Psychological Barriers to Risk Communication
– and a Coping Strategy
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Some Obvious Truths:

1.	Organizations and individuals are self-esteem maximizers more often than profit maximizers. We do what makes us feel good about ourselves.

2.	Many risk communication strategies – sharing control, admitting mistakes, etc. – are psychologically difficult. They are hard to do because they do not feel good, at least not right away.

3.	Risk controversies generate outrage on *both* sides, not just the other side. Having your expertise and integrity questioned is insulting. Anger, injured pride, and fear (for your job if not for your safety) go with the territory.

4.	The presumed obligation to stifle the outrage, to pretend (even to yourself) that you don't mind, often makes the problem worse.

5.	People are not at their most creative when they are busy stifling their feelings.

6.	Managers often insist that risk communication won't work because they don't want to do it.

Coping Strategy:

Separate effectiveness from psychological appeal. Acknowledge to yourself that you feel more like polarizing than collaborating, more like continuing the fight than negotiating the truce. Then decide whether you think a risk communication approach might be worthwhile anyway.

For more about my take on this issue, see:
•	"Chapter 7: Will You Let Yourself? The Psychological Barriers" – in *Responding to Community Outrage: Strategies for Effective Risk Communication* (1993) – www.psandman.com/media/RespondingtoCommunityOutrage.pdf
•	Implementing Risk Communication: Overcoming the Barriers (1994) – http://vimeo.com/20353084
•	Public Health Outrage and Smallpox Vaccination: An Afterthought (Jan 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/smallpx2.htm
•	"Fear Is Spreading Faster than SARS" – And So It Should! (Apr 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/SARS-1.htm

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