Dr. Lianne M. Lefsrud, P.Eng.
Risk, Innovation, and Sustainability Chair (RISC),
University of Alberta, Canada

Where does fear flourish in organizations?

How does this create operational blind spots?

Following a mine tailings fatality in 2017, I led a team to analyze the geohazards for working on and around tailings[1], water, and ice.[2]

We concluded our two-year project by presenting our technical findings in a mine tailings safety workshop.

Sticky note revelations.

We asked the 117 attendees to brainstorm (on Post-It Notes/Stickies, of course) the reasons "Why are hazards not identified or reported?" When attendees jointly clustered their stickies on posters around the hotel ballroom, we were shocked by the emerging results. We expected technical responses. After all, we'd spent the morning discussing technical causes (dynamic work, changing weather, geotechnical variables).

Yet, the responses were overwhelmingly human and organizational factors: lack of training, fear, inappropriate risk tolerances, external pressures, cultural inaction, and complacency. See Fig. 1.

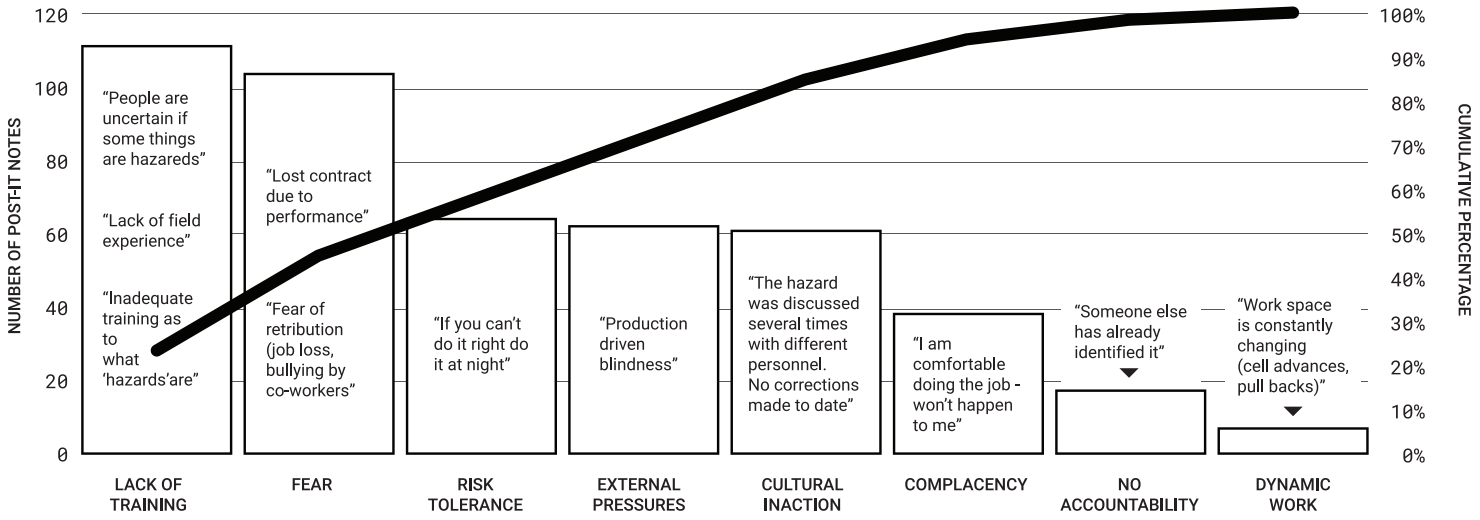

Fig 1: Open-ended responses from 117 mine workers on "Why are hazards not identified or reported?"

How can we address this multiheaded-Hydra-named "Fear"?

The predominance of fear surprised us. Workers felt fear for losing their jobs. Fear of bullying. Fear of making a mistake. Workers were more afraid of the social consequences of identifying and reporting hazards, than of the hazards themselves.

As a result, they were putting their own lives at risk... ***Wow***.

This shocked us and our partner companies.

