

The Four Traditional Stages of a Risk Controversy

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1. Ignore Them

Your research tells you the hazard is low, so you do nothing. This typically generates more outrage.

2. Bury Them in Data

Ignoring them didn't work, so you try to convince them that they're wrong. This typically generates more outrage.

3. Impugn Their Motives

If they're local, call them ignorant or hysterical. If they're nonlocal, call them radicals, mercenaries, or outside agitators. This typically generates more outrage.

4. Give Them What They Asked For

Management wants them to go away! Nothing else has worked, so you finally decide to pretend the hazard is huge, though you know it is not. Even this typically generates more outrage. They wanted an apology and a Community Advisory Panel; instead, you gave them a cleanup or an expensive piece of equipment. They are still outraged -- and now so are you!

Conclusion:

The proper response to a serious outrage is neither to ignore the outrage nor to pretend that it is a serious hazard. Just as a serious hazard requires hazard mitigation, a serious outrage requires outrage mitigation.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Risk = Hazard + Outrage: Coping with Controversy about Utility Risks (Oct 1999) – www.psandman.com/articles/amsa.htm

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