

Reducing Outrage: Some Additional Strategies (p. 1)

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Voluntary vs. coerced

- Ask permission; make the risk more voluntary even if you can't make it completely voluntary.
- Warn newcomers before they come, so they can give "informed consent."

Natural vs. industrial

- Don't compare the risks you impose on people to natural risks.

Familiar vs. exotic

- Use plant tours, mall displays, school curriculum materials, etc. to increase familiarity.
- Explain the risks, the bad news; excessive reassurance backfires.

Not memorable vs. memorable

- Diagnose sources of memorability: personal experience, news coverage, fiction, signal (e.g. odor, flares), symbol.
- Whatever is on people's minds, discuss it -- before they ask.
- Watch for your own tendency to want to stop talking about problems prematurely; be the last, not the first, to drop the subject.

Not dreaded vs. dreaded

- Legitimate the dread; if you don't share people's dread (of cancer, of oil spills, whatever), you're disqualified from explaining that the hazard is low.

Chronic vs. catastrophic

- Take low-probability high-magnitude risks more seriously than your quantitative risk assessment suggests.
- Discuss what you are doing to reduce magnitude (emergency preparedness), not just probability.
- Make sure your worst case scenario is really the worst.

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Knowable vs. unknowable

- Acknowledge uncertainty, but don't exaggerate it; tell what you know, what you think, and what you're doing to find out more.
- Convert expert disagreement into mere uncertainty by estimating risk as a range that includes opponents' estimates.
- Make the risk detectable by skeptics and neighbors.

Controlled by the individual vs. controlled by others

- If you have control, share it -- with community advisory panels, third-party audits, negotiation with activists, etc.
- If you don't have control, admit it; be willing to look powerless rather than uncooperative.
- If you don't need control, delegate it.

Fair vs. unfair

- Allocate benefits in proportion to risks.
- Negotiate for benefits; remember that compensation and restitution are better outrage reducers than unilateral philanthropy.
- In responding to minorities' environmental justice claims, take the injustice seriously even when you think the environmental damage is negligible.
- Resolve fairness issues before discussing mitigation plans, making sure there are options for achieving fairness other than excessive mitigation.
- Be alert for possible tradeoffs; if X is your fault but irremediable, and Y is remediable but not your fault, maybe you can fix Y instead of X.

Morally irrelevant vs. morally relevant

- Acknowledge that pollution is widely considered morally wrong, independent of technical measures of harmfulness.
- Take your share of the moral responsibility rather than accusing stakeholders of avoiding their share.

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Trustworthy sources vs. untrustworthy sources

- Acknowledge problems when they are real, so your denials (when they are not real) have context and credibility. Let us see you solve problems.
- Instead of demanding trust, find ways to be accountable instead -- to regulators, neighbors, and activists.
- To increase the value of regulators as a source of accountability, publicize enforcement actions.
- Negotiate binding agreements with traditional opponents, so that they can certify that you did the right thing (because they made you) instead of complaining that you didn't. Think of this as outsourcing trust.

Responsive process vs. unresponsive process

- Don't keep secrets -- relatively benign information often becomes toxic simply because it was withheld.
- Acknowledge misbehavior or error; remember that forgiveness always requires an apology and sometimes requires a penance.
- Always treat concerned stakeholders with courtesy, even though they are often discourteous.
- Always look into complaints seriously, even if you doubt their validity and suspect a hidden agenda.
- Without being patronizing, try to adjust to the cultural norms of your stakeholders; don't come to a grange meeting in a three-piece suit *or* a brand new pair of overalls.
- Show compassion, not dispassion; people don't care what you know until they know that you care.
- Make your interactions personal, not impersonal; hiding behind bureaucracy only worsens the controversy.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Laundry List of 50 Outrage Reducers (Feb 2002) -- www.psandman.com/col/laundry.htm

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