Effective Psychosocial Risk Management

BOARD GOVERNANCE GUIDE



Weave - *noun*

Interlaced strands that create strength through connection.

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Good Governance is Good Governance

Preface - Craig Marriott

Applying Good Health and Safety Governance to Psychosocial Risks

Good governance of psychosocial risk does not require a separate governance system. The principles of good health and safety governance already apply. But psychosocial risks can be harder to see, understand and measure. They often arise through everyday business decisions about how work is designed, organised and managed. Exposure can build over time, and the consequences may not be immediately apparent.

Boards therefore need to understand what good psychosocial risk management looks like, what questions to ask and what evidence gives them confidence that people are being protected. That is why we developed this guide. It follows the process developed in our Effective Psychosocial Risk Management Guide and Toolkit and is best used when management is using that guidance in practice, but it can be used effectively as a standalone governance tool.

The Marriott–Harmer Board Assurance Pathway translates the principles of good health and safety governance into eleven practical areas of assurance. It helps Boards understand what management should know, what it should be doing and how it can demonstrate that risks are being managed effectively.

This guide is best read alongside *Health and Safety Governance: A Good Practice Guide,* published by the Institute of Directors (IoD) and WorkSafe New Zealand in 2024.

Good governance remains good governance. This guide helps Boards apply it to the realities of psychosocial risk.

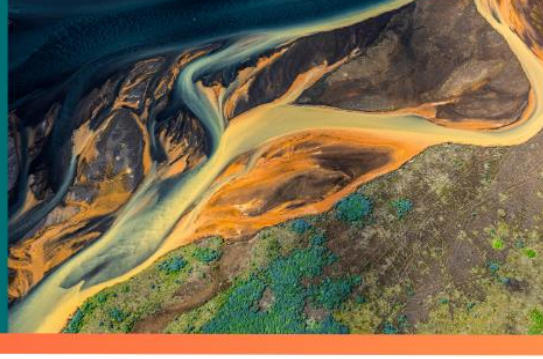
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Craig Marriott brings over 35 years' experience to his work providing Executives and Boards with strategic direction in H&S. He is a specialist consultant, author and expert witness and was the lead author of the IoD and WorkSafe NZ good practice guide.

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The Wellbeing Ecosystem

Scope, Responsibility & Boundaries



Understanding employee wellbeing is essential in psychosocial risk management

Work is an important determinant of health and improving the work lives of the population has a tremendous potential to improve its overall health and wellbeing. However, this guide is not about improving employee wellbeing overall.

This guide takes a clear stance:
Psychosocial risk management is about preventing harm caused by work. It sits within the broader wellbeing ecosystem, but it is not a general workplace wellbeing program.
The focus of this guide is targeted wellbeing.
It is about improving *'little w'* wellbeing, not *'Big W'* Wellbeing.

Big W = Whole-of-Life Wellbeing

Broad social and life outcomes Influenced by work, but not controllable by employers.
Not a governance obligation.

Little w = wellbeing at work

How work is designed, led, and resourced. Where duty of care sits. Where psychosocial hazards arise.
This is squarely a governance responsibility.

