

Talking about Worst Case Scenarios: Twenty Additional Suggestions (p. 1 of 2)

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1. If some in the community want the company to plan for even lower-probability, higher-magnitude disasters, take the issue seriously and argue it on the merits.
2. Don't trivialize public concerns with tongue-in-cheek attention to extremely unlikely scenarios (the "invasion from Mars" ploy).
3. Where possible, frame a discussion of low-probability, high-magnitude scenarios at several levels of probability.
4. Don't forget that magnitude/probability tradeoffs are not linear. A one-in-a-million chance of killing a million people is worse than one accidental death.
5. Specify which accident risks worry plant management the most, and why. Telling us which risks to worry about works much better than telling us not to worry about any.
6. Pay most attention to the most concerned people. Their calmer neighbors are watching to see how you respond to their concerns.
7. Emergency warning equipment (sirens, etc.) are often a source of reassurance. If possible, don't oppose such equipment, but don't be in charge of it either.
8. Use existing communication vehicles in preference to new ones. It helps if you already have a Community Advisory Panel so possible catastrophes can be a routine agenda item.
9. Avoid euphemisms. Don't avoid words like "kill" and "deaths"; they are the essence of your topic.
10. Offer people things they can do to protect themselves, so they feel more control of the situation.
11. Don't ask the impossible. Example: Urging residents not to pick up their children at school in the event of an emergency.
12. Don't keep secrets. Whatever you withhold (a plume map with LD50s, for example) will become the symbol of your untrustworthiness.

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13. Don't rely on distinctions that will seem arbitrary or defensive to your publics – for example, between your accidents and suppliers' or transporters' accidents.
 14. Try to put worst case data into context – but not at the expense of seeming to take the risk seriously enough.
 15. Acknowledge that it took you too long to open up about your worst case scenarios.
 16. Don't blindside others who are used to being involved (police, firefighters, emergency responders, regulators, other companies, etc.).
 17. See the initial discussion as the start of a process. Your goal is to initiate and shape the dialogue, not to preempt it.
 18. Measure success not by how many (or how few) participate, but by how many know they are welcome to participate.
 19. Work with science educators on effective ways to explain low probabilities -- but not at the expense of seeming to take the risk seriously enough.
 20. Be prepared to make concessions. Emergency planning is getting democratized. Get ready to share power.
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For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Worst Case Scenarios – www.psandman.com/col/birdflu.htm

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