

Does Outrage Management Belong in the Public Engagement Toolkit?

by Peter M. Sandman Ph.D.

- ▶ This essay was posted on [The Peter M. Sandman Risk Communication Website](#) on December 31, 2025. For more on Dr. Sandman's approach to outrage management, see the website's [Outrage Management Index](#).
- ▶ The essay has been accepted as a chapter in a forthcoming 2026 book, with the working title *The Purpose, Power, and Promise of Public Engagement*, edited by Lewis Michaelson and Margaret Harvie. This is the original as submitted. The version to be published has some cuts and changes.

In July 2025, Margaret Harvie (a longtime friend and colleague in Australia) asked me to write a chapter for a book she and Lewis Michaelson were planning on public engagement. This is the chapter I submitted in September 2025. It focuses on the fact that public engagement professionals often find my outrage management toolkit for calming stakeholder emotion manipulative and offensive – and on my contention that they nonetheless need that toolkit or something like it as a prerequisite for the sort of calm, substantive discussion they aim to facilitate. Lewis and Margie accepted the chapter – with edits – in December 2025, and gave me permission to post the original on my website.

My principal claim to fame as a risk communication expert is the concept that risk is a function of both hazard (how endangered you are) and outrage (how upset you are) – and that hazard perception is much more a function of outrage than of actual hazard. Being upset (frightened or angry) tends to make us see a situation as dangerous; being calm leads us to see it as not so dangerous. The opposite causal structure – we're upset or calm because we believe it is or isn't dangerous – makes more sense but isn't how human psychology mostly works.

It follows that to get people to take or demand precautions you think are important, it's crucial to increase their outrage, to rile them up. That's one of the main things activists do. I got my start in risk communication helping them do it.

To get people to stop taking or demanding precautions you think are unnecessary, on the other hand, it's crucial to decrease their outrage. The main source of my income for several decades was helping corporate clients craft ways to decrease stakeholder outrage – strategies like apologizing for screw-ups, acknowledging current problems, sharing control, setting up accountability mechanisms, and giving credit to critics for improvements they forced. My label for this set of strategies (“bag of tricks” if you prefer) was [outrage management](#).

Although I developed my signature “Risk = Hazard + Outrage” formula in the context of traditional risk controversies, I learned to apply it much more broadly. Controversies nearly always have an outrage component, and the level of outrage nearly always affects how people see the situation far more than facts or data about the substantive issues.

Now a carpenter walks around with a hammer imagining everything is a nail. So when an outrage management expert tells you that outrage management ought to be important in public engagement, you’re wise to be skeptical. There’s another valid source of skepticism as well: A toolkit for calming people down about risk sounds like exactly the sort of manipulative thing a corporation whose facilities emit a lot of dangerous pollutants would hire a consultant to deploy.

I have two goals for this essay: to explore skepticism about outrage management as a tool of public engagement and to try to overcome it.

(Note that this essay is framed mostly in terms of an outside consultant whose client is a company trying to figure out how best to deal with hostile stakeholders. But the issues aren’t meaningfully different if the stakeholders are challenging a government agency rather than a company, or if the company or agency is actually your employer rather than your client.)

Two paradigms

In 2000 and again in 2007, I had a chance to run an outrage management seminar at a meeting of the International Association for Public Participation. The second session in particular engendered considerable skepticism, sometimes outright opposition. It led to some considerable support too, sufficiently so that IAP2 went on to make a batch of videotapes of me espousing some key principles and strategies of outrage management, then embedded those videos in a two-day outrage management course that lasted until 2017 or so. The course was originally called “Emotion, Outrage & Public Participation,” then later rebranded as “[Strategies for Dealing with Opposition and Outrage in Public Participation](#).” There was even an IAP2 outrage management train-the-trainer program. But the course never really caught on, and the people who taught it often told me that they too encountered a fair amount of skepticism.