Psychosocial risk sits inside the wellbeing ecosystem

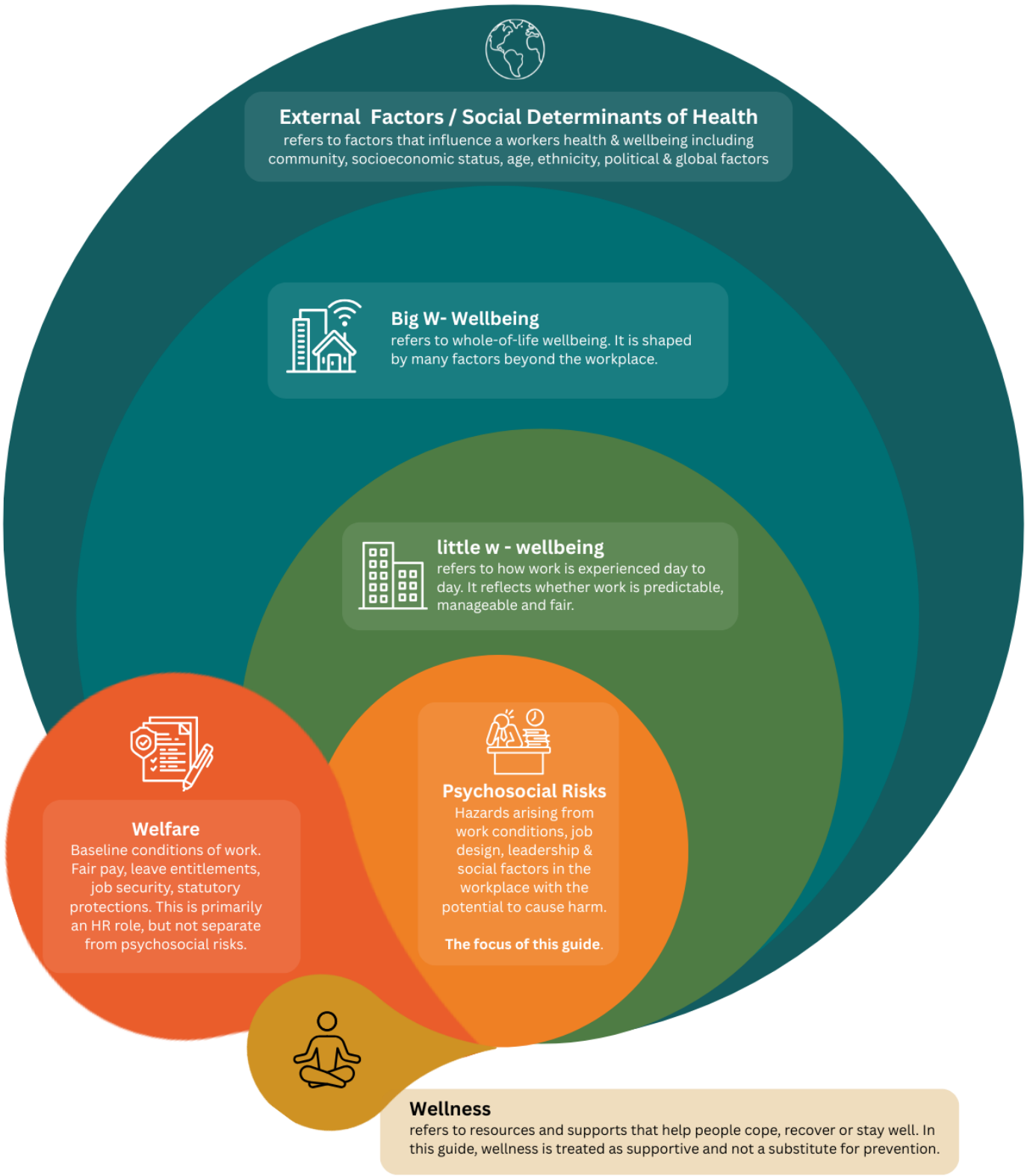
Psychosocial risks are the hazardous conditions of work that can harm health through psychological and social mechanisms.

In simple terms:

- Wellbeing describes ***how people are doing***
- Psychosocial risk describes ***what in the work environment could harm them***

This Ecosystem Framework is not just about definitions. It is a ***boundary-setting*** tool.

It solves a common problem in psychosocial risk management: organisations confuse ***wellbeing*** **responsibility** with **risk responsibility.**





The Board Assurance Pathway

For Psychosocial Risk

What boards need to seek assurance about at each step.

The Big Picture

As Boards move through the Marriott–Harmer System, what they seek assurance about evolves. The pathway begins with making psychosocial health a genuine organisational priority, moves through understanding and managing risk, and finishes with checking effectiveness, learning and recovery.

Step	Assurance focus	What the Board asks	What this tells you
0	**Priority**	What evidence shows that psychosocial health is a genuine leadership priority, even when competing demands arise?	Whether commitments are reflected in decisions, resources and everyday practice.
1	**Reality**	How does management know what work is actually like for the people doing it?	Whether management understands real working conditions, pressures and trade-offs.
2	**Exposure**	How does management know who is exposed to psychosocial hazards, how much and with what effect?	Whether harmful exposure is recognised and addressed before it becomes prolonged.
3	**Foreseeability**	How does management identify credible pathways to serious harm?	Whether foreseeable psychological, physical health and safety risks are understood and prioritised.
4	**Conditions**	How does management know whether conditions for safe, healthy and sustainable work are in place?	Whether the 5S conditions are present, particularly for those facing the greatest pressures.
5	**Employment Foundations**	How does management know whether employment arrangements support fair, safe and sustainable work?	Whether employment conditions and people systems protect workers' health, security and dignity.
6	**Controls**	How does management demonstrate that controls interrupt pathways to harm?	Whether controls are appropriately designed, implemented and resourced to reduce risk.
7	**Leadership Capability**	How does management know whether leaders can manage psychosocial risks in everyday work?	Whether leaders have the capability, authority and support to act effectively.
8	**Real-time Management**	How does management know that emerging psychosocial risks are being recognised and managed as work happens?	Whether concerns lead to timely adjustments and escalation before harm occurs.
9	**Effectiveness**	How does management know whether controls are working, including under pressure?	Whether controls are demonstrably reducing exposure and remain effective when conditions change.
10	**Learning & Recovery**	How does the organisation know people are supported and improvements follow setbacks?	Whether recovery, system repair and organisational learning lead to lasting improvements.

