

sentis



The State of Safety Leadership, Revisited

Nine years on, teams still rate their leader's care highest and recognition last. Five findings and four practical moves from 23,595 responses.

Nine years on, teams still rate their leader's care first and recognition last

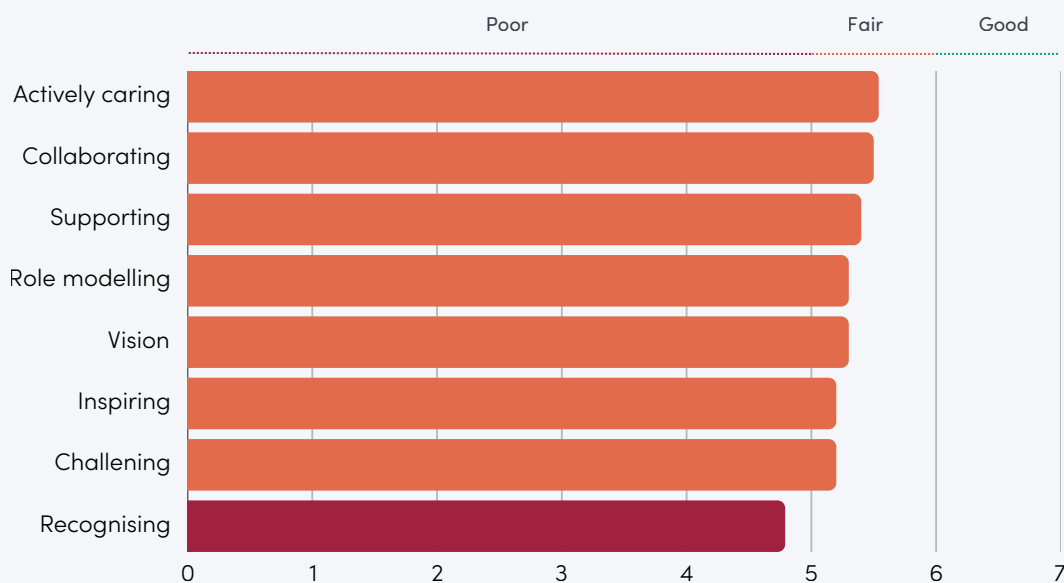
In 2017, 8,212 people told us about the safety leadership they experience. The dataset now holds 23,595 responses across eleven industries and six regions, and the picture has barely moved.

The safety leadership behaviour teams rate most highly is the same one they rated most highly nine years ago: their leader's care for the people in the team. The one they rate lowest hasn't moved either. It's recognition, and it comes last in every industry we measure, every region and every level of the organisation.

The job has also grown since we last published [The State of Safety Leadership](#). Psychosocial hazards now carry explicit duties in all Australian jurisdictions, and much of what protects people from psychological harm at work (resources, support, encouragement, recognition and trust) arrives through the person they report to. Leaders are carrying more of the safety load than they were in 2017.

THE SHAPE OF IT

Care rates highest. Recognition runs last, and not one of the eight reaches good.



A third of people (33.9%) rate the leadership they get as poor.

Average rating of each competency on the seven-point scale, whole dataset.

In this report

- 04** How we measure it
- 05** Finding 1: Care and recognition
- 07** Finding 2: The ratings split
- 08** Finding 3: Leadership and outcomes
- 10** Finding 4: Wellbeing
- 12** Finding 5: Underreporting
- 13** Where to act: Four moves
- 15** Method and next steps



How we measure it

Our research identified eight behaviours that define effective safety leadership. Drawn from transactional and transformational leadership literature, they have shaped the leadership component of our assessments for more than fifteen years.

Want to go deeper on the eight? Read our guide to effective safety leadership at sentis.com.au.