The skepticism led me to write a 2008 website column entitled “[Meeting Management: Where Does Risk Communication Fit in Public Participation?](#)”

I started the column by laying out in laborious detail what I called “The Public Participation Paradigm” and “The Outrage Management Paradigm.” “Of course, many meetings end up someplace in the middle,” I conceded. “Still, when risk communicators are worrying about how to run a meeting, odds are they’re imagining one of two meetings: a rational debate about important substantive options (the public participation paradigm) or an emotional venting of fears and grievances (the outrage management paradigm). Meeting management begins with getting clear on the differences between these two paradigms.” And I added: “A core problem in meeting management – maybe *the* core problem – is figuring out how to split the difference, how to address outrage and substance at the same time.”

Most of that 2008 column explored differences between outrage management and public engagement. Here are four of them:

- **The value of venting.** For public engagement professionals, emotional outbursts are at best a distraction; at worst they threaten to derail the meeting. People who can't stop venting or won't discuss issues respectfully may even be asked to leave. But for outrage managers those outbursts are extremely fruitful: a source of data about why participants are outraged, a way to help them discharge and thereby diminish that outrage, and an opportunity for the company to respond empathetically.
- **Who you want at the meeting.** Public engagement professionals want literally everybody at the meeting (or at least a random sample of everybody). Even people who aren't especially interested may have wisdom to share. Outrage managers want everybody who's upset about the issue and nobody who isn't. They especially want the most outspoken critics and the people who will complain most loudly later if they weren't invited. They definitely don't want the company's supporters, who are all too likely to get outraged themselves when they see the company making concessions.
- **Whose side you're on.** Public engagement professionals are referees. They're not on anybody's side. And since the company hired them, they need to go out of their way to make clear that they're neutral, or maybe even a little biased in favor of the critics. Outrage managers, on the other hand, are coaches. They really do work for the client. But they're not hired guns. At least I never considered myself a hired gun. Many of the things I told my clients, in fact, were the same things their most hostile opponents were telling them. My goal was always to help clients listen better and respond better *to* their critics, and thereby ameliorate the critics' outrage. I rarely reached out to those critics myself, nor did I often facilitate my clients' meetings; that was my clients' job (or the job of a public engagement professional).
- **The relative importance of substance and process.** For public engagement professionals, the substance (the hazard) is what matters. Their skillset is to manage the process in the way that best helps both sides focus together on how serious the hazard is and what to do about it. But for outrage managers, the hazard is by definition small, at least smaller than the outrage. If it isn't, they've got no business trying to calm people down. Both public engagement professionals and outrage managers focus on process, but for different reasons. Public engagement professionals use their process expertise to help the group discuss substantive differences of opinion, so participants can reach consensus (or, more often, compromise) on important substantive issues. Outrage managers use their process expertise to help the group address genuine process grievances, so participants can stop overreacting to substantive issues that are less important than those grievances have led them to suppose.

When paradigms collide

Clients that hire public engagement professionals typically do so because they're facing a

difficult controversy. At least some of the stakeholders are highly outraged. But coping with outrage is not usually a public engagement professional's expertise or inclination. The public engagement model is rational discussion in pursuit of some kind of agreement. That rational discussion isn't about outrage, obviously; it's about the substantive issues, the hazard. Your goal is to help the community reach agreement on the seriousness of the hazard and how best to manage it if it needs managing. A core barrier to achieving your goal is stakeholders' outrage – which determines their hazard perception more than the actual hazard does.

So assume a situation in which the hazard is genuinely pretty low (the emissions are benign, say) but a group of stakeholders are justifiably highly outraged (maybe because the company has been dishonest and arrogant). It's going to be a nearly impossible challenge to get highly outraged people to see that the emissions are benign without first talking about the company's dishonesty and arrogance.

There's an exception to my claim that outrage determines hazard perception. Very high hazard swamps everything else, guaranteeing both high hazard perception and high outrage. If people are dying in the streets, everybody is highly upset and everybody agrees the hazard is high. But for lower-hazard risks, hazard perception is strongly dependent on outrage and pretty independent of what experts say the actual hazard is. Consider the risk of vaccination, or vaping, or nuclear power plants. The amount of hazard that these risks impose is low enough that outrage, not hazard, is the principal determinant of hazard perception.

