

RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

Communication is a fundamental skill at the core of the Counter-Insider Threat (C-InT) mission. C-InT professionals must be able to communicate effectively with decision makers concerning risk management recommendations. This research note describes the research and development of a communication playbook designed to support C-InT professionals in the prevention and mitigation of insider threats through effective communication. The playbook contains a variety of techniques and exercises designed to improve communication, including purposeful message mapping, empathetic listening, message delivery, collaboration, plain language, and relationship building.



About The Threat Lab

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (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.

Developing a Toolkit for Effective Communication of Risk Management Recommendations

OPA Report No. 2021-030 • PERSEREC-RN-21-03 • APRIL 2021

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Introduction

Effective threat management depends greatly on how recommendations are communicated to leaders authorized to take action. When inappropriate behaviors or indicators of a potential insider threat exist, C-InT professionals engage with the appropriate authority to ensure that proper actions are taken to mitigate the threat.

While C-InT professionals recommend how to manage potential threats, they are not authorized to implement those actions. They must rely on organizational leaders or other authorized decision makers to carry out their recommendations. These decision makers may be wrestling with competing goals, such as when a high-performing employee becomes a potential insider threat. They may be reluctant to take action due to concerns about the potential impacts to personnel or to the organization's mission.

The C-InT professional must overcome this ambivalence and convince decision makers to adopt their recommendations. To do so, they must be able to communicate effectively.

The National Insider Threat Task Force tasked the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center's Threat Lab with developing an engaging tool for C-InT professionals to improve their skills in communicating threat risk and mitigation. In response, we created a downloadable playbook, *The Art and Science of Speaking Up and Being Heard*, which includes helpful exercises, tips, tools, and techniques grounded in evidence-based communications strategies. This research note summarizes the development and content of the playbook.



Identifying Best Practices for Communication

We began our research for the playbook with a review of common communication techniques and best practices. We surveyed multiple search engines and databases (e.g., Google Scholar, WorldCat, EBSCO Discovery Service) using keywords such as communication, risk communication, communication strategies, and communication techniques. We also collected and reviewed playbooks and similar communication guides/toolkits developed by agencies and organizations across the Government and the public sector.

After reviewing the literature, we interviewed subject matter experts (SMEs) to better understand how we could apply communication themes from the literature to the C-InT domain. We interviewed three C-InT personnel from Government (DoD and other Federal agencies) and industry. All SMEs were threat management professionals at the coordinator or director level with experience in identifying, assessing, and mitigating insider threats.

In the SME interviews, we asked questions designed to help us understand which stakeholders are involved in risk communication and to clarify the relationships between various stakeholders. We also asked SMEs to relay personal stories of successful risk communication efforts and specific communication techniques and strategies they have used in their work. In addition, SMEs provided feedback on best practices identified in the literature review, including persuasive communication strategies, techniques for overcoming resistance, and tools for improving risk communication.

Playbook Content

We used the themes found in both the literature and the SME interviews as the basis for the playbook content. Content includes information on navigating the communication process (i.e., finding your purpose and identifying your audience), how risk communication shapes risk perceptions, active listening, emotional intelligence, and building trust. The playbook consists of three sections:

- Part 1: The Art of Speaking Up: How to identify the purpose of a message, understand your audience, and influence the perception of risk across the C-InT mission space.
- Part 2: The Science of Being Heard: How to use active listening as a strategy in order to be heard and to build relationships, develop emotional intelligence, and build trust.
- Part 3: Tools for Communication: How to use tools to communicate risk effectively, including techniques and tips for communication (e.g., message mapping, storytelling, and plain language) and exercises to develop personal communication skills.

Part 1: The Art of Speaking Up

In Part 1, we explain why C-InT professionals need to understand their purpose, their audience, and how their audience might respond to risk. Differences in risk perception affect how individuals resolve ambivalence between maintaining the status quo and acting on the recommendations of the C-InT professional.

We describe the steps C-InT professionals should take as they develop their messages, including identifying their messages' purpose and developing messages tailored to meet the audience's needs.

This section ends with a discussion of guiding the audience using persuasive communication and the role of the C-InT professionals as an influencer of risk perception across various areas of the mission space.