I was then asked to discuss the same histogram at a safety stand-down with ~30 CEOs of mining contractors and suppliers. At the coffee break, as I was sitting and eating my muffin, a CEO of a construction company walked up, towered over me, and exclaimed "Fear? Your results are bullshit! If my workers were afraid of me, they'd tell me!" I just sat there and slowly smiled, as it gradually dawned on him that his aggressively 'forthright' manner may, in fact, be preventing his workers from approaching him.

Fast forward to today, and we're analyzing more workplace fatalities in mining operations[3,4]. This time, we surveyed over 4,600 workers and analyzed thousands of incident reports, across five mine sites, and 100+ mining and contractor companies. We added the open-ended question "Why aren't hazards identified or reported?"

The results were surprisingly similar. Of the 1,456 people who answered this question,

- 'fear' was mentioned most (37% of respondents) and
- 'lack of training' was mentioned next (22.5%). Of these
  - 73.3% mentioned inadequate hazard recognition and
  - 26.7% have organizational knowledge gaps because they "don't know who to tell" or are "unsure how to report".

As our methods are now more sophisticated (machine learning instead of clustering stickies), we can better disentangle this fear complex: where it flourishes, its organizational causes and consequences, and how it undermines even the most sophisticated risk management systems.

Where does fear flourish?

Employees lower in a company hierarchy, *feel less psychologically safe, but more senior leaders are not immune*.[5] How many times have you sat in an executive meeting and dared not disagree with your peers or leaders? If a senior leader says that they don't openly discuss concerns in an executive meeting because it's too "political", this is corporate-speak for "I'm not going to rock the boat or I'm afraid to admit weakness"; an indication that this executive team also lacks psychological safety.
We can illustrate how performance standards relate to psychological safety as a 2 X 2 matrix,[6,7] to see where fear flourishes specifically. See Fig 2. For teams with high levels of psychological safety and highly challenging tasks and standards, teammates are curious and engaged problem-solvers. They work in the upper right-hand **performance/ learning zone**.

However, for the same high-performance tasks, but low psych safety (where teammates believe that they might be punished or humiliated for speaking up), team-members become anxious. They work in the **anxiety/fear zone**.

Since psych safety is a team-level variable, your company might have several teams doing the same/similar challenging tasks, but with radically different performance, based on how psychologically safe teammates feel.

Ask yourself, which teams are feeling fearful? And which teams are feeling curious and engaged? And how can you create more of these high-performance / learning teams? Fig. 2 also lists some behavioural and organizational fixes, to get all your teams into the performance/ learning zone[6]. To create sustained competitive advantage, across your organization, you need all your teams to be high performing/learning.