Ratings sit on a seven-point scale, which we group into three bands:

Group	Score	What the person was saying	What it describes
Poor	Below 5.0	Less than 'slightly agree'	The behaviours show up inconsistently or not much at all
Fair	5.0 to below 6.0	Between 'slightly agree' and 'agree'	The behaviours are present but not reliable
Good	6.0 and above	'Agree' or stronger	The behaviours are consistent and visible

A band describes a pattern of behaviour, not a person or their safety record. Any leader can move between them, and plenty of people are rated poor with their commitment to safety fully intact. More often, they've never been shown what the behaviours look like in practice, or they're carrying a workload that squeezes the behaviours out.

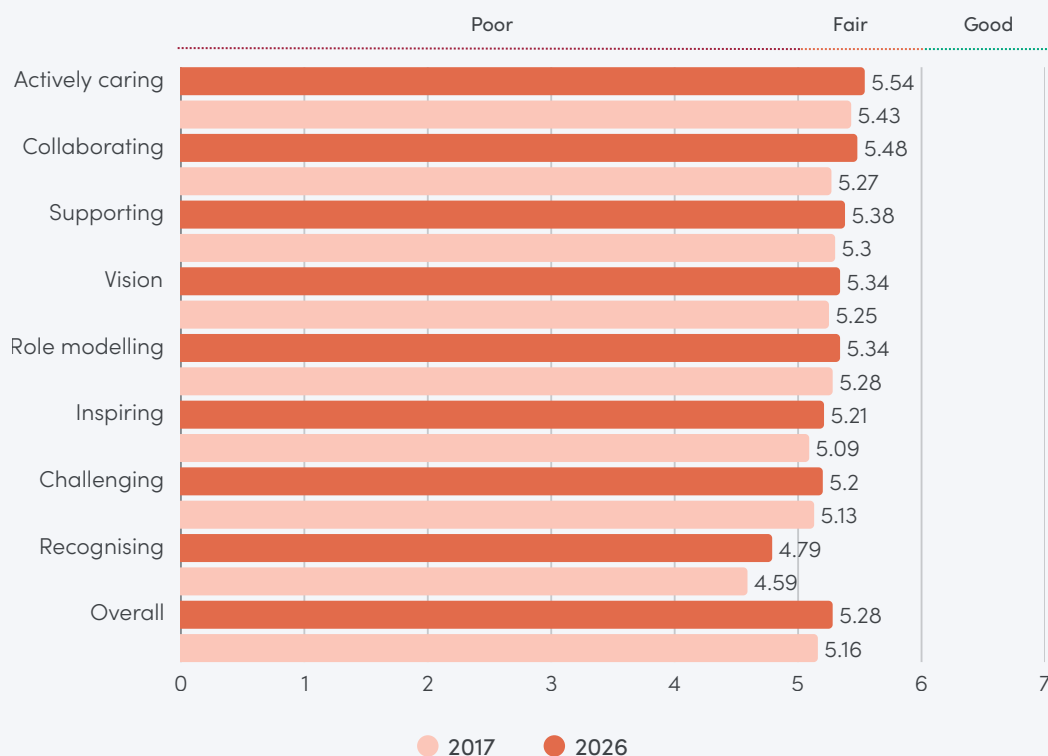
Some charts in this report use a different scale. Each one is labelled where it appears. More on the sample, method and sources is on the last page.

FINDING 1

Care still rates highest. Recognition still runs last.

Actively caring rates highest of the eight competencies, and highest within nine of the eleven industries in the dataset. We called this the most encouraging finding of 2017, and it has held for nine years: whatever else people say about the person they report to, they see the care. A leader who genuinely cares about their people already has the motivation; the remaining competencies can be built on top of it. Every competency also sits slightly above its converted 2017 value. While only a small increase, it's headed in the right direction.

The gap hasn't moved, either. In 2017, Recognising was the lowest-rated competency, and it still is. It sits last in all eleven industries and all six regions, at every level from frontline employee to executive. In 2017 we could say that across six industries and four regions. Now it holds across eleven industries and six regions, with nearly three times the responses behind it.



