ISO 45003: How Leaders Support Psychosocial Risk Management in the Workplace

Executive Summary

ISO 45003 provides guidance on managing **psychosocial risks within an occupational health and safety (OH&S) management system**, recognising that psychological health is as critical to organisational performance as physical safety. While tools, surveys, and policies play an important role, the effectiveness of psychosocial risk management is largely determined by **leadership behaviour, decisions, and organisational culture**.

While there is a lot of divided discussion on whether it is a legal requirement for employers to manage psychosocial risks, there can be on argument of a moral and ethical responsibility to do something to mitigate psychosocial risks within any organisation. The key is to understand what they are. This is where ISO 45003 comes in to play.

This white paper explains ISO 45003 through a **leadership lens**, clarifying what psychosocial risks are, why leaders are central to managing them, and how leaders at all levels can actively support healthy, sustainable, and high-performing workplaces.

Understanding ISO 45003 and Psychosocial Risk

ISO 45003 is an international standard that compliments ISO 45001. It provides guidance for identifying, assessing, and managing psychosocial risks that may impact workers' psychological health, safety, and wellbeing.

Psychosocial risks arise from how work is designed, organised, managed, and experienced. Common examples include:

- Excessive workload or time pressure

- Lack of role clarity

- Poor leadership behaviours

- Inadequate support or resources

- Low job control or autonomy

- Poor communication and change management

- Bullying, harassment, or exclusion

Psychosocial risks are organisational in nature; therefore, leaders have primary influence and accountability.

Why ISO 45003 is a Leadership Issue

We would argue that Psychological Health cannot be managed by policy alone

Psychological harm rarely results from a single event. It typically develops through systemic patterns of work and leadership behaviour. Leaders shape:

- Workload expectations

- Priorities and pace of work

- How change is introduced

- How people are treated when under pressure

Effective Leadership behaviour is a Primary Risk Control. In ISO 45003, leadership is both a risk factor and a risk control. Supportive leadership reduces exposure to psychosocial hazards; poor leadership amplifies them.

Core Leadership Responsibilities Under ISO 45003

So, what are the core leadership responsibilities highlighted by the ISO 45003 standard?

Firstly, we offer designing healthy work, whereby leaders are responsible for how work is structured as important. This includes:

- Setting realistic workloads and deadlines

- Ensuring role clarity and manageable spans of control

- Balancing performance expectations with capacity

Perhaps the leadership question we should consider is *"Are people struggling because of individual capability—or because of how work is designed?"*

Secondly, Managing Change Safely as change is a major psychosocial risk factor. All too often, we read of failed change projects because the human element had not been adequately addressed. Leadership responsibilities for managing change safely include:

- Communicating the rationale and impacts of change early

- Involving workers in change planning where possible

- Providing stability and support during transitions

Thirdly, it is all about trust and creating Psychological Safety – enabling people to speak up without fear. To engender this, leaders must:

- Encourage open dialogue

- Respond constructively to concerns and mistakes

- Address bullying, harassment, and disrespect promptly

It could also be argued that silence is often a symptom of unmanaged psychosocial risk.

Next, supporting Managers and Supervisors as front-line leaders experience the highest pressure and exert the greatest influence. Senior leaders must ensure:

- Managers are trained to recognise psychosocial risks

- Expectations on people management are clear

- Managers are supported, not overloaded

A key question that is often raised is do managers feel safe to raise concerns about capacity and wellbeing?

Finally, integrating Psychosocial Risk into Decision-Making. A key tenet of ISO 45003 is that it requires psychosocial risks to be treated like other OH&S risks. Therefore, Leaders should:

- Consider psychosocial impacts in strategic decisions

- Monitor leading indicators (absence, turnover, errors)

- Act on findings from surveys, audits, and feedback

Culture, Trust, and ISO 45003

Organisational culture is a decisive factor in psychological health. A culture aligned with ISO 45003 is one where people feel valued, respected, and supported. Leaders influence culture through:

- What behaviour they tolerate or challenge

- How they respond under pressure

- Whether wellbeing is treated as a priority or a slogan

Common Leadership Weakness or Failures in Psychosocial Risk Management

When considering leadership failures in relation to psychosocial risk management, we can see some common themes. These are:

Weakness / Failure	Consequence
Treating wellbeing as an individual issue	Systemic risks persist
Over-reliance on surveys	Action fatigue and cynicism
Ignoring workload and pace	Burnout and disengagement
Normalising stress	Increased mental ill-health

What Effective Leaders Do Differently

We can summary what effective leaders do through the following:

- Model healthy boundaries and behaviours

- Act on psychosocial risk data

- Hold themselves accountable for team wellbeing

- Treat respect and inclusion as non-negotiable

- Recognise that performance and wellbeing are interdependent

- Understand that psychological health is a prerequisite for sustainable performance.

Conclusion: ISO 45003 as a Leadership Maturity Indicator

ISO 45003 challenges leaders to move beyond reactive wellbeing initiatives toward systemic, preventative action. It tests whether leaders are prepared to:

- Address root causes, not symptoms

- Balance performance with human sustainability

- Lead with empathy, clarity, and accountability

Ultimately, organisations that succeed with ISO 45003 are those where leaders actively protect both psychological and physical health.