STEP 0 | PRIORITY

Making psychosocial health a genuine organisational priority



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC*) reflects how seriously an organisation takes protecting people's psychological health. It is shaped by four things: **management commitment**, **management priority**, **organisational communication** and **worker participation**.

The Board's role is to set clear expectations and seek assurance that protecting people is a genuine organisational priority, reflected in decisions and everyday working conditions, not just policies.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

What evidence shows that psychosocial health is a genuine leadership priority, even when it competes with cost, productivity or performance?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. How do senior leaders demonstrate their **commitment** to protecting psychosocial health through decisions, resources and actions?
2. What happens when protecting people's health **competes with productivity**, cost or performance?
3. How does management ensure **concerns about psychosocial risks** can be raised, heard and acted upon?
4. How are workers and their representatives **involved in decisions** that affect their psychosocial health?
5. How does the Board know these commitments are **reflected in everyday working conditions**, not just policies and statements?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence across the four dimensions of Psychosocial Safety Climate:

Management commitment: Clear accountability, dedicated resources and leadership decisions that demonstrate action.

Management priority: Examples of workloads, deadlines or resources being adjusted to protect health.

Organisational communication: Worker concerns are reported, discussed, responded to and followed up.

Worker participation: Evidence that workers and their representatives influence decisions affecting their work.

[*PSC adapted from Dollard and colleagues]

Good assurance combines worker feedback with evidence of what management has actually changed, not simply policies, survey results or statements of intent.

STEP 1 | REALITY

Understanding what work is really like



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Work as imagined by leaders is not always work as experienced by workers. Policies, procedures and job descriptions rarely capture the full picture of competing demands, workarounds and pressures people face.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that management understands how work actually happens, including where everyday working conditions differ from what was intended.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know what work is actually like for the people doing it?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. How does management hear directly from workers across different roles, teams and locations?
2. Where does actual work differ from policies, procedures or planned ways of working?
3. What pressures, competing demands or workarounds are workers reporting?
4. Whose experiences might be missing from the information management receives?
5. What has management changed as a result of understanding these realities?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Worker experience: Direct feedback from different roles, shifts and locations, including workers who may be less likely to speak up.

Work as done: Observations and operational information showing how work happens in practice, including workarounds and competing demands.

Differences across groups: Evidence of where workloads, resources and working conditions vary between teams or worker groups.

Management response: Specific examples of problems identified through worker input and changes made to address them.

Good assurance brings together what workers say, what operational information shows and what management has actually done in response.

STEP 2 | EXPOSURE

Understanding who is exposed, how much and with what effect



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Identifying psychosocial hazards is only the beginning. Organisations also need to understand who is exposed, how frequently, how intensely and for how long. Short periods of pressure are different from repeated or prolonged demands without sufficient recovery.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that management understands patterns of exposure, recognises early signs of stress and acts before sustained exposure leads to harm.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know who is exposed to psychosocial hazards, how much exposure they experience and how it is affecting them?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. Where are people experiencing the greatest or most **sustained exposure**?
2. How does management assess the **frequency, duration and intensity** of exposure?
3. Where are **different hazards combining** to increase pressure?
4. How does management respond to **early signs of stress** before exposure becomes prolonged?
5. What is being done to **reduce excessive exposure** and allow recovery?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Exposure patterns: Actual hours, workloads, missed breaks and the frequency, intensity and duration of pressure.

Cumulative exposure: Where hazards combine, who faces sustained demands and whether recovery is sufficient.

Early stress signals: Reports of stress, fatigue, sleep disruption and emerging workforce trends.

Management response: Evidence that concerns prompt changes to workloads, staffing or recovery arrangements, with follow-up to check exposure has reduced.

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Good assurance shows how management identifies and reduces prolonged exposure before stress becomes chronic.

STEP 3 | FORESEEABILITY

Understanding how psychosocial hazards could lead to serious harm



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Identifying exposure is not enough. Organisations also need to understand how psychosocial hazards could cause harm, including psychological injury, cardiovascular disease and fatigue-related accidents.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that management recognises credible pathways to serious harm, considers who may be affected and acts before harm occurs.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management identify where psychosocial hazards could lead to serious harm, and how likely that harm might be?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. How does management identify credible pathways from **exposure to harm**?
2. Are psychological, physical health and safety **consequences** considered?
3. Which exposures have the potential for the most **serious outcomes**?
4. What **evidence and uncertainties** inform management's assessment of likelihood and severity?
5. How are **foreseeable risks prioritised** and acted upon before harm occurs?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Pathways to harm: Risk assessments linking actual working conditions and exposure to credible psychological, physical and safety outcomes.

