Goals for Dealing with Activist Groups

Copyright © 1998 by Peter M. Sandman

The first two goals rarely make sense; the other five are contenders.

1. **To beat them.** This is unlikely to work. Polarization is the activists' game; they gain almost as much from losing as from winning.

2. **To convince them.** Another nonstarter. Activists have sound reasons (psychological, ideological, organizational, financial) not to let themselves be won over to your side.

3. **To show that you're listening.**   In the theater of risk controversy, your role requires you to make significant concessions to the activists in Act One. In Act Two the audience decides you've given enough and suffered enough (though the activists may disagree), and lets you get on with the job.

4. **To make them exclude themselves.**   Most activists hope you will exclude them, giving them an easy issue on which to polarize. If you keep offering them opportunities to collaborate, they may decide to exclude themselves rather than risk looking co-opted.

5. **To lure them into collaboration.**   Offered the chance to collaborate, activists sometimes judge that the risk of looking co-opted is lower than the risk of looking unreasonable and being marginalized.

6. **To get them to abandon the issue.**   Faced with the choice between marginalization (offending their moderate wing) and co-optation (offending their extremist wing), activists sometimes opt for a different issue and a less canny opponent.

7. **To help them beat you.**   A risk controversy stabilizes only when the community decides you can be trusted or decides you don't have to be trusted because the activists have you under control. The second is a lot easier than the first. Letting them take credit for your good behavior is less harmful than watching them attack your good behavior.

For more about my take on this issue, see:
*   Accountability (Oct 2002) – www.psandman.com/col/account.htm
*   The Outrage Industries: The Role of Journalists and Activists in Risk Controversies (Mar 2006) – www.psandman.com/col/outrage.htm

Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.
Brooklyn, NY

Email: peter@psandman.com   Web: www.psandman.com   (U.S.) Phone: 1-609-683-4073
Consulting, Training, and Research in Risk Communication