

Announcer ([00:02](#)):

You are listening to The Safety Moment Podcast by Utility Safety Partners. Safety is always a good conversation and it's a click away. Here's your host, Mike Sullivan.

Mike Sullivan ([00:17](#)):

Welcome to The Safety Moment Podcast everybody. And today we're talking about managing communications in an emergency situation with renowned expert, Mr. Jon Lovink of Lovink Media. This is the first of two episodes with Jon, the proprietor of the Credible Spokesperson, or as he calls it, CRED. We're talking about communications, but not just any kind of communications. We're talking about emergency management, communications. What happens in an emergency communications in itself is a broad topic. We're not always talking about the good things and promoting awareness and Click Before you Dig the benefits thereof. Today, we're talking more so about communications when things don't go well, when an event happens, and the importance of being prepared to speak with the public, to speak with your shippers, to speak with the media who are going to be all over you. Jon Lovink, he has been around for a long time. I'm going to ask him to introduce himself here in a moment, but he is the curator of the credible spokesperson program, and he's trained me. He's trained countless others in the industry over many years, helping us prepare for that possibility, that potential that someday we will be faced with the media and responding to questions in relation to an incident. Jon, welcome to the podcast. It's so nice to have you here.

Jon Lovink ([01:45](#)):

Hey, Mike, it's actually terrific to be here with you. We've known each other for a long time and I appreciate the many times that we've worked together. And hopefully I can provide some good insight or advice or whatever you want to talk about. But I'm really happy to be here with you, man.

Mike Sullivan ([02:02](#)):

Well, we've had our paths crossed a number of times back when I was with the pipeline industry and again, with the Canadian Common Ground Alliance and Alberta One Common Now Utility Safety Partners. And I always came away with one more tidbit, at least one more tidbit of information, of knowledge, and you would show us the benefit, the importance of being prepared, but the importance of getting your message across, bridging the communications, all those, those other things I want to talk about today. Before we get there though, I would be really glad if you could give us everybody a little bit of a background of how you got to doing this, because you've been in the communications industry a long time.

Jon Lovink ([02:44](#)):

Hey, serendipity, in many ways. I started, I mean, started a long time ago at a TV station in Toronto called City TV, where I got a job as a junior reporter just by putting my foot in the door. And I mean, I'd had some education, but certainly not journalism education. And I learned my way through the media business over about 25 years, just learning as I go. And eventually ended up working in Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Vancouver, ended up in Calgary, married in the news business. It's a very demanding business that's changed dramatically since I left. And I'd love to talk about that too, because that's really significant these days, especially around critical incidents. But it was sort of like this. I had four children and every day I had to attend to something in the news business cause it just keeps going around. And I found at a certain point, my heart just wasn't in it anymore.

[\(03:50\)](#):

And so I ended up leaving for just really, it was just that, just too much and overwhelming and I felt overwhelmed and I was running a newsroom and in Calgary and for a CBC and anyway, looked for a new opportunity. And someone, actually, a good friend of mine who had brought into the business, who's still a top line reporter for the US News Network, Liz Palmer said, there are people who help people deal with the news business. And I never even thought about that. And did you say help? One thing led to another, killed, did you say help kill the news business? No. People who have to deal with the news business and part of it that, yeah, yeah. No, not that I was wondering, but maybe but not that. Yeah. Anyway, it, it's kind of struck a chord with me part in part because I guess as a kid I'd watched, my dad worked kind of in the business.

[\(04:51\)](#):

He was a Dutch ambassador to Canada, Russia, Australia had a huge career in, I guess in a way of communications, but more in a lot of contact with media and reporters and all that. And every morning we had to be quiet when the news came on and all that. But it just struck me also as a reporter that what I experienced so often, and as a producer, even more maybe as an executive producer news, the anger and anxiety that people have towards the news media often reflected itself in people saying things they shouldn't say in part because they're frightened or they're concerned, or the many different reasons people have when they're sitting in front of a microphone, especially when there's cameras there. And they would do say things that were not natural to them and maybe not even who they were in part because of fear or part because of negativity or all these types of things that happen to people when they have to public speak.