Serious consequences: Consideration of psychological injury, cardiovascular disease and fatigue-related accidents.

Evidence and uncertainty: Worker experience, operational data, incident patterns and relevant research, with assumptions made clear.

Management response: Clear priorities, preventive actions and escalation of risks with potentially serious consequences.

Good assurance shows that management understands how serious harm could occur and acts on credible risks, rather than relying on risk scores alone.

STEP 4 | CONDITIONS

Creating the conditions for safe and sustainable work



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Preventing psychosocial harm is not just about removing hazards. It is also about creating working conditions that help people stay healthy and do their jobs well. The Marriott–Harmer 5S framework identifies five essential conditions: Stable, Safe, Seen, Supported and Set Up for Success.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that these conditions exist in practice, particularly for workers facing the greatest pressures.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know whether the conditions for safe, healthy and sustainable work are in place?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. How does management assess working conditions against the 5S framework?
2. Where are workers experiencing instability, unsafe conditions or a lack of support?
3. Do people have the resources, clarity and relationships needed to work well?
4. Which groups are least likely to experience all five conditions?
5. What is management doing when working conditions deteriorate?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence from worker feedback and operational information showing whether the five conditions are present in everyday work:

Stable: Predictable work, clear expectations and well-managed change.
Safe: Risks addressed, respectful treatment and confidence to raise concerns.
Seen: Worker experiences heard, acknowledged and reflected in decisions.
Supported: Accessible practical help, responsive managers and appropriate adjustments.
Set Up for Success: Workable demands, sufficient resources, capability and opportunities for recovery.

Good assurance shows where these conditions are missing, who is affected and what management is doing about it.

STEP 5 | EMPLOYMENT FOUNDATIONS

Making sure the basic employment conditions support decent work



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

A job can be satisfying but still be unsustainable, and unsustainable work can become unhealthy and unsafe. Someone might experience all five of the 5S conditions in Step 4, yet still need to work extra shifts to make ends meet, or face ongoing uncertainty about their hours, income or job security. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda identifies five employment foundations that support safe, healthy and sustainable work.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that these foundations are reflected in people's actual employment experiences, not just policies.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know whether employment conditions, policies and people systems support fair, safe and sustainable work?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. **Pay**: What evidence shows workers earn a living wage without relying on excessive overtime?
2. **Stability:** How does management provide predictable hours, income and contracts?
3. **Commercial pressures:** How are changing staffing needs balanced with employment security?
4. **Fairness and voice:** How can workers influence decisions, exercise their rights and raise concerns safely?
5. **Dignity and opportunity:** How does management support fair treatment, inclusion, recognition and development?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence from employment records, worker feedback and management decisions across the five foundations:

Security & Stability: Living wage comparisons, actual earnings, predictable hours, contract security and overtime reliance.
Fairness & Protection: Employment audits, access to entitlements, grievance outcomes and protection from retaliation.
Connection & Communication: Consultation records, worker representation and evidence of worker influence.
Respect & Value: Worker feedback on dignity, inclusion, recognition and fair treatment.
Meaning & Growth: Access to development, skill use, progression and meaningful work.

Good assurance shows how management balances commercial realities with employment arrangements that protect people's health, security and dignity.

STEP 6 | CONTROLS

Designing work to prevent harm



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Psychosocial hazards do not create the same risk in every situation. Harm depends on context, including how hazards combine, the intensity and duration of exposure, and opportunities for recovery. A heavy workload may be motivating in one situation and harmful in another. Controlling psychosocial risks is therefore not as simple as assigning a control to each hazard on a risk register. A control must interrupt the pathway to harm. A bullying policy may define expectations and reporting procedures without preventing bullying. Similarly, EAP provides support but does not necessarily protect workers from traumatic exposure.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that controls reduce the risk of harm, rather than simply exist on paper.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management demonstrate that controls are designed and implemented to interrupt pathways to harm, rather than simply documented on a risk register?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. **Context:** Do controls account for combined hazards, prolonged exposure and working conditions?
2. **Prevention:** How do controls interrupt the pathways through which harm could occur?
3. **Adequacy:** Are preventive controls distinguished from policies and support services?
4. **Implementation:** Are controls practical, resourced, owned and implemented?
5. **Gaps:** Where are controls inadequate, missing or creating risks elsewhere?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence that controls address pathways to harm and are implemented where risks arise:

Risk in context: Combined hazards, exposure patterns and credible pathways to harm.
Control rationale: How each control interrupts the pathway to harm.
Changes to work: Adjustments to staffing, workloads, relationships and recovery.
Implementation: Accountable owners, resources, worker input and implementation checks.
Gaps: Uncontrolled exposure, weaknesses and corrective actions.

Good assurance shows how controls prevent harm, not simply that they exist.

