards, yours respectfully, or thank you.
8. Include an email signature. It should include your full name, phone number, and email address. Before you send your email, be sure to proofread it and look for opportunities to condense ideas or even delete.

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Map the tips above to the example correspondence below.

To: firstlast@agencyordepartment.gov
Cc: 1
Bcc:

Subject: **Confirmation of Next Steps** 2

Hello Mr. Smith, 3

Thank you for meeting with me last week. I really appreciated your help in understanding your situation better. There are some items we need to address in order to move forward.

As agreed during our discussion concerning [subject or situation], you will move forward on taking these next steps:

- *Details on action steps*
- *Details on action steps* 4
- *Details on action steps*

It is critical that these steps be carried out immediately in order to maximize the likelihood of the best possible outcome.

Please confirm receipt of this message and your agreement on carrying out these steps. 5

I will follow up with you on Month, Day, Year to check on progress and to confirm if your actions led to a successful resolution or if additional advice or support is necessary. 6

Please call me at 555-555-5555 by February 20.

Reach out any time if you need clarification or just want to talk through the situation. We are here to support you.

Sincerely, 7

Bob Thomas
Insider Threat Program Director 8
555-555-5555
Bobthomas@agencyordepartment.gov

Reviewing your risk communication

Review a document three times:

- First for completeness
- Second for conciseness
- Third for clarity

After crafting your risk communication, run through this best practice checklist and adjust your message as needed.

My risk communication has

- [ ] Just enough information
- [ ] Examples where needed
- [ ] Relevant facts
- [ ] Valid interpretation of facts
- [ ] Logical argument of position
- [ ] A complete message
- [ ] An objective
- [ ] Main point up front
- [ ] Active voice
- [ ] Short words and sentences
- [ ] Concise, "single-purpose" paragraphs
- [ ] No jargon or pompous words
- [ ] Subject matter laid out clearly
- [ ] Subject advanced in stages
- [ ] Smooth transitions
- [ ] Clear linkages between stages
- [ ] Correct spelling and punctuation
- [ ] An appropriate tone
- [ ] Clarity

Developing personal skills for risk communication

In addition to using techniques for effective communication, it is also important to develop personal skills that support communication. These skills include active listening and emotional intelligence as well as skills related to visualization and self-reflection.

Practicing active listening

Active listening requires focus from you and your conversation partners. To reduce your own distraction and support active listening, you need to be mindful of your physical well-being. To keep your body running optimally, you have to supply it with oxygen, rest, and nutrients.

Self-Care Checklist to Support Active Listening:

- [ ] Are you in the right headspace for active listening? Stretch, take deep breaths, and visualize the conversation.
- [ ] Can you adjust elements of your environment to support active listening? Adjust lighting to create an intimate setting or use bright light for stimulation.
- [ ] Have you eaten? Hunger is distracting, and low blood sugar can interfere with decision making.
- [ ] Did you get a full night's sleep? If possible, schedule conversations for when you will be properly rested. If it is not possible to delay the conversation, set aside time after the conversation to recover.

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Fostering focus

To execute goals within a group setting, it is helpful to first cultivate the attention of everyone present. The following exercise emphasizes active listening from the audience while enabling each person to process and release distractions.

1. Ask, “What’s holding your attention today?”
2. Give 1 minute for the group to reflect on the question.
3. Give each person 2 minutes to share. Remind the group to practice active listening when others share by asking curious questions and by not focusing on what they are going to share.
4. After each share, thank the individual and check for follow-up questions or thoughts.

Cultivating emotional intelligence

Use the points below to reflect on different aspects of your emotional intelligence and find your strengths and weaknesses.