[\(05:54\)](#):

So one thing led to another, I found that it was a really useful service that I started to offer, which is coaching people into that realm. Started in Calgary, ended up working with a lot of government agencies across the country, then the oil and gas business pipeline business. Now I'm all over, really all the place, just about every industry you can think of that helping people. That's really what I try to do, just help people figure out how to manage their message in an environment where there's a lot of scrutiny and certainly a critical incident or something that might involve a safety type of thing.

Mike Sullivan [\(06:35\)](#):

Well, and the scrutiny today, as you mentioned, the scrutiny today comes from all angles there. There's no limit to where the scrutiny can come from and having the ability, and you said like, I want to talk about this as well a little bit later, but having the ability to turn the dial down on some of those areas is critical as well, because that's part of managing your communications. You have to focus on the issue and forget about all the chaff that's coming at you for the time being. Some things may have to be dealt with and other ones you just don't choose not to because it's just all it is, it's chaff. But how, I'm going to ask the obvious though. I'm going to ask the obvious. How important is it? I mean, how critical is effective communication management today? Emergency communication management today,

Jon Lovink [\(07:20\)](#):

The essence of crisis communications, emergency communications as it always has, is to figure out where the story is going and get ahead of it. That's kind of rule number one. If you or your organization is affected by something that draws a lot of public scrutiny, it's going to be because people are affected. It's going to be because some, whatever, it could be one person, or it could be thousands of people or tens of thousands of people, it's going to be because people are affected. And it's the business of getting

ahead of the story actually used to be a little bit easier 20 years ago than it is now, because now everything is so fast in social media realms. And most news media for lots of reasons that I'm sure we can get into if you want, our sourcing, social media and emergency organizations are primarily using social media to getting their message out.

[\(08:24\)](#):

Although there's some controversy now around that, given what's happening with Twitter, because Twitter sort of has become the emergency management tool of communications. And yet recently in BC during the fires, there was a BC fire management issued a tweet about an evacuation order that for some reason Elon Musk's crew decided should be blocked, which that you start to think, okay, really weird. I mean, people's lives are at risk and Twitter's blocking something. So look, the question now, how important is it? It is just so important to the reputation of your organization to figure out and to practice stuff around communications when there's a critical incident. And of course most organizations have the tools, but what my focus on is primarily the capacity for the leadership team to figure out what they're going to say, how they're going to say what tools they're going to use. And then on top of that, because most social media is now video driven, to be able to, if you're going to go into that realm and speak and be talk to people and specifically reporters or even stakeholders, you have to have the tools to figure out how to manage the video component of that communications. Because half the time, it's not even what you say. It's how you say it. That's so important.

Mike Sullivan [\(10:06\)](#):

That's kind of where I wanted this to go. I mean, good communications almost get passed over because there's no story that you, you've diminished the story and you've answered the questions that need to be answered. You're given the information that needs to be given, but bad communications, then that becomes the story. Well,

Jon Lovink [\(10:27\)](#):

You're saying, I think what you're saying is if you may say all the right things, but if say one wrong thing, yeah, you're done. Is that kind what you're at pretty much?

Mike Sullivan [\(10:37\)](#):

Or somebody goes out there and they say all the wrong things, and that is we've, and we've seen that before too, but you mentioned the corporate reputation. Brand equity is, can a corporation come back from something like that?

Jon Lovink [\(10:52\)](#):

I think corporations do come back if they handle it well. And there's lots of examples of corporations who handle critical incident or organizations who have gotten really good at managing it. Look, I mean, obviously if a reputation is seriously maligned, it's going to take years. You can think back on maybe the BP Deep water horizon, we're the leader. He just said something inappropriate once

Mike Sullivan [\(11:25\)](#):

And then that became the story.