STEP 7 | LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY

Equipping leaders to protect people through everyday decisions



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Leaders play a critical role in psychosocial risk management because their everyday decisions shape how work is experienced. Workloads, priorities, communication, relationships and responses to concerns can either reduce risk or make it worse.Leadership training alone is not enough. Leaders need the knowledge, authority, resources and organisational support to recognise psychosocial risks and respond appropriately. They must also be able to escalate risks they cannot resolve themselves.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that leaders are equipped and supported to manage psychosocial risks as part of their normal responsibilities, not as an additional wellbeing activity.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know whether leaders have the capability, confidence and support to manage psychosocial risks in their everyday work?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. **Expectations:** Are leaders clear about their responsibilities for psychosocial risk management?
2. **Capability:** Can leaders recognise hazards, stress signals and situations requiring action?
3. **Decision-making:** Can leaders adjust workloads, priorities and working conditions to reduce risk?
4. **Support:** Do leaders have the authority, resources and specialist advice they need?
5. **Accountability:** How does management identify and address gaps in leadership capability or behaviour?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence that leadership capability is developed, supported and demonstrated in everyday decisions:

Clear expectations: Role descriptions, leadership standards and performance expectations.
Practical capability: Applied learning, scenario-based assessments and demonstrated risk management skills.
Management decisions: Examples of leaders adjusting workloads, resources or work arrangements.
Support and escalation: Access to HR, H&S and specialist advice, with clear escalation pathways.
Accountability: Worker feedback, leadership reviews and action where capability or behaviour falls short.

Good assurance shows that leaders can recognise and respond to psychosocial risks and have the organisational support to act.

STEP 8 | REAL TIME MANAGEMENT

Managing psychosocial risks as work happens



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Psychosocial risks are not static. Workloads change, priorities compete, relationships become strained and unexpected events create new pressures. Even well-designed work and effective controls can be challenged by everyday operational demands. Managing these risks cannot depend on annual surveys or periodic risk assessments alone. Leaders and workers need practical ways to notice emerging pressures, raise concerns and make adjustments before exposure becomes harmful.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that psychosocial risks are recognised and managed as part of everyday work, with clear arrangements for escalating issues that cannot be resolved locally.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know that psychosocial risks are being noticed and managed as part of everyday work, before people are harmed?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. **Early signals**: How are checks for emerging signs of stress built into daily work?
2. **Worker voice:** Can workers raise concerns and influence decisions while work is happening?
3. **Timely action:** Can leaders adjust workloads, priorities or resources when conditions change?
4. **Escalation:** What happens when risks cannot be resolved at team or manager level?
5. **Organisational learning:** How does management identify recurring pressures that require wider changes?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence that psychosocial risks are actively recognised and managed during everyday operations:

Early detection: Team discussions, workload reviews, fatigue signals and worker concerns.

Worker participation: Practical ways for workers to raise issues and influence immediate decisions.

Timely adjustments: Examples of changes to workloads, staffing, priorities or recovery arrangements.

Escalation: Clear thresholds, accountable decision-makers and records of unresolved risks.

Emerging patterns: Repeated pressures identified across teams and referred for organisational action.

Good assurance shows that emerging risks lead to timely decisions and changes to work, rather than waiting for surveys, complaints or harm to reveal a problem.

STEP 9 | EFFECTIVENESS

Knowing whether controls are actually working



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Having controls in place does not mean psychosocial risks are adequately managed. Even well-designed controls may fail to reduce exposure as intended, particularly when workloads increase, staffing changes or operational pressures rise. Organisations need to look beyond policies, completed actions and risk ratings to establish whether controls are actually interrupting pathways to harm. This means defining what success looks like, measuring changes in exposure and working conditions, and checking whether protection holds under pressure.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that management can demonstrate controls are effective and takes action when they are not.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does management know whether controls are working, including when pressure rises or circumstances change?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. **Effectiveness:** How does management determine whether controls are actually reducing the risk of harm?
2. **Exposure:** What evidence shows that harmful exposure has reduced since controls were introduced?
3. **Worker experience:** Do workers report meaningful improvements in their working conditions?
4. **Under pressure:** Do controls remain effective when workloads increase or circumstances change?
5. **Corrective action:** How are ineffective controls identified, strengthened or replaced?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence that management has established whether controls are reducing exposure and interrupting pathways to harm:

Effectiveness measures: Clear criteria for what each control should achieve and how success will be assessed.

Exposure trends: Before-and-after comparisons of workloads, hours, missed breaks, fatigue and recovery.

Worker experience: Feedback confirming whether controls have improved actual working conditions.

Operational testing: Evidence that controls continue to work during peak demand, staffing shortages or change.

Corrective action: Reviews identifying ineffective controls, adjustments made and follow-up checks.

