Effective communications are the foundation for successful project management. In fact, communication problems are often cited as a primary reason projects fail.

Previous columns have addressed the use of communication tools (see “Simple Communication Tools Drive Project Success,” EM April 2007), communication planning (see “Project Success Depends on Communication Success,” EM January 2011), and management of communication channels (see “Channeling Project Success,” EM March 2011). While these are all important aspects of project communications, poor messaging will undermine the best use of communication planning and communication tools. Accordingly, careful attention should be given to framing our communications.

As environment, health, and safety (EH&S) project managers, we are often asked to identify multiple solutions and recommend the best option. Not that it is easy or straightforward, but our detailed knowledge of the project requirements and solutions provides us a unique perspective to identify the best solution. So why is it that a project sponsor or client will select an option that we have not identified as best? Likely, our recommendation was not selected because we did not effectively frame our message.

Communication Framing Theory
Framing theory is rooted in mass communications and simply states that the same situation will be perceived differently based on the way it is presented. Tversky and Kahneman argue that choices associated with framing effects are influenced by
attitudes toward risks (The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice, *Science* 1981, 211, pp. 453-458). Specifically, the authors argue that people will choose a certain gain more than a probable gain with an equal or greater expected value; however, the opposite is true when people are faced with losses. The following study, cited in the article, is used to illustrate the point.

**Probability Problem**

Problem for consideration: The United States is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Study participants were asked to select a preferred program.

If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and two-thirds probability that no one will be saved. Although there is no quantitative difference in the outcome of the two programs, 72% of the study participants chose Program A and 28% of the study participants chose Program B. The authors argue that the prospect of certainty of saving 200 lives (i.e., the “certain gain”) is more attractive than a one-in-three chance of saving 600 lives (i.e., the “probable gain with an equal value”). When framed in terms of gains, we’ll choose the risk-averse option that offers certainty.

A second group of study participants were given the same problem with the following alternative programs: If Program C is adopted, 400 people will die. If Program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that no one will die and two-thirds probability that 600 people will die. In this case, 22% of the study participants chose Program C and 78% chose Program D. In this case, the authors argue that the certain death of 400 people (i.e., the “certain loss”) is less acceptable than the two-in-three chance that 600 will die (i.e., the “probable loss with an equal value”). When framed in terms of losses, we’ll take the chance and accept the option that appears riskier.

**Mixed Message**

In a previous issue, I described the case of an EH&S manager at a facility subject to Good Manufacturing Process (GMP) requirements who wanted to reduce solvent usage in manufacturing to avoid Title V permitting (see “Laying the Groundwork for Environmental Project Success,” *EM* February 2007). The EH&S manager reasoned that management would readily revert to a previously successful formulation that would reduce solvent consumption and thus, eliminate the need for a Title V permit.

The EH&S manager presented the proposed reformulation project without an analysis of costs or benefits, emphasizing instead the difficulty in obtaining and complying with a Title V permit. However, management was more familiar with GMP management and compliance than it was with the challenges of Title V permitting and compliance. As a result, the EH&S manager was instructed to proceed with Title V permitting for the facility.

Had the EH&S manager taken the time to frame the reformulation project in terms of guaranteed GMP compliance without the risk of operational constraints (i.e., the “certain gain”) instead of the complexities of Title V compliance (i.e., the “certain loss”), plant management may have decided to accept the reformulation alternative. Instead, management perceived operation under a Title V permit as less risky than reformulation, when in fact reformulation was the less risky option.

Some may argue that framing a recommendation to influence a decision is manipulative; it isn’t. If we believe that we have a solution that effectively satisfies project budget and schedule requirements, we should make the effort to present the solution in terms that resonate with the decision maker. When we have been trusted to evaluate options and make a recommendation, we are simply providing excellent service when we frame our recommendations in terms that reflect an understanding of stakeholder needs and concerns. *em*