Jon Lovink [\(11:27\)](#):

It became the story. I mean, he was dismissed summarily. I mean, if anyone listening to this might remember, lots of lives were lost, lots of lives were put in jeopardy when that oil environmental

Mike Sullivan ([11:43](#)):

Catastrophe,

Jon Lovink ([11:44](#)):

It was really environmental catastrophe. All the shrimp fishermen had lost basically their jobs. And yeah, so lives are lost. And the guy who's the leader, I think his name was Tony Hayward, BP chief says, at some point in exasperation, after yet another news conference, I just want my life back. Meaning really that this had taken up so much air and everybody else, he wanted his life back. But the implications for the way that came across and his British accent differing so much from the Louisiana accent and all of that compounded with the fact that I think his son was waiting on or was waiting on some beautiful cruise ship in the Mediterranean for his dad to arrive for a holiday that just pissed people off so much and they lost all really, BP lost so much credibility just on that one little thing. And there's so many examples of that. And I don't know mean he didn't recover from that. Did BP recover from that? I think one, those things stick as sort of the meme or in the mindset of everybody who thinks of bp. It's hard to get rid of that.

Mike Sullivan ([13:12](#)):

Well, now today, it just lives on an infamy on the web. It's there forever.

Jon Lovink ([13:16](#)):

It's infamy. Well, that's it, right? And I mean, I'm sure BP has done a job, a good job in regaining some of its reputation in terms of emergency management. And I mean, the key thing in emergency management, if you do screw up, the sooner you acknowledge you screw up, the better off you are.

Mike Sullivan ([13:32](#)):

You passed it, move on and focus on work at hand. Right. I know in your talks and in your presentations, you've talked about the Lac Megantic, and this is the 10th anniversary of Lac Megantic just July or June 13th or something like that. Yeah, very close. And taking the course, the credible spokesperson course, I know you've provided some documentation on that where I can't remember the gentleman's first name. Burkhart. Ed Burkhart, Ed Burkhart. And he was the wrong guy to be there, obviously the wrong guy to be a spokesperson. And it people, 47 people were incinerated and all he could think about was, I'm not worth today what I was worth yesterday. And that was the only the message that went out there. But you see,

Jon Lovink ([14:22](#)):

Yeah, that just on that point, this is what I need to focus my clients on, and I'm Mike all about this. He got to have, if you're an organization that has the possibility of something going really seriously wrong, the natural inclination is we're going to put the CEO in front of.

Mike Sullivan ([14:47](#)):

Not a good idea. Most of the time,

Jon Lovink ([14:49](#)):

Well, sometimes it's a bad idea, especially if the person is not really good at this and is not comfortable and doesn't know and doesn't understand audience communications. So the Lac Megantic incident is just a classic example because people are killed the whole community, it just desk. And there's two things that come to mind when you think of Ed Burkhardt, and it's almost natural that people want to answer questions straightforwardly. But in that news conference, in that news conference he gave, there were two questions that just come and they happened about 15 minutes into the news conference. The first question was, are you sleeping at night? And how are you sleeping at night? Was the question. And the first inclination for people maybe is to say, just be straightforward and say, I'm working my butt off. I'm so tired, I'm just exhausted. So I got to get some sleep, which is kind of what he said actually.

([15:53](#)):

He said, if you're working as many hours as I do, you'll sleep anywhere. Which is maybe the wrong answer because it's a truthful answer. And yet at the same time, it shows that you're not really thinking about the people who are affected by this. And a better answer would've been for him, would've likely been how I'm sleeping, doesn't mean much to the 47 people. And then the next, or subsequently after, shortly after, another reporter asked a question, well, as he was the primary shareholder of the company, and the reporter asked him, well, how much are you worth today? Which seems like a hugely insensitive question for a reporter to ask, but you

Mike Sullivan ([16:37](#)):

Figure the reporter had some idea this guy was going to be the story.

Jon Lovink ([16:40](#)):

I think so. And on top of that, reporters aren't necessarily generous minded kind people. They're asked the tough questions and maybe real dumb questions in the while they're looking for a story. And so whatever you think about the question, his answer was deadly. A lot less than I was four days ago. Yeah, so which is true. I'm sure it's true.

Mike Sullivan ([17:07](#)):

But the wrong answer.