Average rating of each competency, 2017 and 2026, ordered by 2026 score. The response scale changed from six points to seven in 2023, so 2017 results are converted to the 1–7 scale for comparison.

Filter by industry and the levels shift, but the shape barely moves: recognition comes last in every one of them. The consistency in the data is what indicates that many leaders find recognition the most difficult competency to master. Workplaces with almost nothing else in common land in the same place, which points to the work of leading itself, rather than to any one site or industry.

Why recognition is the hard one

Three things work against recognition, and none of them are about effort or intent.

Danger announces itself. Safe work doesn't. An unsafe act raises an alarm. A crew working carefully looks like nothing happening, so seeing it takes deliberate attention.

Good work goes invisible. We tune out anything repeated. The safer a crew works, the less their leader consciously registers it. No incident, no trigger to pay attention.

The systems point at failure. Audits, investigations and reporting are all built to catch what went wrong. Over years, that trains a leader to work like an inspector rather than a coach.

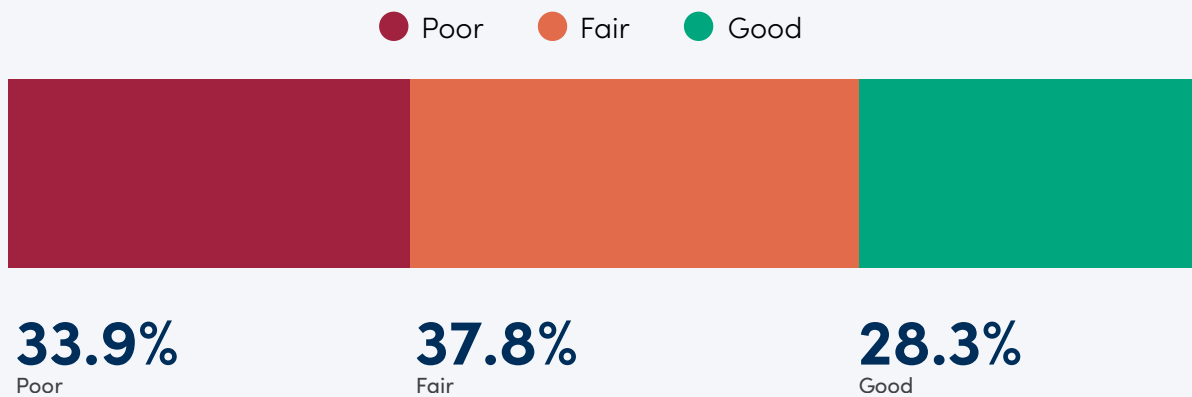
Once you can name the wiring, you can work around it.



FINDING 2

1 in 3 people rate the leadership they get as poor.

A third of people (33.9%) describe safety leadership behaviours that show up inconsistently at best. Another 37.8% describe behaviours that are there but not reliable. 28.3% describe leadership they can count on.



If you combine the poor and fair groups, that's **71.7%** of people are working under safety leadership that hasn't yet become dependable. Not absent, but not something a team can count on.