Good assurance shows not just that controls have been implemented, but that management can demonstrate they are reducing the risk of harm.

STEP 10 | LEARNING & RECOVERY

Supporting people, repairing conditions and learning from setbacks



WHAT THIS STEP IS ABOUT

Even with good prevention, setbacks can happen. People may experience severe psychological distress, bullying, traumatic events or other work-related harm. How an organisation responds can either support recovery or make matters worse. A good response goes beyond providing individual support. It includes protecting people from further harm, adapting work where needed, repairing relationships and trust, and addressing the conditions that contributed to the setback. Recovery takes time, and people's needs may change.

The Board's role is to seek assurance that people are supported, working conditions are made safe and lessons lead to lasting improvements.

CORE GOVERNANCE QUESTION

How does the organisation know that people are being supported, lessons are being learned and improvements are being made following setbacks?

QUESTIONS FOR THE BOARD TO ASK

1. **Immediate protection**: How does management prevent further harm when a serious concern or incident arises?
2. **People and recovery:** How are affected workers supported according to their needs, without imposing unnecessary interventions?
3. **System repair:** How does management address the working conditions, relationships or decisions that contributed to harm?
4. **Learning:** How are lessons identified and shared without relying on blame or individual explanations?
5. **Follow-through:** How does management know that agreed improvements have been implemented and recovery needs continue to be met?

WHAT GOOD EVIDENCE LOOKS LIKE

Evidence that responses protect people, support recovery and strengthen the organisation:

Protection: Timely adjustments to work, reduced exposure and safeguards against further harm.

Coordinated support: Practical assistance, appropriate referrals, recovery plans and follow-up over time.

System repair: Changes to harmful conditions, leadership practices or damaged working relationships.

Organisational learning: Reviews identifying contributing factors, recurring patterns and opportunities for prevention.

Follow-through: Accountable improvement actions, worker feedback and evidence of sustained support.

Good assurance shows that the organisation learns from setbacks, repairs the conditions that contributed to harm and supports people for as long as needed.

GOOD GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE

Bringing the Board Assurance Pathway into everyday governance

The purpose of this guide is not to create another layer of governance. It is to help Boards apply established health and safety governance principles to psychosocial risks with greater confidence.

The eleven-step Board Assurance Pathway helps directors understand what good psychosocial risk management should look like, what questions to ask and what evidence provides confidence that people are being protected.

The following four activities show how this assurance can be built into normal Board routines.

FOUR WAYS BOARDS STRENGTHEN ASSURANCE

Governance activity	What this means in practice
LOOK AHEAD Anticipate risks	Consider how strategic decisions, organisational change, competing priorities and emerging pressures may create psychosocial risks. Use the *Tension Library* to identify where business decisions could place additional pressure on people.
LOOK NOW Understand current conditions	Use regular management reporting to understand current exposures, emerging concerns, controls and management responses. The *Monthly Board Psychosocial Risk Report* helps bring these signals together.
LOOK DEEPER Test assurance	Use the eleven-step *Board Assurance Pathway* to examine areas where greater confidence is needed. Seek evidence that risks are understood, controls are effective and management is responding appropriately.
LEARN FORWARD Strengthen the system	Use incidents, setbacks, assurance findings and lessons from other organisations, including coronial findings, to identify weaknesses and improve future decisions. Check that lessons lead to meaningful changes.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

These activities work together. A Board may **Look Ahead** and recognise that a major organisational change could increase workloads and uncertainty. Through regular reporting, it may **Look Now** and identify emerging fatigue, sustained overtime or concerns about staffing. It can then **Look Deeper** to understand whether existing controls are adequate and effective. Finally, it can **Learn Forward** by checking what worked, what did not and what needs to change before the next major programme.



Boards do not need to work through all eleven steps at every meeting. The pathway can be used to examine particular risks, investigate areas of uncertainty and test the quality of management's assurance. The Board does not need to manage these risks itself. Its responsibility is to ensure management understands them, acts appropriately and can demonstrate that people are being protected.

A FINAL WORD

Psychosocial risks are often created or influenced by ordinary business decisions. Good governance means understanding how those decisions affect people and seeking assurance that foreseeable harm is being prevented.

Boards do not need a different approach to governance. They need to know what good assurance looks like when the risks are psychosocial.

The aim is not more reports, more questions or more governance processes. It is better assurance about whether people are being protected from harm.

Good governance remains good governance. The difference is knowing what to look for.

To access the Effective Psychosocial Risk Management full guide and toolkit visit cm-safety.com.

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APPENDIX 1 | THE TENSIONS LIBRARY

Looking ahead: Where might business decisions create psychosocial risks?

What is the Tensions Library?

