

Outrage Management in Mid-Crisis (p. 1)

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In mid-crisis there are more important priorities than outrage management -- especially managing the hazard and warning the people at risk. Don't make this your top priority until the crisis is over. But don't neglect it altogether.

1. Talk quickly, even if uncertain.

Don't allow a vacuum to be filled by critics and rumor-mongers. Companies in crisis used to shoot from the hip, claiming knowledge they didn't really have yet. Now they tend to defer all questions until next year's investigatory report. Find the middle ground.

2. Express your uncertainty.

"We think it's probably X, Y, or Z. Our scientists say X is the likeliest, Y is the least harmful, Z is the worst. But we haven't yet ruled out A or B or some other longshot. We should know more by tomorrow morning."

3. Avoid understating the crisis.

It's acceptable to report later that things are better than you feared; it's devastating to report later that they're worse than you thought. Make sure your first statement is your most alarming statement, and things get progressively better from there.

4. Sound and look concerned.

In their effort to seem professional, managers often come across as indifferent. If it's been a hellish night for you, let it show. If it's been a hellish night for your neighbors or employees, say so (apologetically). Report the facts, of course ... but be human.

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5. Keep it simple.

In times of stress, technical people often take refuge in sounding technical -- exactly when their non-technical stakeholders are feeling most vulnerable, most misled, and least tolerant of all that jargon. The worse the crisis, the simpler your explanations should be.

6. Try to control the message, not the messengers.

In a crisis, trying to keep your employees or neighbors from talking to the media is a lost cause. Instead of gagging anyone, inform everyone: Get the information you consider most crucial to everyone who is likely to become a source.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- At Three Mile Island (1979) -- www.psandman.com/articles/3-mile.htm
- Risk Communication and the War Against Terrorism: High Hazard, High Outrage (Oct 2001) -- www.psandman.com/col/9-11.htm
- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) -- www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm

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