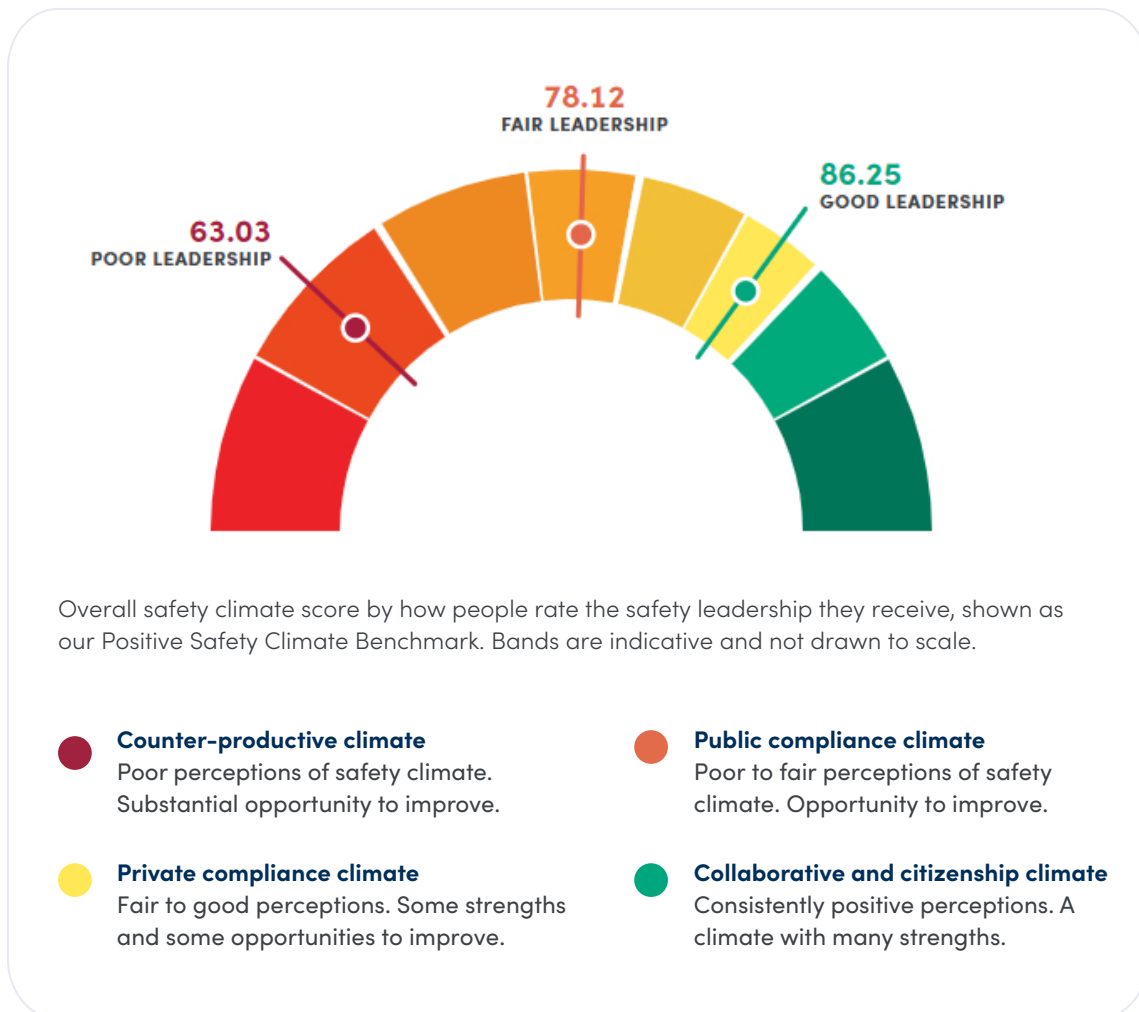
The fair group is the largest of the three, and it doesn't face the same problem as the poor group. The survey shows what teams see, not why they see it, so a leader still needs to work out what will move them from one group to the next.

Where people don't agree the behaviours happen, the work is to establish them: what the behaviour is, when it applies, what it looks like on an ordinary Tuesday. Where people agree the behaviours happen but only mildly, the behaviours already exist and the work is to make them hold. The two need different conversations, and the same development rarely works for both.

FINDING 3

Stronger leadership ratings, stronger results on every measure.

Teams reporting stronger safety leadership also report stronger results everywhere we looked. The size of the effect varies, but the direction never wavers. Overall safety climate is the big-picture number: the overarching score an organisation takes from a **Safety Climate Survey**.



There is a clear correlation between ratings of safety climate overall and ratings of safety leadership. Those that report poor safety leadership also report safety climate that averages at a counter-productive level. Those working for fair safety leaders report public compliance climate. Those that work for good safety leaders also report more positive safety climate, reaching private compliance.