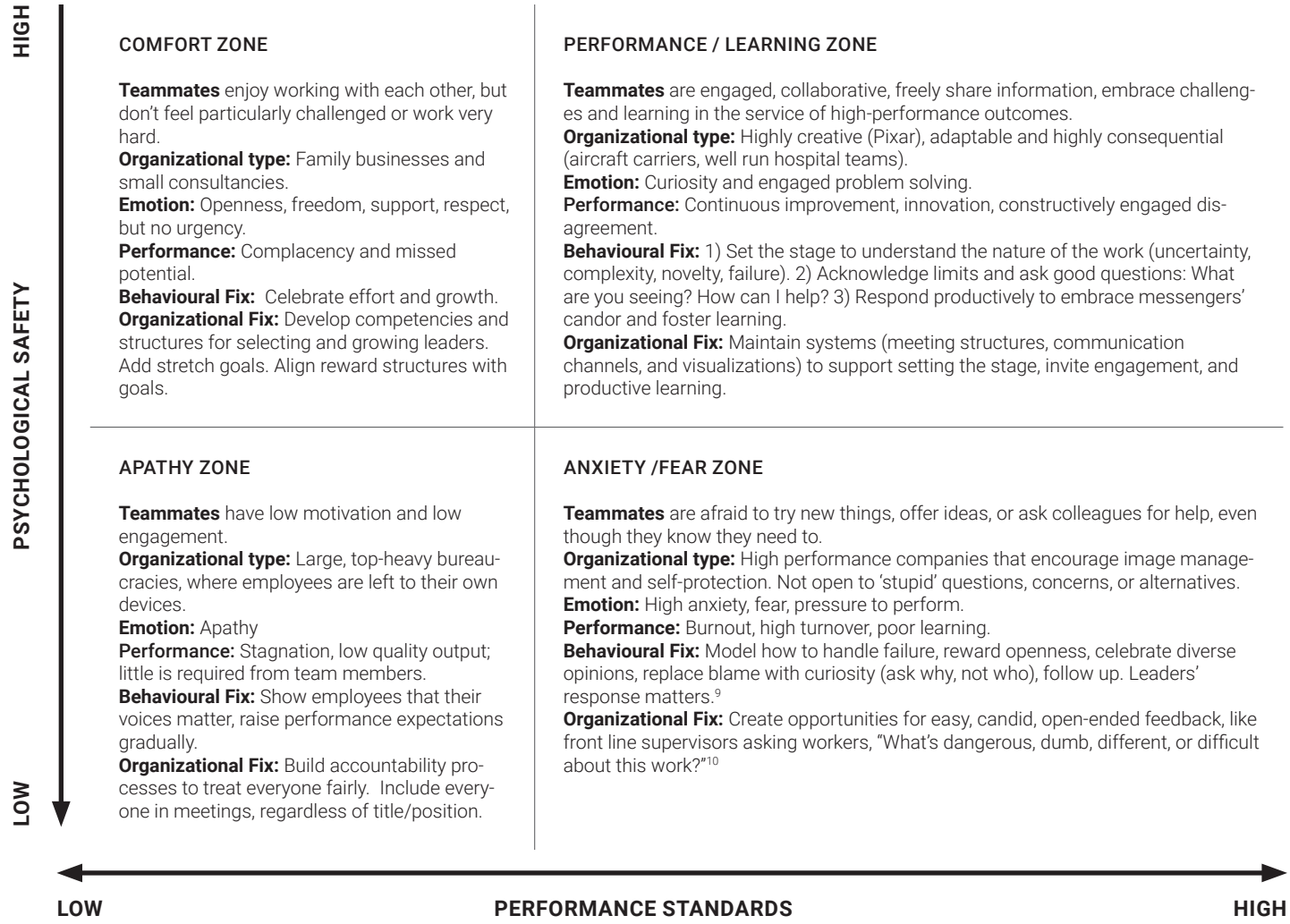

Fig 2: The Four Quadrants of Psychological Safety X Performance Standards

Workers who are more fearful are less likely to identify and report hazards, and more likely to withhold information. On top of doing challenging tasks, mine workers are paid highly, work away from home, and live in camps. So, we were curious if financial precarity and/or social precarity also played a role. We found that their fear of job loss is more correlated with social precarity than financial precarity. In other words, workers care more about the social stability that their jobs provide than the financial stability from the income.[3]

How can you quickly know where fear is flourishing in your organization? As a leader, ask "Who finds me scary? What am I not being told as a result?" of the most secure employees in your organization (such as un-fireable union reps) and/or those with the least to lose (those nearing retirement). If anyone will tell you, they will. For a more in-depth analysis, you can ask these questions on an anonymous employee survey or working with a third-party consultant.[8] Machine learning analysis (like we do) can also reveal the role of fear in incidents, how this correlates with employee surveys, and understand how this suppresses hazard identification and reporting.[9]

How does fear undermine operational risk management?

How does fear undermine the operational risk management process? This multi-step continuous cycle (see Fig. 3)[11] only works if all steps are followed in sequence, to create the foundation for the next step. So, if your company is not identifying hazards (step 1!) because employees are afraid, then you cannot begin to assess, analyze, evaluate and implement controls, or review the management of all your company's risks.

Your entire operational risk management process is being undermined in ways that you cannot understand. Effectively, you are creating your own unknown unknowns.

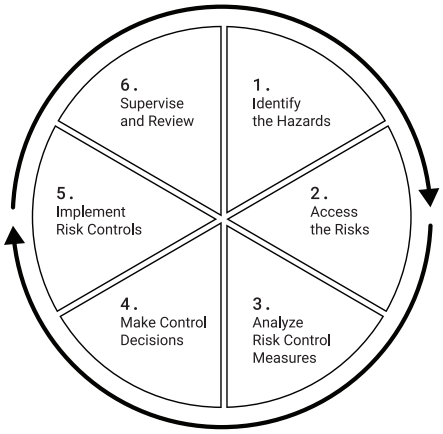

Fig 3: The Operational Risk Management Process

IN SUM: interpersonal fear is created by a perception that you will be humiliated for speaking up, asking questions, or challenging the status quo. As a leader, it doesn't matter what you think about your teams, it only matters what your team members think. Their perception is reality. **If your employees worry more about managing impressions than operational risks, then they're not identifying or reporting all hazards.** And they're unknowingly putting themselves and others at risk.

