



The importance of empathy and other soft skills in first responders when dealing with a disaster situation

The aspect of “listening” was elaborated further by other practitioners who outlined trust issues when there is no common language, and the important role of empathy to overcome such difficulties: “When we do not listen to people, e.g. earthquake in Emilia Romagna. There was a foreign citizen, desperately looking for help, because his house was destroyed and his family was missing. He went to the Police, and he was told to stay in line. The situation went off the rails, the cops wanted to jail him. Finally, a police officer hugged him and asked him what was going on. That means that sometimes, people just ask for listening. In emergencies, as people are more vulnerable, they need to be listened” (G3; R8 - see source document for full reference). The effectiveness of communication in disaster situations was also seen to be affected by the credibility of both the communication and the communication source, and the need to build credibility over a period of time so that citizens can trust disaster communications. The importance of credible communication sources was highlighted, as practitioners felt that citizens require individual communicators they can trust: “Credibility is on individuals and we do not speak for units. If we send to Tor Bella Monaca the communicator who was in jail for a miscommunication in Stromboli, for instance, people do know him and know about the charges and the fire becomes a political and media event” (G1; R), “When we had the impeachment issues for L’Aquila, having dirty facts happening took away all the trust of people in institutions” (G1; R7). “I need to measure every word, I cannot make promises I cannot keep, and if people lose the faith in your communication, they elect outer sources that often feed with people’s rage and distrust” (G2; R). “In the US, they have so many tornado alerts and then only a few happen. In Italy, if we gave so many alerts, we might be questioned for alarming the population, they have no such problem. In 2011, the Genoa flood made thousands of death. A year later there was the same risk and after they secured the entire area, there was a huge payback, as the flood didn’t happen. We are not as free as to trust institutions even within high-risk areas” (G3; R8).

Applicable to:

Stakeholders: [Attitudes toward authorities](#), [Communication](#), [Languages](#)

Disaster Phases: [Response](#), [Recovery](#)

Types of Actors Concerned: [National civil protection body](#), [Local authorities](#), [Government](#)

Hazards: [Natural hazards](#), [Man-made non-intentional hazards or emergency situations](#), [Man-made intentional hazards](#)

Recommendations:

- [Engage in activities and develop strategies aiming to improve trust between citizens and authorities](#)

Source

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