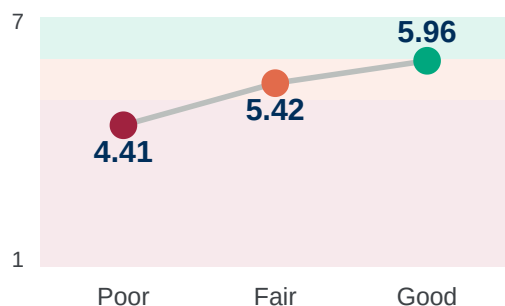
Climate and leadership go hand in hand: climate shapes the leadership people expect and leadership shapes the climate people experience. Investing in one will produce improvements in the other.

● Poor leadership
 ● Fair leadership
 ● Good leadership

Shaded bands show poor, fair and good on each measure's own scale.

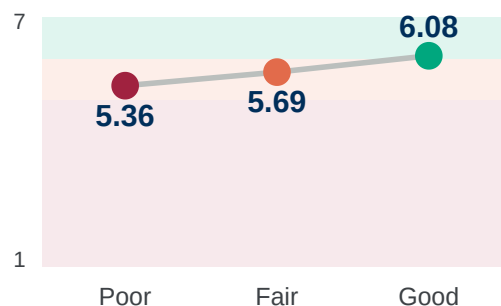
Psychological safety climate 1–7

How safe it feels to speak up and engage.



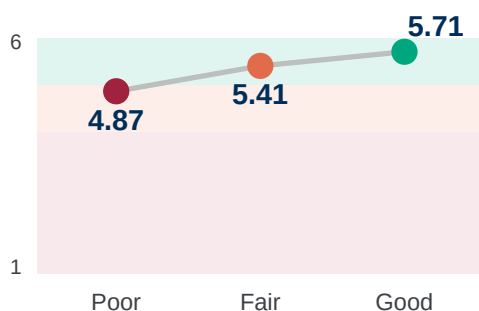
Critical risk climate 1–7

How strongly the climate supports managing risks that can cause serious harm.



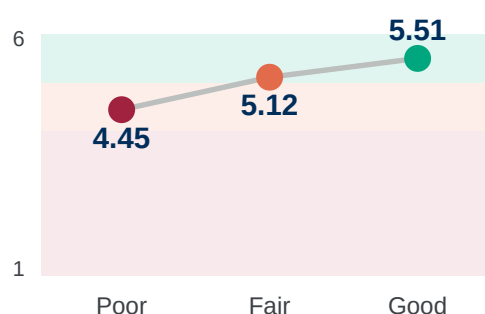
Compliance behaviour 1–6

How consistently people follow safety procedures and standards.



Citizenship behaviours 1–6

The discretionary acts like flagging a hazard or helping a colleague.



Average score for each measure, by how people rate the safety leadership they experience. Charts are grouped by the scale each measure uses, and every chart is drawn on its own axis. From modules of the [Safety Climate Survey](#).

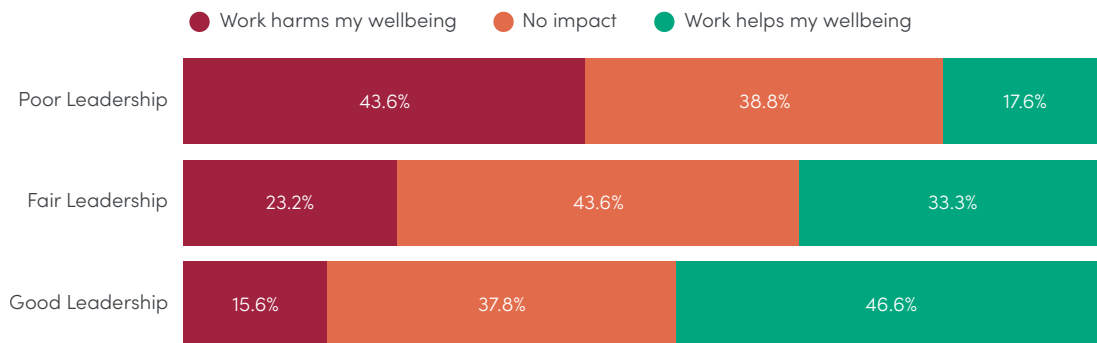
Where the problem is discretionary (people not speaking up, hazards going unraised), leadership is the strongest lever in this data. Where the problem is compliance, leadership still matters, but the weaker relationship suggests procedures, supervision and site systems carry part of that load alongside it.