- Self-awareness
  - Attention to your feelings and emotions
  - Evaluation of your strengths, limitations, and idiosyncrasies
- Self-regulation
  - Ability to put rational thinking ahead of emotional impulses
  - Ability to recognize when your judgment or bias is influencing your actions
  - Motivation to excel and maintain standards
- Social empathy
  - Compassion for others' perspectives and concerns
  - Interest in seeing others achieve
  - Ability to show when change is needed within whole groups

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Exercise: Identify one area where you feel you could improve your emotional intelligence. For example, "Sometimes I respond impulsively or emotionally." Then, craft an assignment to strengthen the skill. For example, here are some ways to improve your emotional self-regulation

- Read an article on impulse control from a trusted resource.
- Practice counting to three in your head before responding in a conversation.
- Ask a close colleague to watch your behavior and give you feedback.

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Using breath work and visualization

Understanding how to guide the energy of a conversation is critical to mastering communication. Humans are biologically wired to notice emotions and unconsciously mimic them. Special neurons in our brains known as "mirror neurons" activate in the same pattern when we perform an action or simply watch someone else perform the action. That means your behavior can actively set the tone and establish a shared experience.

Breath work and visualization are two techniques that help you recognize and control the energy you project. These skills build your ability to maintain composure in high-risk situations. A meditative mind expresses deepened emotional intelligence and influence on others.

Take a breath

Find a place where you can stand or sit in an intentional posture with your eyes closed and perform self-guided breath work techniques. Here are two techniques you can try:

- 4-4-4-4 (i.e., Tactical Breathing): Take a deep breath in through your nose (counting to 4), hold the breath for a 4 count, exhale for a 4 count through the mouth, then pause for a count of 4 before repeating the cycle. Repeat until your heart rate is lowered.
- Prolonged Exhalation: Take a deep breath in through your nose for a 2-second count, then exhale for an 8-second count. Repeat until your heart rate is lowered.

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Reflecting on everyday conversations

Make use of conversations you have in everyday life to evaluate ways you can improve your communication. Not all conversations are difficult, but you can practice deconstructing everyday conversations to improve your communication skills so you are prepared for difficult conversations. Use the following table to help you assess where things went right with your communications and where you might be able to improve.

I focused on the facts.	Yes / No
I asked open-ended questions.	Yes / No
I listened.	Yes / No
I engaged with the goal of understanding my conversational partner.	Yes / No
I explored options with my conversational partner.	Yes / No

What went well during the conversation?	Notes:
What did not go as expected?	Notes:
How can I improve for next time?	Notes:

Online resources [1]

- CDSE Insider Threat
- EPA Risk Communication Workbook
- Insider Threat Definitions
- Insider Threat Guide: A compendium of best practices to accompany the National Insider Threat Minimum Standards
- Insider Threat Maturity Framework
- Insider Threat Symposium Expo
- Keystone Center: Primer on Perceptions of Risk
- Message Mapping
- Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center- Risk Communication Primer
- Periodic Table for High Concern Communication

[1] Full bibliography available upon request

Conclusion: Risk communication skill development is a continuous process.

We hope you'll use the skills outlined in this Playbook to strengthen your risk communications going forward. You have learned the basics of effective risk communication such as tailoring your communication to a purpose and audience, influencing the perception of risk, using active listening, and applying your emotional intelligence to build trust.

Remember, like with any skill, practice helps you improve. Use the tips and techniques presented in this Playbook to continue developing your risk communication skills. Explore the "Online resources" section to learn more about insider threat resources as well as tools and techniques you can apply in your risk communications.

Communication is a team sport. Build on what you know, and share what you have learned. Show others how you've benefited from investing in your risk communication skills, and watch them benefit too.

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This Playbook follows the plainlanguage.gov “Design for reading” guidelines.

The goal of this approach is to make it easy for you to

- Find what you need
- Understand what you find
- Use what you find to master risk communication skills

Visit plainlanguage.gov

The Threat Lab: A Brief History

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the DoD Counter-Insider Threat Program Director's vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

Our business model is simple: We work with stakeholders to transform operational challenges into actionable research questions. We then design and execute research projects that result in accessible, concise findings and recommendations that we integrate into training and awareness materials for organizations to use as-is or customize for their own purposes. For more information or to request a briefing, please email us at: **dodhra.ThreatLab@mail.mil**