Jon Lovink ([17:08](#)):

The wrong answer, but the wrong answer, because that's not a question. That's a question you say, I don't think that matters a lot. Right? No, no, exactly. Exactly. Anyway, I know he is a classic example of somebody who should never be a spokesperson for an organization under a turmoil. And I think it's something that all executives and all leaders need to look at. Am I the right person who can answer these questions and really focus on trust building, maintaining our reputation under scrutiny, even when something goes wrong, and who understands that the answers always have to be about what you're doing to address the needs of people.

Mike Sullivan ([17:51](#)):

Utility Safety Partners is proud to finally roll out the recognition awards for excellence in Excavator Safety, Locator Safety and Member of the Year. This is a project that we've been working on for a long time to recognize the experts in those fields. If you know somebody and would like to nominate them

for the excavator of the year or the Locator of the year, or even the member of the year, you'll be able to go to our website very soon at utilitysafety.ca and find out exactly how to do that.

(18:25):

I know we've used the example when I was with the pipeline industry, there could be a massive event happening behind you in the field, many miles behind, kilometers behind you. And the message is, yes, we have an emergency. Everything is under control, all secondary fires are being addressed. This will burn out in a matter of hours. Everybody is safe. And then we'll get back in there and we will investigate the cause of this before we allow anybody to get back into their homes. And that really just diffuses the whole thing. It looks awful, but the situation is, in reality, something happened. We have it under control and everybody's safe.

Jon Lovink (19:04):

Assuming it is under control. And if so, say so. Yeah. One of the things, the sort of the core element of my credible spokesperson program, I call it cred now, and because it really focuses on sort of four core principles of managing communications under scrutiny. Now, the one you talked about there speaking, the person speaking, you said, well, we talked about who should that be? And sometimes it's really just best to put the most, the best expert, the person who really knows what's going on in the situation in front of people, reporters, if need be, whatever. Because having the expertise to address a situation is almost always one of the critical components of crisis management. And sometimes the CEO might, he might not be the responder, and that could

Mike Sullivan (20:01):

Be due to timing too, couldn't it? I mean, if it's early in the situation, shouldn't the CEO be addressing other things and not be in front of the camera?

Jon Lovink (20:08):

Again, it really depends on the corporate reputation and how much that is at issue. So sometimes its putting the CEO in front of a camera if that is what's happening, or in front of a video feed or using Twitter or any number of ways that you can use these days to get your message out. Sometimes that is the right call because the reputation of the organization is embodied in what the CEO says, but in the early days, maybe not. So the decision, these are all decisions actually, that every organization that is potentially exposed should be thinking of now rather than when it happens. And that's what we do in my business. I mean, we coach people through intensive scenarios. We put the C E O, the operational leads, their field people through this. And it's useful because sometimes it shows that a certain person in organization should not be the person, and another should.

(21:09):

So, you know, go through a simulation and you test and you put cameras on people. And because so much of it is nonverbal and it's presentation, it's eyeline, it's tone of voice, and also the smarts to understand who you're really speaking to through reporters or through stakeholders, all of that requires some skill and training. The question again about who it should be and all of that is, Hey, I've worked with organizations where it's always going to be the c e because they are so good. I've worked with organizations who would not put their CEO in front of for various reasons and others. And the other side of this too, just while we're talking about whether we're actually getting in front of the news media, is there are lots of reasons these days not to use traditional news media in crisis.

Mike Sullivan ([22:05](#)):

You can control it better, can't you

Jon Lovink ([22:06](#)):

Not only control it better, but you can get messages out more effectively to those who are affected. For example, I've worked closely with BC Wildfire. They're primarily using social media to reach out to communities that need to be evacuated, because that's where, and then reporters are following up on that and reporting that. Look, these days, there are so many better ways to get your message out than through traditional news media.

