

Psychosocial risk as a leadership system problem: from compliance anxiety to evidence-based culture design

Peter Butko, Bryce Jardine and Noal Atkinson

School of Business and Law, CQUniversity Australia, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – Psychological injury claims are rising due to a lack of architecture, not empathy. This paper problematises the prevailing reliance on individual leadership traits and bureaucratic compliance, arguing instead that psychosocial risk is an emergent property of “wicked” organisational complexity.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employs an integrative conceptual review. It synthesises wicked problems theory to frame the context, the job demands-resources (JD-R) model to explain the mechanism of harm and social information processing (SIP) theory to explain the transmission of safety culture. These lenses are integrated to construct a new conceptual model: the psychosocial leadership architecture (PLA).

Findings – The paper distinguishes between measurable risk and unknowable uncertainty, arguing that standard compliance matrices fail to capture complex social hazards. It proposes the PLA as a three-tiered framework (structure, practice and governance) and identifies the safety signal function of leadership as the primary mechanism for buffering worker health against demands.

Practical implications – The PLA offers executives a blueprint for engineering roles and decision protocols that prevent harm, providing a pathway to legal defensibility while securing high performance.

Originality/value – Challenging the orthodoxy of “soft” leadership, this paper proposes that safety is achieved through hard structural design. It integrates the concept of avoidable employee harm and identifies specific people management risk contexts (e.g. rostering) as primary intervention sites.

Keywords Psychosocial risk, Leadership systems, Organisational design, Governance, Psychological safety, Leadership accountability, Risk management, Work health and safety, Culture

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Psychological injury has become a defining business challenge of the modern economy (Schulte *et al.*, 2024). Claims related to stress, bullying, and hostile work environments are costly, often exceeding the expense and recovery time of physical injuries (Deady *et al.*, 2025). In response, global regulators now mandate that organisations assess and control psychosocial hazards just as they do physical risks (Jain *et al.*, 2022). However, for many leaders, these new duties are experienced as a burden—a compliance minefield where every management decision regarding performance or attendance risks triggering a grievance (Tuckey *et al.*, 2022).

This paper argues that psychosocial regulation should not be viewed merely as a punitive imposition, but as a structural opportunity (Langenhan *et al.*, 2013). The current anxiety leaders feel stems from a fundamental error in management practice: the application of “tame” solutions to “wicked” problems (Jespersen *et al.*, 2016). Physical hazards, such as a slippery floor, are “tame” problems: the cause is observable, and the fix is permanent. Psychosocial hazards, however, are “wicked” problems—defined by incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements (Andersen and Young, 2020). A rostering change that delights one employee may distress another; a necessary performance review may be perceived by the recipient as harassment (Tuckey *et al.*, 2022). For example, a manager attempting to be “fair”

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by strictly enforcing rostering rules may inadvertently trigger a psychological injury in a single parent struggling with childcare, converting a standard administrative task into a complex psychosocial hazard (Popple *et al.*, 2023).

Because current regulations encourage organisations to view these hazards through the lens of traditional physical safety, leaders attempt to manage them using linear risk registers and static controls (Jespersen *et al.*, 2016). This approach fails because psychosocial risk is not static; it is dynamic and relational. It exists in the “backstage” micro-cultures of the organisation, where employees vent frustrations that are hidden from formal surveys (Kiaos, 2025). To effectively manage this uncertainty, we must move beyond predicting probability and instead focus on building a Psychosocial Leadership Architecture (PLA) (Andersen and Young, 2020). This moves the focus from “fixing people” (resilience) to “fixing work” (design) (Schulte *et al.*, 2024). See Figure 1 for an overview of the PLA.

