Implementing a **Whistleblower Hotline** to Improve Safety Standards at Every Site

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M ining is known to be one of the most dangerous industries in Canada. Issues such as occupational disease, equipment-related injuries, chemical exposure, hearing health issues, explosive accidents, and environmental concerns leave miners at risk each day. While the widespread understanding is that efforts to reduce occupational risk for miners must be regularly sustained and advanced with a goal of zero harm, there is no actual federal government oversight of these efforts across the country. Instead, in Canada, mining infrastructure and the safety of the sites are regulated by the provincial or territorial governments.

The Mining Association of Canada has stepped up as a key player in aligning objectives across the provinces and territories to ensure companies are held accountable and actively monitor health and safety compliance as outlined in their Towards Sustainable Mining (TSM) Safe, Healthy, and Respectful Workplaces Protocol.[1] The protocol contains six major pillars which provide umbrella focuses for management teams to improve their performance. These indicators include *Commitments and Accountability, Safety and Health Management Systems, Psychological Safety and Respectful Behaviour, Training, Behaviour, and Culture, Monitoring and Reporting*, and lastly, *Physical Safety and Health Performance.*

Each one of these pillars has an outlined purpose and corresponding assessment criteria, which grades the facility on a scale ranging from C (unsatisfactory steps taken) to AAA (the health and safety plan is in place and audited to determine effectiveness).

We aim to highlight the importance of pillars three and five: *Psychological Safety and Respectful Behaviour,* and *Monitoring and Reporting.* These two pillars are crucial for enhancing overall safety at mining sites, and their effectiveness can be facilitated with the implementation of the right technology.

Before we can understand how exactly specific technologies can help, we must break down what these pillars should mean to operations management.

Psychological safety and respectful behaviour

When we speak about psychological safety, in contrast to physical safety, we are taking a more nuanced approach to understanding the worker experience in each mine. Generally, psychologically safe workplaces create an environment where employees feel safe and empowered to

make judgement calls and do not fear the repercussions of making an error.

However, the current workplace is not the only influence on an individual's feelings of safety. Past lived experiences can also influence and trigger feelings of unsafety. In mining, the focus on psychological safety is not so much empowering individuals to challenge the status quo of operations as much as it is providing the resources to make them feel comfortable in completing operations safely and speaking up when the conditions are not satisfactory to do so.

Mental health challenges are a major concern for Canadian miner's psychological safety. A 2019 study by Vale Canada[2] concluded that 18 per cent of workers showed symptoms of mild depression, 10 per cent showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, another 10 per cent said they experienced suicidal thoughts, and the report also suggested the perpetuation of a culture where employees felt pressured to return to work quickly after an absence. These conditions can be further exacerbated by the high-stress physical conditions presented in the mines.

Preexisting mental and physical health challenges can be further exacerbated if every employee on the site does not maintain respectful behaviour. This pillar focuses on bullying, harassment, discrimination, and violence specifically, which are unfortunately commonly cited in workplace incident reports. This closely aligns with the fifth pillar of the Towards Sustainable Mining (TSM) Safe, Healthy, and Respectful Workplaces Protocol, which is *Monitoring and Reporting,* as management must identify gaps that may be creating physically and psychologically unsafe conditions in their mines and create plans to mitigate these issues.

Monitoring and reporting

Unfortunately, reports and data on experiences related to psychological safety are more sparse, which is common in every industry. While we have a lot of insightful data on physical risks to miners, there is less usable information about psychological risk factors and what best proactive measures should be taken to suit the unique needs of each mine.

As TSM (p. 15) outlined, Level A of reporting and monitoring confirms that "data is collected on the number and types of reported issues related to psychological safety and respectful behaviour, with ongoing monitoring and analysis of this data." Mining companies in Canada need not only an outlet for employee reports but also a secure and efficient pathway for acting on these reports and auditing results over time to meet the Mining Associate of Canada's standards.

