

What Makes an Interaction Responsive?

Copyright © 1995 by Peter M. Sandman

- 1. Openness versus secrecy.** Most risk controversies focus as much on “why didn’t you tell us sooner” as they do on the risk itself. Even benign facts turn into guilty secrets if they are withheld.
- 2. Acknowledgement versus denial.** Our culture forgives the repentant sinner but endlessly punishes the weasler. The dynamics of forgiveness are well-established: acknowledge that you did it, apologize, make restitution, promise (to try) never to do it again, and do a penance.
- 3. Respect versus contempt.** People can tell whether or not they (and their concerns) are being taken seriously. Whether you ultimately agree to do something about the problem may actually matter less than whether you listen respectfully, investigate thoroughly, and respond thoughtfully.
- 4. Courtesy versus discourtesy.** The little things matter: returning phone calls promptly, remembering to send the document you promised to send, using other people’s last names if they’re using yours. Concerned citizens become dedicated opponents largely because of discourteous treatment.
- 5. Similarity versus differentness.** Managers who send their kids to the local schools and coach little league are better risk communicators than managers who commute from out of town. The greater the barriers of gender, class, income, language, clothing, etc., the more difficult the communication.
- 6. Compassion versus dispassion.** Dispassion helps keep science objective – but it’s disastrously out of place in risk communication, where compassionate listening is the first priority. Nobody cares what you know until they know that you care.
- 7. Personality versus impersonality.** Organizations in controversy become less personal, probably to protect spokespeople from feeling responsible. Compare “we regret” with “we’re sorry” or even “we feel awful.” Ironically, controversies are easier to resolve when the approach is personal.

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