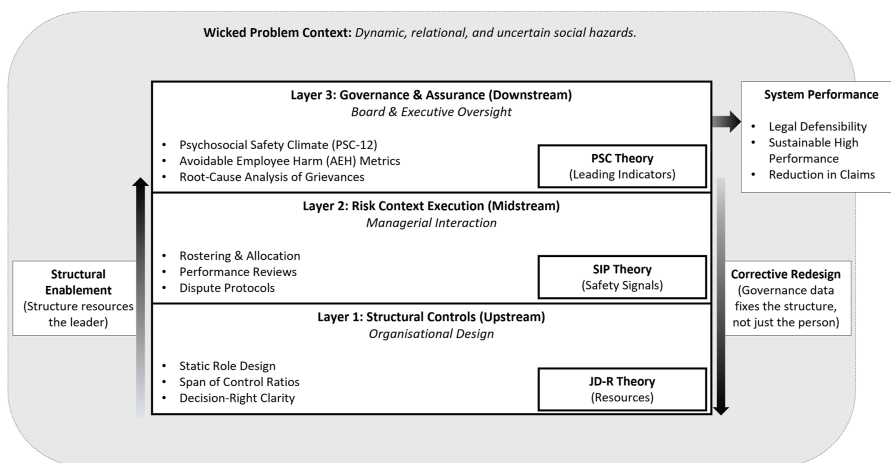


Figure 1. The psychosocial leadership architecture (PLA). **Note:** The model integrates three layers of defense: Structural controls (governed by JD-R theory), risk context execution (governed by SIP theory) and governance (monitored via AEH and PSC). The architecture is designed to manage the “wicked” uncertainty of the external risk context. Source: Authors’ own conceptual model

2. Conceptual methodology

To address the limitations of treating psychosocial risk solely as a compliance issue, this paper employs an integrative conceptual review to move the discourse from descriptive analysis to prescriptive design (Jespersen *et al.*, 2016). This section outlines the integration logic used to synthesise diverse theoretical streams into the PLA framework.

2.1 Theoretical integration logic

We prioritised literature that links organisational design to psychological outcomes, explicitly excluding studies focused solely on individual resilience or clinical interventions. First, to frame the *context* of the problem, we draw on *Wicked Problems Theory* (Rittel and Webber, 1973). This lens explains why traditional linear risk management fails: psychosocial hazards are dynamic and relational, matching the definition of “wicked problems”, which cannot be solved by static checklists alone (Jespersen *et al.*, 2016).

Second, to explain the mechanism of harm, we utilise the health impairment pathway of the *Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model* (Dollard and Bakker, 2010; Law *et al.*, 2011). We rely on the health impairment pathway of JD-R to demonstrate how poor leadership design

functions as a job demand that depletes employee cognitive resources, and how structural supports function as upstream resources (Dollard and Bakker, 2010).

Third, to explain the transmission of safety culture, we apply *Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory*, which posits that leaders function as key sources of social cues, interpreting organisational climate and transmitting these “safety signals” to employees (Plimmer *et al.*, 2022). We use SIP to conceptualise leadership not as a personality trait, but as a source of “safety signals” that employees interpret to determine if the environment is safe (Yulita *et al.*, 2017).

3. Problem statement: fear, fragmentation, and the measurement trap

The formal inclusion of psychosocial risk into work health and safety laws has triggered significant anxiety across the business community (Jespersen *et al.*, 2016). This review synthesises key fields—leadership, safety science, and regulation—to examine where current practice fails.

3.1 Psychosocial hazards and workplace regulation

Psychosocial hazards are defined as aspects of work design, organisation, and management that possess the potential to cause psychological or physical harm to workers (Jain *et al.*, 2022). These hazards include high workload, low control, inadequate support, role conflict, bullying, and harassment (Jain *et al.*, 2022). Regardless of the legal phrasing across different jurisdictions, the core regulatory intent remains consistent: organisations must identify and manage work environments that predictably expose employees to harm (Quinlan, 2025). The cost of failure is escalating; for example, the Fair Work Ombudsman recently secured a \$10.3 million penalty against the Commonwealth Bank for systemic compliance failures, signalling a shift from administrative notices to significant financial enforcement (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2024).

A critical management challenge lies in distinguishing legitimate psychological harm from the inevitable friction, challenge, and discomfort of productive work. Constructive work belongs in the “Learning Zone,” characterised by high psychological safety and robust accountability (Eldor *et al.*, 2023). Harm, conversely, arises from chronic, repeated exposure where power is misused or accountability is systematically avoided (Tuckey *et al.*, 2022). The regulatory objective is not to eliminate necessary pressure, but to eliminate the systemic unpredictability that subjects employees to chronic threat states (Dreismann *et al.*, 2025).

3.2 The perils of “soft” interventions

Organisations have historically responded to these risks with “painkillers”—engagement surveys and resilience training—that treat symptoms rather than causes (Vieira and Santos, 2024). Recent evidence suggests this approach can carry significant perils (Larsson *et al.*, 2020). When leaders undergo development that emphasises performance-orientation without a concurrent adjustment in work design, it can inadvertently increase job demands, leading to higher absenteeism (Woods *et al.*, 2024). Training leaders to be “transformational” without giving them the structural resources to change the work environment creates a *cynicism gap* that exacerbates psychosocial risk (Tuckey *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the relationship between psychosocial safety and performance is not strictly linear. While a safe climate is essential for learning, excessive psychological safety without accountability can harm performance in routine tasks (Eldor *et al.*, 2023).

