

When You Think People Are Under-Reacting to a Risk: A Nine-Step Checklist (p. 1)

Copyright © 2003 by Peter M. Sandman

This list is in chronological order. Do not focus on the questions near the bottom until you have eliminated the ones above them.

1. Are you sure they're underreacting?

Might they be taking the risk more seriously than you're giving them credit for? Might you be taking the risk more seriously than it deserves? Might they be in denial rather than apathetic, too terrified to let themselves feel it rather than insufficiently alarmed? If the answer to any of these questions is affirmative, trying to make the risk seem worse is the wrong approach.

2. Can you engineer the problem away?

Reducing the risk is sometimes easier and more effective than getting people to take it more seriously. Especially if the risk is your fault in the first place, you have an obligation to think about whether you can eliminate it. If there is a feasible, cost-effective engineering answer, risk communication is a pallid (even an unethical) replacement for it.

3. Are they ignorant?

My clients lean far too much on this explanation, assuming that the problem is education when it isn't. But sometimes it is! If there are truths people don't know that would persuade them to take the risk more seriously, then this is the place to start.

4. Are they misinformed?

Misinformation is much harder to correct than ignorance. If there are falsehoods people think they know that are keeping them from taking the risk seriously enough, you have to start where they are. Acknowledge the reasonableness of their opinion before you explain why it's wrong. You can't just ignore what they think they know.

5. Do they know how to protect themselves, and do they know they know?

One common reason for under-reacting to a risk is not knowing what to do -- a training problem. Just as common is *feeling* you don't know what to do, even if you actually do -- a self-efficacy problem. When people are powerless, or feel powerless, wallowing in apathy isn't irrational. So give them things to do, things they think they can do and think will work.

Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.

59 Ridgeview Road
Princeton NJ 08540-7601

Email: peter@psandman.com
Web: www.psandman.com

Phone: 1-609-683-4073
Fax: 1-609-683-0566

Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication

When You Think People Are Under-Reacting to a Risk: A Nine-Step Checklist (p. 2)

6. Are they paying attention?

Even when people are well-informed, well-trained, and feeling efficacious, they may still forget to stay focused on the risk you want them focused on. They get busy and it falls off their radar screens. Big improvements are possible by teaching people how to keep reminding themselves about the risks they should worry about and the precautions they should take.

7. Is there a "motivated inattention" problem?

Sometimes when people aren't paying attention to a risk it's not because they're daydreaming; they don't *want* to pay attention to that risk. Sources of motivated inattention range from "it can't happen" to "it can't be prevented" to "my boss doesn't mean it about safety." First diagnose the rationales behind the inattention; then develop a strategy to address it.

8. Can you get them more outraged at the risk?

This is the activist solution when people are under-reacting to a risk: Mobilize their outrage. Depending on your issue, your employer, and your own opinions, you may not want to avail yourself of this powerful tool. If you do, think through which three or four outrage components you can most productively trigger. Then plan your campaign.

9. Can you get them less outraged at the precautions?

We all spend our childhoods outraged not at risk but at precaution-taking; our parents keep spoiling our fun with all those warnings. This often survives into adulthood: "How dare that safety manager make me wear those goggles!" Reducing outrage about precautions is a powerful strategy for getting people to take risks more seriously.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- When People Are "Under-Reacting" to Risk -- www.psandman.com/col/under-r.htm

Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.

59 Ridgeview Road
Princeton NJ 08540-7601

Email: peter@psandman.com
Web: www.psandman.com

Phone: 1-609-683-4073
Fax: 1-609-683-0566

Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication