

The Seesaw of Risk Communication

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Whenever people are ambivalent, seeing merit on both sides of some issue, they tend to focus on the side others are ignoring. When addressing an ambivalent audience, therefore, it is often useful to stress the side that does you harm, leaving the other side – your preferred side – for your audience to stress instead. Thus:

- **Responsibility/blame.** If you emphasize the sense in which a problem is not your fault, we will emphasize the sense in which it is. But if you blame yourself more, we will blame you less.
- **Catastrophic potential.** If you emphasize that a catastrophic possibility is low-probability, we will emphasize that it is high-magnitude. But if you keep saying how bad it would be, we will point out how unlikely it is.
- **Tradeoffs against cost or benefit.** If you emphasize that a risk is “worth it” compared to the alternatives, we will emphasize that it is horrific considered on its own. But if you insist on ignoring the tradeoffs, we will insist that they are crucial to a sound decision.

A longer-term strategy is to move to the fulcrum of the seesaw, forcing your publics to come to terms with their ambivalence, to recognize that there are good arguments on both sides.

The worst strategy – and the most common one – is to preempt the position you wish your audience were adopting, as if the game were follow-the-leader instead of seesaw.

Remember, the seesaw applies only when people are ambivalent. If they are firmly on one side and you express that side, they won't move to the other side; they'll just tell you it's about time you saw the light.

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
- Advice for President Bartlet: Riding the Seesaw (Jul 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/westwing.htm
- Smallpox Vaccination: Some Risk Communication Linchpins (Dec 2003) – www.psandman.com/col/smallpox.htm#6
- Games Risk Communicators Play: Follow-the-Leader, Echo, Donkey, and Seesaw (Dec 2005) – www.psandman.com/col/games.htm
- The Boss's Outrage (Part II): Talking with Top Management about Risk Communication (May 2007) – www.psandman.com/col/bossoutrage.htm
- Origins of the risk communication seesaw principle (November 2007) – www.psandman.com/gst2007.htm#seesaw

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