It's important to see that the causality is mostly in the outrage → hazard perception direction, not so much hazard perception → outrage. This is counterintuitive, but crucial. And again it's true of all issues, not just risk issues. It is incredibly hard to convince upset people that the controversy they're upset about isn't as big a deal as they feel (more feel than think) it is. But if they calm down – in response to an apology, say – they may quickly come to that conclusion by themselves. (Back when I used to have trouble convincing corporate clients of the direction of the causality, I used to ask them what were some hot-button issues within their own organizations. Parking spots were a perennial favorite, which nicely proved my point.)

What follows, obviously, is this: If an organization wants its stakeholders to believe a particular situation is low-hazard, the organization needs to try to get or keep the stakeholders' outrage low.

Now here's the rub. This is true regardless of whether the organization is right or wrong, honest or dishonest, about the actual hazard. It is true if the goal is to educate the group so they will work toward sound policy agreements. It is just as true if the goal is to persuasively mislead the group so they will shrug off the risk and go home.

Conversely, of course, if the goal is to get the group to think the hazard is high, the core task is to raise their outrage. Every activist knows that Job One is to get people upset; explaining why they're right to be upset can come later.

Communicators who see themselves as in the persuasion business have no problem with this

reality. But it is understandably a tough sell for communicators who see themselves as in the education business, who would like to think evidence is persuasive enough and hate the thought that emotions so greatly determine how people assess the evidence. Trying to arouse or mitigate an audience's fear or anger strikes many educators as manipulative, even unethical. And most public engagement people are educators at heart. Outrage management isn't in their toolkit and they don't really want it to be.

Here's what's toughest for educators. Arousing outrage is crucial to convincing people that a hazard is high. Ameliorating outrage is crucial to convincing them that the hazard is low. But suppose you don't want to convince them of anything. The substantive issues are debatable. Both sides are partly right. Your goal is to get the group to assess the hazard calmly, based on the evidence. So what's crucial for you is that the group's level of outrage be intermediate. You don't want people to be upset, but you don't want them to be apathetic either.

But your corporate client hired you in the first place to deal with stakeholders who are *very* upset. And odds are your corporate client wants them as calm as possible – apathetic would be terrific as far as the client is concerned. Assume a high-outrage situation where the hazard – however high or low it actually is – is imposed by a company that wants to keep imposing it and is opposed by activists who want to force the company to stop. Three things are true:

- Since activists want the stakeholders to think the hazard is high, they will aim to keep stakeholder outrage high or even get it higher, as high as possible.
- Since the company (your client) wants the stakeholders to think the hazard is low, it will aim to get stakeholder outrage as low as possible.
- Since you want the stakeholders to attend calmly to the evidence, you will aim – or at least I'm arguing that you should aim – to get the outrage lower, not as low as possible but lower than it is.

You and your client share the goal of reducing the group's outrage. But your motives are radically different. You want to encourage calm consideration of the evidence. Your client wants to encourage unthinking confidence that there's nothing worth worrying about.

That's the core of the problem. Public engagement people *need* outrage management because it's a prerequisite for getting outraged stakeholders to assess the hazard calmly. And public engagement people *distrust* outrage management because it's a way companies can try to get people to stop worrying about the hazard altogether. There's no conflict if you're convinced the hazard is actually too low to be worth worrying about. But suppose you believe the hazard is actually high enough to deserve thoughtful consideration, debate, and amelioration – not as high as the company's outraged stakeholders imagine, but not so low that they should lose interest and go home, which is what the company hopes they'll do. Should you aim to reduce the stakeholders' outrage in the interests of calm assessment of the hazard? Or is that playing into the company's hands? Should you prefer instead to keep the stakeholders' outrage high in the interests of sustaining their insistence on hazard reduction?

Adding outrage management to your toolkit

Why do I think outrage management is both a crucial and an honorable thing for public engagement professionals to do?

Because stakeholder outrage is the main reason why most clients bring in a public engagement professional in the first place. The client is afraid to manage the meeting in-house. The client wants professional help only because stakeholder outrage is high. You don't get that many gigs to facilitate calm meetings.