Your greatest fear should be whether your employees are afraid to speak up. Be highly suspicious of 'good news only' green dashboards, obsequious agreement, or stoney silences. **Don't kill your messengers, rather, embrace their candor as a gift**.

Take action now to protect and enhance your organization's performance, contact:

Dr. Lianne Lefsrud, P.Eng.
Risk, Innovation and Sustainability Chair (RISC)
lefsrud@ualberta.ca

CEO, Insight Risk Systems
lianne.lefsrud@insightrisksystems.com
www.insightrisksystems.com

780.951.3455

1 Tailings 'ponds' are large, engineered earthworks -reservoir, dam, and dyke structures - used to store process water and waste materials generated during ore extraction. These can be for temporary or long-term storage and water recycling. Tailings ponds can be thousands of acres in size and pose a significant risk to people, environment, operations, and public confidence if they fail.

2 Baker, K., Macciotta, R., Hendry, M. T., & Lefsrud, L. M. (2019). Final Report for Creative Sentencing: Protecting Worker Safety in Alberta by Enhancing Field Level Hazard Assessments and Training for Ground Hazards Associated with Tailings Facilities, Dams, and Systems. https://ualberta.scholaris.ca/bitstreams/d6ce67cd-b5d8-4bce-9dda-53357aa6cd1c/download

3 Lefsrud, L. M., Sattari, F., Gellatly, I. R., Wasel, C., Charuvil Elizabeth, R. M., Abdolmaleki, A., Jones, S. & O'Neill, T. (2025). Final Report for Creative Sentence: Building Resilience into Safety Management Systems: Precursors and Controls to Reduce Serious Injuries and Fatalities (SIFs). https://ualberta.scholaris.ca/bitstreams/59a0eca0-fcfc-4629-b6a0-c6ed0288ed51/download

4 Lefsrud, L.M., Sattari, F., Solano, J., Paul, A., Macciotta, R., Hendry, M., Liu, A.F., Goodwin, J., Jones, S. and O'Neill, T., (2025). Interim Report for Creative Sentence: To Enhance Safe Work Practices for Trenching and Excavating.

5 Nembhard, I. M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2006). Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams. *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior*, 27(7), 941-966. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.413

6 https://amycedmondson.com/category/psychological-safety/

7 Given that MBAs love 2 X 2s!

8 There are plenty of management and HR consultants that do this: https://tribuspeople.co.uk/psychological-safety-what-is-it-why-is-it-important-and-how-can-you-promote-it/, https://www.sbjconsultinginc.com/2022/02/11/the-four-stages-of-psychological-safety/, https://blueeq.goodwindevsite.com/psychological-safety-survey-psychsafety16/, https://www.wwt.com/article/how-and-why-to-create-safety-within-your-teams, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jasonrmurphyjrmhumancapital_everydaygreatday-activity-7366651877926531073-uvtq/, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/victoria-repa-115a1987_only-1-rule-defines-the-worlds-best-teams-activity-7174386356461203459-_ePW/

9 Conklin, T.E. (2019). The 5 Principles of Human Performance: A contemporary update of the building blocks of Human Performance for the new view of safety.

10 Sutton, B.L. & Lyth, J. (2023). 4Ds for HOP and Learning Teams: A practical how-to guide to facilitate learning from everyday work, critical and dynamic risks with 4Ds.

11 All risk management frameworks are cyclical, starting with understanding your system and identifying the hazards/threats, even with the simplest Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) process. Among the most common are ISO 31000 Risk Management, COSO (Committee of Sponsoring Organizations) ERM (Enterprise Risk Management) Integrated Framework, ICMM (International Council on Mining and Miner¬als) Critical Control Management, and The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Risk Management Framework.