Part 2: Being Heard

In Part 2, The Science of Being Heard, we provide recommendations for active listening, emotional intelligence, and trust building. We explain how C-InT professionals can use active-empathetic listening to identify their audience's emotional state. Identifying an audience's emotions is especially important for risk communications because fear and uncertainty may interfere with effective decision making.

We also discuss how emotional intelligence impacts communication and changes the way decision makers perceive risk. It can be difficult for the C-InT professional to encourage change if decision makers' perceptions of risk are low. However, a C-InT professional who is attentive to the emotions of their audience is able to recognize the best moment to deliver recommendations to encourage change.

This section of the playbook then turns to the role of building relationships and trust in risk communication. Hurley (2006) noted that effective communication positively impacted the level of trust reported in relationships. Therefore this section offers strategies to improve trust by building effective communication skills.

Part 3: Tools for Communicating Risk

Part 3, Tools for Communication, provides techniques C-InT professionals can use to improve their risk communications. One technique, message mapping, supports effective response in crisis situations by providing guidance on organizing and delivering messages. Message mapping helps establish clear goals for risk communications prior to engaging with decision makers. In this section, we also describe templates that can be used to effectively map messages (i.e., the Compassion, Conviction, Optimism Template; the 27/9/3 rule; and One Negative Equals Three Positives).

We found storytelling to be a common communication technique in the literature, a finding supported by SMEs interviewed who reported using storytelling in their communications. This technique is flexible and versatile, taking advantage of the human predisposition to organize information in a narrative structure. Stories are easily remembered and provide a structure for understanding and making predictions about the world. Stories can be crafted to present risk information in nonthreatening ways and can elicit different emotions in the audience. In the playbook, we identify best practices for effective storytelling and encourage C-InT professionals to use stories in different ways depending on context.

Another effective technique we recommend is the use of "plain language," as stipulated in the Plain Writing Act of 2010. Plain language promotes a writing style marked by the selection of familiar words that are concrete and easy to understand. Like message mapping, the technique instructs communicators to condense their messages to the essential points to avoid overwhelming their audience. The plain language format is deceptively simple and must be actively practiced to achieve its full impact. The underlying theme of the plain language approach is to keep your audience and your communication goal top of mind as you develop your message, the foundation of all effective communication strategies promoted in this playbook. At the end of the playbook, we provide several

tips, checklists, and activities. These tools include example language tailored to threat management scenarios.

Using the Playbook and Next Steps

Communication often feels effortless, but effective communication takes practice and persistence. We designed the risk communication playbook as a self-instructional tool that can be used to develop effective and persuasive communication skills. We have made the final playbook available as a downloadable PDF for easy reference by C-InT professionals in their day-to-day communications. To increase the likelihood of successful implementation, we recommend that C-InT leadership promote the download, use, and discussion of this playbook by C-InT professionals in their organizations. The playbook can be downloaded from the Center for Development of Security Excellence website at the following link: <https://www.cdse.edu/toolkits/insider/research.html>.

Future Research

Potential areas for future development of the playbook include the following:

- Investigating other communication techniques and strategies commonly used across the security and intelligence mission space (e.g., negotiation tactics), and
- Increasing C-InT professionals' understanding of the influence of context on communication effectiveness (e.g., nudge theory).

Another area for future work would involve the creation of a suite of products focused on the development of soft skills—skills related to communication and emotional intelligence. These products could be repurposed and disseminated to the general workforce beyond C-InT professionals as a means of improving reporting of potential threats.

There could also be great value in developing products exclusively devoted to each technique discussed in this playbook (e.g., storytelling). Next steps could include collecting stories from C-InT professionals, or other security and intelligence communities, to identify co-occurring themes and context cues that influence the effectiveness of storytelling. Understanding the full spectrum of stories (e.g., origin stories, symbolic stories, slice of life stories), how they vary, and when to use them (i.e., emotional or thematic priming) would be a valuable follow-up to this communication playbook.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the team of designers, writers, and subject matter experts from Northrop Grumman Learning and Communications Solutions, with advisory support from Hillard Heintze, for their contributions to the content and design of the playbook described in this research note.

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