Organisations constantly balance competing demands. They need to deliver results, manage costs, meet deadlines, respond to customers and protect their people. These demands are not necessarily in conflict. But when they are, the decisions made about what takes priority can create psychosocial risks. The Tensions Library is a table of common business tensions that helps Boards recognise and name where those pressures may arise and consider who might bear the consequences.
Tensions are not automatically hazards. They tell us where to look.

Common organisational tensions

Tension	What the Board should consider
Demand ↔ Capacity	Are expectations greater than the **resources available?**
Speed ↔ Safety	Are **deadlines** putting pressure on safe ways of working?
Productivity ↔ Recovery	Is performance being sustained at **the expense of rest** and recovery?
Cost ↔ Resources	Are **financial decisions** leaving people without what they need?
Change ↔ Stability	Is the **pace of change** exceeding people's capacity to adapt?
Accountability ↔ Support	Are people held responsible for outcomes without **sufficient authority** or support?
Consistency ↔ Flexibility	Are standardised approaches **preventing reasonable adjustments**?

How Boards can use it

The Tensions Library is particularly useful when considering strategy, budgets, restructuring, major programmes and organisational change. Rather than asking management to eliminate competing demands, Boards can ask how those demands are being balanced and whether the resulting decisions create foreseeable risks.

THE KEY QUESTION When we cannot achieve both sides of a tension, where does the pressure go?

Tension → Trade-off → Who absorbs it? → Exposure → Potential harm

For example, a decision to reduce costs while maintaining output may transfer pressure onto workers through higher workloads, longer hours or reduced recovery. The Board's role is to seek assurance that management recognises these consequences and takes appropriate action.

Good assurance considers not only what a business decision achieves, but also what pressures it creates and who carries them.

APPENDIX 2 | THE 5S FRAMEWORK

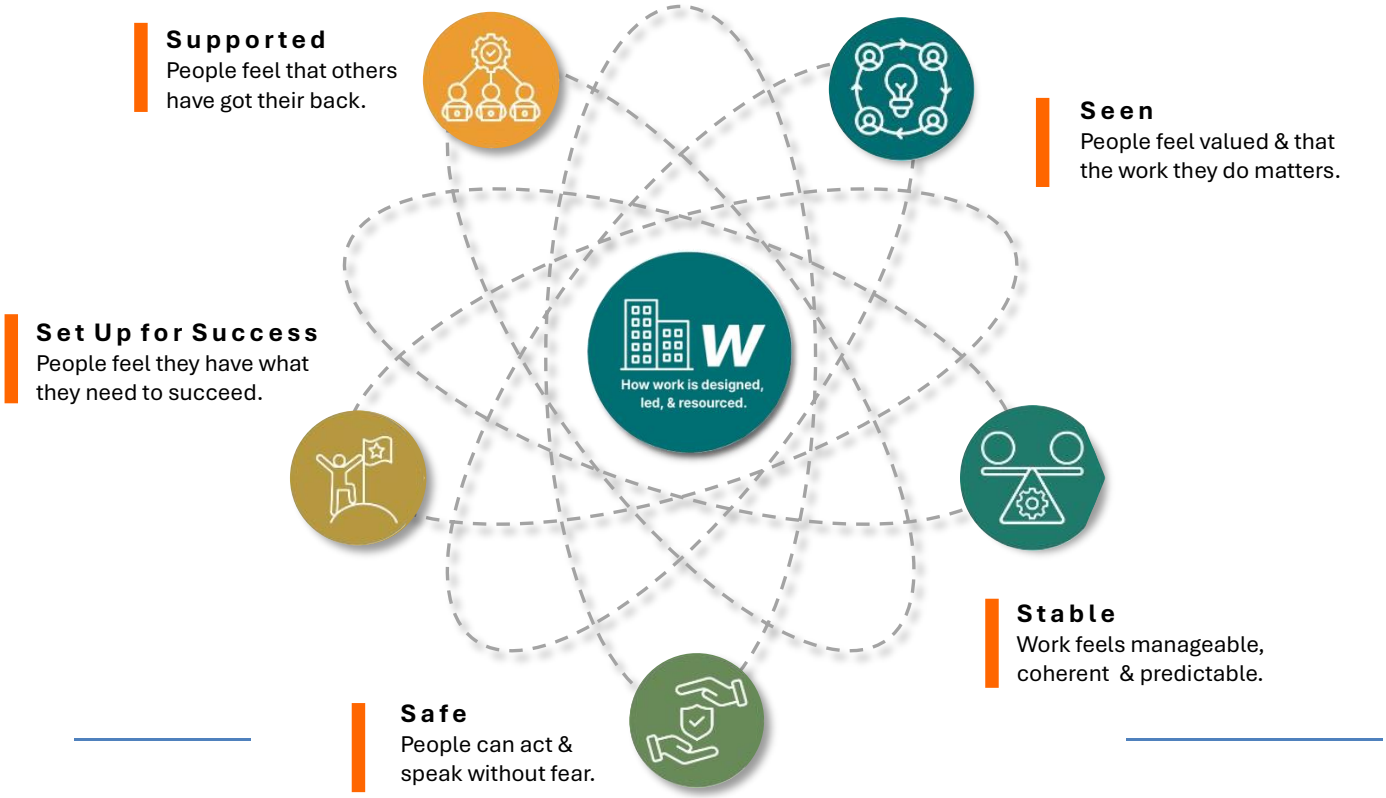
Understanding the conditions for safe, healthy and sustainable work

What is the 5S Framework?