And the shape of the result repeats: across nearly every measure, the difference between poor and fair is larger than the difference between fair and good. For anyone planning how to use their development budget, that's the order of operations: the biggest headroom sits with the leaders currently rated poor.

FINDING 4

Where leadership is rated poor, 43.6% say work harms their wellbeing.

This is the evidence we didn't have in 2017: how work affects people's wellbeing, split by the leadership people describe.



How people describe the effect of work on their personal wellbeing, by how they rate the safety leadership they experience. Each group totals 100%. Answered by 3,370 people rating leadership poor, 3,494 fair and 3,727 good.

Pressure to put production ahead of safety



Percentage of people reporting pressure from their supervisor to put production ahead of safety, by how they rate the safety leadership they experience.

When leadership is rated poor, 43.6% of people say work harms their personal wellbeing; when leadership is rated good, that falls to 15.6%. Positive wellbeing moves in the opposite direction, rising from 17.6% to 46.6%. Pressure to put production ahead of safety shows the same pattern: 27% under poor leadership, compared with 5.1% under good leadership.

That's the figure worth carrying into a board conversation. Australian regulators have finished phasing in explicit duties to manage psychosocial hazards, jurisdiction by jurisdiction. Victoria's regulations, the last of them, commenced on 1 December 2025. Policies and surveys are now common. Named, testable controls are rarer. This data says leadership capability is one of them, and it puts a number on it.

It also gives safety and people teams a shared measure. The behaviours behind these figures (recognition, visibility, care and psychological safety) sit in both remits, and the leaders expected to deliver them usually get two sets of expectations and one set of hours.

A shared measure is a start on a shared plan.

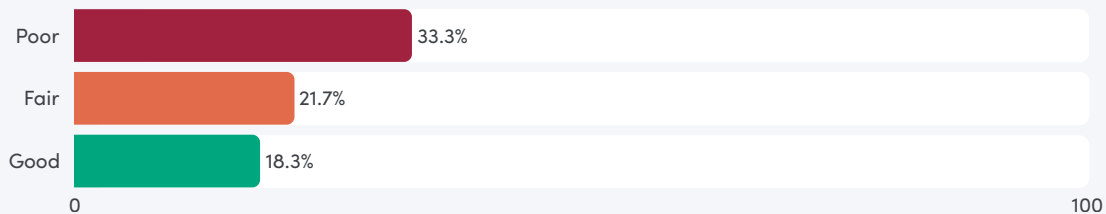


FINDING 5

1 in 3 incidents go unreported under poor leadership.

Split incident reporting by the leadership people describe and it moves a long way.

Share of incidents that go unreported



Shares of incidents, not people: the percentage of incidents that go unreported within each group, by how people rate the safety leadership they experience.

Where leadership is rated poor, 33.3% of incidents go unreported. Where it's good, that falls to 18.3%. Nearly twice the silence at one end of the scale as the other.

Reporting is often treated as a systems issue: is the form too long, and do people understand the process? Those things matter. But within the same organisation, using the same form, reporting rates shift with how people rate the leader receiving the report. Reporting that stays flat after repeated system fixes points somewhere other than the form: at what happens to the person who submits it. And that moment can be coached.

SUMMARY

Last, everywhere

Recognition ranks lowest in every industry, region and level, nine years later.

Every measure

moves with leadership: psychological safety climate, critical risk climate, compliance behaviours and citizenship behaviours

71.7%

work under safety leadership that hasn't yet become dependable.

