

Talking about Worst Case Scenarios

Eight Principal Strategies

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1. Open your emergency planning files. It may be debatable whether a risk is likely enough that management should be planning for it. What isn't debatable is that if management is in fact planning for it, the community deserves to be told and consulted -- plume maps and all.
2. Choose the actual "worst case," not a likelier-but-less-catastrophic "worst plausible case." Better for the community to complain that you're worrying too much about vanishingly unlikely scenarios than for the community to blame you for ignoring such scenarios.
3. Don't understate your worst case, in content or in tone. If you stress the scenario's low probability, the community will stress its high magnitude. Better to stress its high magnitude, and let the community stress its low probability.
4. Acknowledge that risk assessment of catastrophic risks is extremely uncertain, and in key ways less conservative than risk assessment of chronic risks. Accidents happen quite often that were missing from the "event tree."
5. Don't neglect risks attributable to low employee morale -- or to sabotage at the hands of a disgruntled employee. These are often the likeliest catastrophic risks, and almost always the most memorable ones.
6. Pay more attention to improving mitigation and prevention than to estimating magnitude and probability. The "right" debate is over what you should be doing about disaster risks, not whether you are quantifying them correctly.
7. If activists have played an important role in getting you to open up your disaster planning, give them the credit they are due, and involve them in the planning and the communication.
8. Some of the regulations for communicating about worst case scenarios may turn out foolish. Don't use foolish regulations as an excuse for doing foolish communication. Do what's required *and* what's sensible.