Managing psychosocial risk is not only about identifying hazards and preventing harm. Organisations also need to create working conditions that help people remain healthy, feel supported and do their jobs well. The **Marriott–Harmer 5S Framework** describes five conditions that support safe, healthy and sustainable work.

5S - Safe & Sustainable

Conditions Model



These conditions are not "soft extras." They are operational reliability conditions.

Condition	What it means in practice
STABLE	People have reasonable predictability, clear expectations and sufficient stability to manage their work. Change is communicated and managed well.
SAFE	People are protected from foreseeable harm, treated respectfully and able to raise concerns without fear of unfair consequences.
SEEN	People's experiences, needs and contributions are recognised. Their concerns are heard and reflected in decisions.
SUPPORTED	People can access practical help, responsive leadership, appropriate adjustments and support when difficulties arise.
SET UP FOR SUCCESS	People have workable demands, sufficient resources, appropriate capability, clear responsibilities and opportunities for recovery.

Why this matters for Boards

Psychosocial risks often develop when one or more of these conditions are missing or deteriorating. For example, an organisation may provide excellent wellbeing support while continuing to expect people to manage excessive workloads with inadequate resources.

People may feel supported, but they are not necessarily set up for success. The 5S Framework helps Boards consider whether the organisation is addressing the working conditions that create risk, rather than relying primarily on support after problems arise.

How Boards can use it

The framework provides a practical lens for examining worker feedback, operational information, risk assessments and management reports.

- Which of the five conditions are strongest and weakest?
- Where are working conditions deteriorating, and who is most affected?
- What is management doing to restore or strengthen those conditions?
- How does management know its actions are making a difference?

THE KEY QUESTION Are we creating the conditions people need to work safely, stay healthy and succeed?

Good assurance shows that these conditions exist in everyday work, not just in policies, programmes or statements of intent.

APPENDIX 3 | MECHANISMS OF HARM

Understanding how psychosocial exposure can lead to serious harm

What are Mechanisms of Harm?

Psychosocial harm does not always result from a single incident. It can develop gradually through repeated exposure, accumulate over time or arise suddenly when demands overwhelm available protection.

The **Marriott–Harmer Mechanisms of Harm framework** uses five descriptive pathways to help organisations understand how harmful exposure may develop and why different situations require different controls. These pathways are explanatory models, not clinical diagnoses. They may overlap, and they do not predict how any particular person will respond. However, they do describe the array of different ways psychosocial risks may cause harm.

Pathway	What it describes	Example
	**EROSION** Gradual wear and tear from prolonged demands and insufficient recovery.	Sustained excessive workloads contribute to exhaustion and declining health.
	**FRACTURE** A breakdown following accumulated strain that has weakened a person's capacity to cope.	Prolonged pressure culminates in a significant psychological injury or loss of functioning.
	**CORROSION** Damage accelerated by repeated unfairness, betrayal or harmful relationships.	Repeated mistreatment undermines trust, security and wellbeing.
	**EXPLOSION** Sudden, intense exposure or overload that can cause immediate harm.	A violent incident or traumatic event creates an acute risk of injury.
	**CORRUPTION** Harm to a person's values, identity or sense of integrity through ethical conflict or betrayal.	A worker is repeatedly required to act against deeply held professional values.

Why this matters for Boards

Different pathways to harm require different preventive actions. An organisation responding to chronic overload needs to examine workload, staffing and recovery. One responding to violence or traumatic exposure needs appropriate protections against acute harm. Repeated unfair treatment may require changes to leadership, accountability and organisational practices. A generic wellbeing intervention is unlikely to address all these risks.

How Boards can use it

The framework supports Step 3: Foreseeability, helping Boards examine whether management understands how exposure could lead to serious harm.

- What credible pathways to harm has management identified?
- Where is exposure accumulating or protection weakening?
- Are controls appropriate for the ways harm could occur?
- What early warning signs would trigger action?

THE KEY QUESTION Does management understand how harm could develop, and what needs to change to prevent it?

Good assurance does not wait for harm to become visible. It examines whether foreseeable pathways to harm are being recognised and interrupted.

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