43.6% → 15.6%

say work harms their wellbeing under poor versus good leadership.

Where to act

Four moves, each grounded in something above.

1 Measure first

Without a measure, development budget follows instinct: the loudest gap or the most recent incident. A measure taken first shows where the gaps are (which competencies, for which leaders), so the investment lands where it's most effective. And it sets the baseline, because a program without a starting measure can't show what changed.

Our own tools include the Safety Leadership Assessment (leaders' own perceptions) and the Safety Climate Survey (employee perceptions of the leadership they receive), but you may already hold data that surfaces the same insights. Whatever the source, take the measure before the development starts. Re-measure on the same instrument afterwards and the return is visible instead of assumed.

2 Start with recognition

Recognition has ranked last everywhere for nine years running. The upside is it's skill, not a trait, so there's a practical place to start. Effective recognition is timely, specific and grounded in real behaviour: instead of 'good job on safety this month', say 'you stopped that lift when the load shifted, and that's exactly what we want'. It must also feel genuine; performative recognition can damage trust more than silence.

- 1 Decide what deserves recognising.** List the behaviours you want repeated; point the list at safety rather than speed.
- 2 Know your options.** From a quiet word in the field to a call-out at the toolbox meeting.
- 3 Go looking.** Safe work doesn't announce itself, so time in the field is the only reliable way to catch it.
- 4 Match the moment to the person.** Some value the public mention; others want it one-on-one.
- 5 Do it soon.** Same day beats next toolbox.



3 Coach the middle for consistency

The 37.8% rated fair are the largest group, and their teams already see the behaviours. The development question is how to keep those behaviours showing up when the week gets tough, and the answer usually lives inside rhythms that already exist. A prestart already happens every morning; the version that builds consistency adds sixty seconds of yesterday's specifics (what went right, who caught what) so the crew hears the behaviours named on ordinary days.

Our 2017 report called the underlying principle attention density: repeated, varied attention to the same priority turns a behaviour into a habit. Repetition without variation fades into wallpaper, so change the angle: ask the crew which risk worries them most this week.

4 Put leadership capability in the controls column

Where your psychosocial risk assessment names poor support, low recognition or production pressure as hazards, list leadership capability as a control against them, the way you would any other control. In practice that's four entries in the register: the hazard, the capability listed against it, the upward measure attached as verification and a re-measure date. Most registers already apply that discipline to hard controls; the shift is extending it to a human one.

None of this asks for a personality transplant. The behaviours that separate a poor rating from a good one are ordinary ones done consistently, shown on ordinary days rather than saved for a crisis. Nine years on, the opportunity is still there.



About the data

The sample

Every figure comes from the 2026 Sentis Safety Climate Survey aggregate: 23,595 responses across eleven industries and six regions, each person rating the safety leadership of the person they report to across eight competencies on a seven-point scale. The aggregate is stratified so each client organisation appears once.

Who's in it

Mining (7,397 responses) and Utilities (6,030) together make up 57% of the sample. Australia makes up 51%. This is a picture of safety leadership in heavy industry, weighted towards Australian mining and utilities and seen mostly from the frontline.

Comparing with 2017

The survey's response scale changed from six points to seven in 2023, so the published 2017 benchmarks (8,212 responses, six industries, four locations) were converted to the 1–7 scale before any comparison. The small across-the-board rise since 2017 is best read as indicative rather than exact.

What this data can and can't say

The survey is cross-sectional: it shows how outcomes differ with the leadership people describe, not what causes what. We've written the findings with that in mind. Survey items are proprietary and remain the intellectual property of Sentis Pty Ltd.

Source: WorkSafe Victoria. Occupational Health and Safety (Psychological Health) Regulations 2025, commenced 1 December 2025.

Ready to set your leaders up for success?

Developing safety leaders is what we do, and this report is where that work starts: measure first, then build where the opportunity is. We're happy to talk it through, whether or not it goes anywhere.

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