3.3 The measurement trap: confusing risk with uncertainty

A critical failure in current safety management is conflating “risk” with “uncertainty” (Andersen and Young, 2020). Risk refers to measurable events where probabilities can be calculated from historical data. However, psychosocial hazards reside in the domain of

“uncertainty” (Jespersen *et al.*, 2016). When leaders apply linear risk matrices to complex social interactions, they engage in a “control illusion”. Recent studies indicate that transactional leaders are perceived to make critical decisions based on a “hunch”, overriding facts and data, 87% of the time (Moon, 2021). The PLA framework proposes that instead of trying to quantify the unquantifiable, organisations must develop a capability for “Strategic Risk Leadership” (Andersen and Young, 2020). Table 1 outlines the fundamental shift required to move from this defensive administration to a designed leadership architecture.

Table 1. Comparison of approaches

Feature	Compliance administration (current state)	Psychosocial leadership architecture (proposed)
Focus	Eliminating liability	Eliminating harm through design
Primary Tool	Policies, training, and checklists	Role design, decision protocols, and governance
Leadership View	Leadership is a personal trait or “soft skill”	Leadership is a governable safety system
Risk Model	Linear (risk registers)	Complex/wicked (strategic risk leadership)
Outcome	Defensive documentation	High-performance culture

Source(s): Adapted from Jespersen *et al.* (2016) and Langenhan *et al.* (2013)

4. Proposed framework: The Psychosocial Leadership Architecture (PLA)

This paper proposes the PLA framework, treating leadership not as a collection of personal virtues, but as measurable organisational infrastructure. The PLA operates across three distinct layers: Structural Controls, Risk Context Execution, and Governance, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. The psychosocial leadership architecture (PLA) – mechanisms and indicators

Layer	Definition and boundaries	Key theory	Measurable indicators
1. Structural controls	The static design of roles, authority, and resources Boundary: Organisational Design (Upstream)	JD-R (Upstream Resources)	Role clarity scores Span of control ratios Decision-right ambiguity
2. Risk context execution	The dynamic execution of high-stakes people management tasks Boundary: Managerial Interaction (Midstream)	SIP (Safety Signals)	Fairness in rostering Quality of performance reviews Adherence to dispute protocols
3. Governance and assurance	The feedback loops are used to monitor and recalibrate the system Boundary: Board/Executive Oversight (Downstream)	PSC (Leading Indicators)	PSC-12 Aggregate Scores Avoidable Employee Harm (AEH) rates

Source(s): Developed for this study based on Dollard and Bakker (2010) and Tuckey *et al.* (2022)

4.1 Layer one: structural controls (organisational design)

Structural controls lay the foundation. Leadership behaviour or traits cannot make up for faults in the organisational framework. This layer focuses on intentional Organisational Design—the systematic engineering of jobs to ensure quality (Li *et al.*, 2019). Roles must explicitly define tasks, clear boundaries, and appropriate authority. Psychosocial risk increases dramatically

when employees operate in ambiguous, contradictory, or persistently overloaded roles (Kiaos, 2025). Furthermore, fairness must be structurally embedded in decision-making processes, ensuring procedural justice is delivered consistently, regardless of individual manager style (Jones *et al.*, 2024).

4.2 Layer two: people management risk contexts

While Layer One provides the structural architecture, Layer Two focuses on the dynamic execution of these controls. Empirical analysis of complaints indicates that bullying and psychological injury do not occur randomly but cluster around specific administrative interactions, specifically: managing underperformance, coordinating working hours, and administering entitlements (Tuckey *et al.*, 2022).

Competence in this layer requires what we define as *emotional granularity* (see Section 5.3)—the capacity to execute these high-stakes administrative tasks with procedural justice by detecting the subtle emotional cues of distress before they escalate into injury. For instance, a “Safe Performance Review Protocol” would require leaders to provide 48 hours’ notice of agenda items (predictability) and offer a support person option by default (resource provision), thereby structurally lowering the threat level of the interaction (McFarlane and Karabitsios, 2012). Drawing on SIP theory, this leadership practice acts as a signalling mechanism. When a leader actively intervenes to modify a roster to prevent fatigue, they send an unambiguous signal to the team: *your health matters more than the schedule* (Yulita *et al.*, 2017).

4.3 Layer three: measurement and governance infrastructure

The final layer moves psychosocial safety from an ambiguous aspiration to a governed domain of risk. Governance must focus on the continuous measurement of Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC). High PSC is a powerful lead indicator, predicting lower levels of bullying and harassment (Amoadu *et al.*, 2023).