Mining companies around the world are already taking notice of the importance of monitoring and reporting to understand how safe employees feel at work. In 2022, global mining company Gold Fields, in partnership with EB&Co,[3] engaged 2,855 employees through interviews and anonymous responses to better understand their workplace environment. While 78 per cent of respondents feel they do not experience any inappropriate behaviour from colleagues, and 84 per cent agreed the people at their site behave respectfully, there were still staggering numbers to say the contrary of the past five years. Forty-seven per cent of respondents reported experiencing bullying, 15 per cent experienced racism, and 23 per cent

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(female) and seven per cent (male) reported experiencing sexual harassment or gender inequality in the workplace in the recent past.

From these results, Gold Fields is better suited to address the unique issues at their mines. Their next steps included strengthening measures to prevent harmful behaviour and providing more resources to help employees on sites, including introducing a trauma-informed mechanism for reporting workplace incidents.

How do whistleblower hotlines help?

With a better understanding of the link between physical and psychological safety and how they relate to safety reporting and monitoring, it becomes clear that comprehensive reporting technology can push initiatives forward for mining companies.

When thinking about making an incident report or effectively "blowing the whistle" on a workplace issue, many people immediately think of hotlines. Hotline-based reporting systems are some of the oldest and most effective mechanisms for accessible reporting in workplaces. However, as the digital landscape has expanded, online web intake forms and email reporting have become more secure and common as well. Implementing a secure omnichannel reporting system can improve accessibility and ensure maximum convenience for reporting, especially outside of working hours, which is extremely important for ensuring that employees feel psychologically safe when making a report.

The other most critical factor of reporting tools that will help ensure safety is maintaining the anonymity of the person making the report. When using a hotline, the intake personnel must be objective, unbiased, and non-judgmental in all circumstances. Additionally, they must have a predesigned protocol for gathering key details of the presented incident to ensure the case is appropriately escalated to the suitable management team or authorities. Employees must receive confirmation and updates on any ongoing developments to help create a sense of security in the process and avoid feeling that their concerns are being abandoned or not taken seriously.

While many appreciate having a human-to-human connection when making a report, others are not comfortable verbally voicing their concerns, which is where online intake forms come in. By setting up a secure platform and comprehensive questionnaire that does not require personal identification of the employee, management can easily audit and act on concerns brought forward. Additionally, advanced software can prioritize the most sensitive cases by level of urgency.

Best practices for hotline implementation

When deciding the best reporting tool for your company structure, you want to keep a few best practices in mind to ensure that 1) the tool is used effectively; 2) reports are taken seriously; 3) that employees are encouraged to speak up and are not retaliated against for doing so; and 4) there are measures in place to access reporting data so future proactive measures can be taken to prevent repeat incidents.

To ensure each of these measures is met, there must be top-down training focused on how and when to make a report, and the rights of the employees to do so. Management must set the tone for a robust speak-up culture that will encourage employees to take the necessary steps, no matter what their concern is.

However, actions speak louder than words, and in the case of workplace compliance, policies speak louder than both. Accompanying the implementation of any anonymous reporting tool needs to be an anti-retaliation policy that explicitly states employees shall not be reprimanded for creating a report. With the anonymity feature of reporting tools, some may think this is unnecessary. However, with more serious concerns being escalated, anonymity cannot always be maintained, and ostracization in the workplace often happens on the basis of rumours. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that anti-retaliation is set in stone to support the ongoing development of a speak-up culture.

As a company, you don't only want to know how often the hotline is used, but you should also be keeping track of response times, types of incidents, the times of day incidents are reported,

and what reporting tool is favoured by your employees. Implementing a secure case management software that can regularly audit and provide analytics into key indicators will help your company meet the monitoring and reporting requirements set out by the Towards Sustainable Mining protocol. Additionally, your employees will feel safer making reports knowing there is a robust system in place keeping their concerns confidential and effectively handled.

As we can learn from the case of Gold Fields, even in a seemingly respectful workplace culture, monitoring and reporting on the specific incidents affecting your mine is crucial for implementing proactive measures to help advance your employees' physical and psychological safety. An omnichannel reporting tool and case management system that can provide you with insightful data about the issues and incidents commonly affecting your employees will be vital in meeting the conditions for reporting as outlined by The Mining Association of Canada and further regulatory conditions put in place by local governments where you operate. Moreover, these reporting and auditing mechanisms will keep your employees safe and decrease the chances of the same incident occurring more than once. Ⓜ

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