

Risk = Hazard + Outrage: Summary

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If you make a list of environmental health risks in order of how many people they kill each year, then list them again in order of how alarming they are to the general public, the two lists will be very different. Risk managers in industry and government often deduce from this that public perception of risk is ignorant or irrational. But a better way to see the problem is that the public defines “risk” more broadly than the risk assessment profession. It helps to stipulate new definitions. Call the death rate “hazard”; call everything else that the public considers part of risk, collectively, “outrage.” Risk, properly conceived, includes both hazard and outrage.

Among the components of outrage are: voluntary/coerced; familiar/exotic; not memorable/memorable; controlled by the individual/controlled by others; fair/unfair; and imposed by institutions that are trustworthy/untrustworthy. Risks that are high in these factors are high risks, even if they are not especially hazardous.

To decrease public concern about small hazards, therefore, risk managers must work to diminish the outrage. The presentation focuses especially on six key strategies for managing outrage: stake out the middle, not the extreme; acknowledge prior misbehavior; acknowledge current problems; give others credit for achievements; share control or be accountable; and bring unacknowledged concerns to the surface.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Getting to Maybe: Some Communications Aspects of Siting Hazardous Waste Facilities (Spring 1986) – www.psandman.com/articles/seton.htm
- Dealing with the Public (Nov 1986) – www.psandman.com/articles/explain3.htm
- Tips on EMF Risk Communication (Summer 1993) – www.psandman.com/articles/risk.htm
- Risk Communication (1994) – www.psandman.com/articles/riskcomm.htm

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