To operationalise this, organisations should adopt the concept of “Avoidable Employee Harm” (AEH). Just as healthcare has standardised the definition of avoidable patient harm, organisations must define AEH as *harm arising from identifiable and modifiable workplace causes*—such as flawed change management processes or toxic disciplinary procedures (Jones *et al.*, 2024). By categorising these not as “interpersonal conflicts” but as “safety incidents,” organisations can apply root-cause analysis to leadership failures.

5. Implications

The mandate to manage psychosocial risk reshapes fundamental expectations for organisations, requiring a shift from fragmented initiatives to systemic design.

5.1 Commercial and regulatory imperative

The proposed PLA responds to an escalating commercial imperative. Recent data indicates that unmanaged harassment risk is associated with a 17.3% decline in annualised risk-adjusted stock returns (Au *et al.*, 2024). Research further confirms a “selective attrition” effect where toxic leadership architectures systematically drive away principled employees (77% turnover intention), leaving behind those comfortable with malfeasance (Cialdini *et al.*, 2021).

5.2 Practitioner implications: a phased approach

Practitioners are advised to adopt a phased implementation strategy. Phase 1 (Immediate) involves auditing “People Management Risk Contexts”. Organisations should audit high-stakes interactions (e.g. rostering, performance management) identified by Tuckey *et al.* (2022) to ensure they are governed by fair process protocols rather than leader discretion. Phase 2 (Strategic) involves structural redesign, during which executives should review span

of control and role clarity to ensure leaders have the structural capacity to enact the PLA, thereby reducing reliance on individual resilience.

Furthermore, the consulting industry must evolve to provide solutions anchored in system design. Interventions must demonstrate a plausible impact on measurable psychosocial outcomes, moving beyond improved self-reported confidence towards demonstrable reduction in systemic risk (Larsson *et al.*, 2020).

5.3 Implications for leadership capability

Leadership capability must be professionalised to meet psychosocial duties. Leaders require “emotional granularity”—the capacity to distinguish between subtle emotional states, such as frustration versus insecurity—to effectively diagnose psychosocial hazards before they escalate (Butko *et al.*, 2025). Competence should be defined through observable behavioural standards rather than subjective notions of “style.” When management relies on personal intent rather than governable, disciplined practice, the resulting systems become inequitable and fragile (Deady *et al.*, 2025).

6. Future research directions

To mature this field, we propose the following avenues for empirical validation, articulated as three specific testable propositions.

- Proposition 1.* High structural clarity (Layer 1) is proposed to moderate the negative impact of low leader emotional intelligence on employee stress. Future research should test the hypothesis that robust role design functions as a substitute for leadership, buffering teams against toxic traits.
- Proposition 2.* Organisations that measure AEH (Layer 3) are expected to demonstrate lower rates of psychological injury claims than those relying solely on lagging indicators. Longitudinal studies are required to validate if the implementation of PLA correlates with a reduction in injury claims over a 12–24 month period (Parent-Lamarche and Biron, 2022).
- Proposition 3.* Collective accountability is hypothesised to buffer the relationship between high psychological safety and performance on routine tasks. Drawing on Eldor *et al.* (2023), research should investigate if the PLA structure mitigates the *performance drag* sometimes associated with excessive safety in routine environments.

7. Conclusion

The inclusion of psychosocial risk in WHS law is an invitation to elevate leadership practice. This paper has argued that psychosocial harm is an emergent property of leadership systems, accruing through predictable organisational failures rather than isolated individual events. By adopting the PLA, organisations can shift from compliance anxiety to a disciplined, evidence-based culture design. The PLA offers organisations a pathway to transform psychosocial obligations from a compliance burden into a sustainable competitive advantage.

About the authors

Peter Butko is Ph.D. Researcher at CQUniversity whose work examines emotional literacy and granularity in leadership and organisational culture. He is co-founder and director of Bryter Training, designing neuroscience-informed leadership and psychosocial risk programs for organisations.

Bryce Jardine is Co-founder and Managing Partner of Bryter Training, specialising in commercial strategy, sales leadership and organisational development. He holds an MBA and a Master of Educational Neuroscience and applies contemporary research to practical, evidence-based training design.

Dr Noal Atkinson is Course Manager in the School of Business and Law at CQUniversity and Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. His Ph.D. investigated regulation of health information systems and clinician resistance to technology, underpinning his expertise in regulation, compliance and organisational change in healthcare.

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Corresponding author

Peter Butko can be contacted at: peter.butko@cqumail.com