Mike Sullivan ([22:33](#)):

So we've been talking mostly about emergencies here, but there, there's an operational element to this as well. If you're in operations, whether it's gas distribution, pipeline transmission, telecom, project based, maybe you're have a new fiber build or something like that, that we see Telus doing right now across the province. There's an operational element to this that if you're going out on the people's property and you're digging up the property and you're putting in new facilities, there's lots of locating going on. You're going to be dealing with the public face-to-face, social media, community groups or whatever the case may be. It could be city transit that is putting in a new system, or whether it's rail or light rail, or even a new bus terminal or a bus lane or whatever it might be, communities that they have interest. And we've seen, I know here in Calgary we've seen some of these interest groups or community groups. The one that comes to mind is the city of Calgary Transit. It just became a horrible mess. Almost the community groups were up in arms. Is that also an opportunity to, of getting out there and having these open house sessions or discussions with community groups, open houses? Is that also an opportunity to go through the same process for emergency communications and getting the right people out there to help diffuse situations?

Jon Lovink ([24:01](#)):

There's going to come at that maybe slightly differently. Look, it used to be 20 years ago, it's not relevant anymore that there was a way in which you could manage your communications through news releases. And

Mike Sullivan ([24:14](#)):

It was almost like a process,

Jon Lovink ([24:15](#)):

Right? Yeah. It was a whole, very directed process. The advent of Twitter and social media, Facebook, everything that's out there has taught us, I think one thing that it's all about trust building with an individual, one individual at a time. And that really media relations and media management message has become stakeholders. Don't love that word stakeholder, but it really has become about managing your relationships at a human level with people out there. And let me just reflect back on that. Back when I was a reporter, and let's say an organization, Calgary Transit's doing something, whatever they do affects so many people. And most of their communications work now has to be with relationship building, with people who are using transit in various different communities, people who are concerned about whether it's safe to even get on an L R T at night. And a lot of this is now really about building sort of trust as an individual stakeholder, community communicator.

[\(25:26\)](#):

Because in a way, what the news media really does is reflect the trust within communities, towards organizations. We go talk to people who are affected by what an organization is doing as a reporter, and that we reflect that back into our stories. And if the community say good things and they trust their relationships with, let's say, Calgary Transit as an example, or any other organization, then that's going to be reflected in news media. So a lot of what we do, I think what people need to be doing in terms of media management and all of that is to build really strong communications with those people who are affected. And in my world, that means coming across as a person who actually gives a damn about people who actually cares, you know, have to have

Mike Sullivan [\(26:16\)](#):

A gen genuine approach.

Jon Lovink [\(26:17\)](#):

It is because ultimately what I teach people is sort of the four core principles. Concern for c. C stands for concern. So that means, so it can concern caring in a crisis that might be comfort or consoling in day-to-day communications. It might be somebody who you could identify with and get along with, or somebody who at least understands what it's like to walk a mile in your shoes, that sort of person. So having those attributes as a communicator, whether you're C E O or operational, it's so important because these days, that's how people respond. That's what people respond to. That's sort of authenticity associated with that empathic, caring concern person. So that's the R that I always talk about to people, is actually responding what people's concerns are now and understanding what they are and knowing and being responsive to the issues that are in their mind.

[\(27:17\)](#):

And then the part I talked about earlier, that expertise, that's the E of cred, that means they actually have to be seen to be able to do something about it or at least know how to draw in the resources that are required. And then the D of Cred is that you are living up to what you said you are going to do, the principles you're committed and dedicated to, and that you're living up to those. And I think those four elements are like absolutely, whether it's media or stakeholder relations, and almost more important than the message

Mike Sullivan [\(28:00\)](#):

That's going to wrap things up on the Safety Moment Podcast for part one of our podcast with Mr. Jon Lovink of Lovink Media. As we talk about communications in an emergency situation, when we reconnect next time on The Safety Moment podcast, we'll be talking about what is the makeup, what is the character that we are looking for, for the people who are delivering those messages in those critical situations. I want to thank our producer Stories and Strategies, and I hope you choose to follow this podcast on any director you're listening on. And please do leave a rating. You can follow us on Twitter at Utility underscore Safety, and we're also on Instagram and Facebook. If you'd like to send us a note, maybe you have an episode idea, please email us at info@utilitysafety.ca and put podcast in the subject header. I'm Mike Sullivan, the president of Utility Safety Partners. Click to know what's above and below. One click costs you nothing. Not clicking could cost you everything.