Because highly outraged stakeholders aren't likely to calm down enough to spend the meeting considering the substantive issues rationally unless the meeting facilitator takes onboard the task of calming them down. You simply can't have the sort of productive meeting you're hoping for until participants' outrage has been acknowledged and addressed.

Because regardless of what the company wants, highly outraged stakeholders almost never calm down so much that they lose interest and go home – though some less concerned people may go home once they see that the two sides collectively have the issue well in hand.

Because if the hazard is actually unacceptably high, outrage management doesn't mislead stakeholders into imagining it's okay. They'll calmly assess the evidence and calmly discover that they were right to be upset.

And because quite often when highly outraged stakeholders calm down because their outrage is being addressed, they decide that the evidence shows the company is right about some subissues but wrong about others – thus clarifying the debate and opening the door to some kind of agreement on a path forward.

In other words, successful public engagement often requires an outrage management prerequisite. Getting to yes or even getting to maybe is often a two-step process: deploying an outrage management toolkit to create the conditions needed to have a fruitful discussion; then deploying a public engagement toolkit to facilitate that discussion. Or to put the point more pointedly, public engagement professionals need to know what to do when outrage rears its ugly head at what they had hoped would be a nice, calm, substantive discussion.

So shouldn't outrage management be a tool in the public engagement toolkit? It doesn't have to be Peter Sandman's bag of tricks. There are other systematic approaches to dealing with outraged publics.

Not surprisingly, most clients don't know the difference between public engagement and outrage management, and don't know which one they need. (Why should they? If clients understood the situation they were in, they wouldn't need consultants.) Sometimes clients used to come to me to facilitate a substantive meeting, and would say that's not really what I do. Often they come to a public engagement professional for help figuring out how to calm stakeholder outrage, and he or she should say ... what? Hopefully, "Yes, that's in my toolkit. We'll work together to get your stakeholders calm enough that I can facilitate a fruitful series of meetings."

Some quick asides and concluding thoughts from my experience after 50+ years as an outrage management consultant:

- Quite often the company representatives are highly outraged as well, though their outrage may express itself as cold passive-aggressiveness rather than hot anger. Calming them down is often as tough a task as calming down their stakeholders.
- Stakeholders are usually wrong about at least some aspects of the hazard, though of course the company may be wrong (or lying) about some aspects too. But stakeholders are almost always right about the outrage. They may misattribute their outrage to hazard. But if you ask them what has happened that frightened or angered them, they have cogent, accurate answers – usually concrete things the company did or failed to do.
- It's almost needless to say, but I want to get it onto the record: Calming people down doesn't mean telling them to calm down. It means addressing the causes of their outrage – apologizing for prior misbehaviors; acknowledging current problems, abandoning claims that the hazard is negligible; sharing control; etc. The biggest part of my work was convincing company people to stop exacerbating stakeholder outrage and instead implement these outrage management strategies.
- Not everyone calms down. The most highly outraged stakeholders stay outraged. Activists with their own stake in sustaining the controversy keep on doing what they do. But as other stakeholders' outrage begins to decline, their extremism begins to backfire. Everyone else gets calmer in order to avoid sounding like one of those rabble-rousers. Paradoxically, therefore, outrage reduction is served by keeping the irreducibly outraged people in the room and even defending their right to be heard. If everyone else thinks you're being entirely too responsive, you're on your way to a successful meeting.
- Nothing I have written here is meant to imply that hazard doesn't matter. Of course companies have an obligation to manage the hazards they cause. But since hazard isn't the main thing causing stakeholders' outrage, hazard mitigation isn't all that useful in mitigating their outrage. The proper response to a serious hazard is to manage the hazard. The proper response to serious outrage is to manage the outrage.
- And the most basic question underlying all of this is the conflict between two visions of how best to get powerful institutions – companies and governments – to manage a hazard or any substantive problem properly. The activists' answer and sometimes even the revolutionaries' answer is to get and keep people's outrage as high as possible, building pressure for change. The alternative answer, the one I subscribe to and I think most public engagement people mostly subscribe to, is to get and keep people's outrage in the range where reasoned debate and negotiation are feasible. Implementing that alternative answer, I think, requires outrage management in your toolkit.