

Employee Outrage vs. Community Outrage

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Employees respond very much like anyone else to risk controversies, focusing much more on outrage than on hazard. But there are differences:

1. *Employees usually know more about the hazards they face.* That means employees are less likely to panic unnecessarily; it also means they're harder to reassure if they think they have reason to be alarmed.
2. *Employee exposures are typically higher than community exposures, but they are taken less seriously by regulators and the media.* Even employees themselves often believe they are paid for their risk, and therefore deserve less protection than the general public. When they decide that even this reduced standard is not being met, their outrage is explosive.
3. *Employees have other relationships with the company besides the risks they endure -- especially economic ones.* This may make them less likely to raise risk issues. But it can also make the risk issue a stand-in for other sources of resentment. When morale is low, risk controversies are hot.
4. *Employees are often pressured not to raise risk issues.* Some of the pressure comes from themselves and from peers, a mix of machismo and fear of boat-rocking. Some of it comes from supervisors.
5. *Employee communication is constrained by legal formalities.* Union contracts, OSHA regulations, and labor relations laws may specify kinds of communications that must or must not take place.
6. *Employees are easier to reach than the general public.* There are more vehicles, formal and informal, for interacting with employees. The employer finds it easier to make sure the message gets out and gets heard.
7. *Employees are a key conduit to the general public.* People who hear about a risk controversy often ask a neighbor or a friend who works there what the real scoop is. Employees are ambassadors for better or for worse.

The first four differences all work in the same direction: Employee risk controversies are less common than external risk controversies. But when they happen, they tend to be nastier and harder to resolve.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

What's Different about Employees? (Oct 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/different.htm

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