

# The Two-Stage Social Identity Model of High- Reliability Organisations

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## Abstract

The goal of this paper is to develop an evidence-informed model that explains how contemporary psychological theorising can be brought to bear on the challenges of making organisations highly reliable. Divided into two parts, **Part 1** of the paper builds on the seminal work of Weick and colleagues to develop a *Two-Stage Social Identity Model of High-Reliability Organisations (2SIM-HRO)*. This argues that two inter-related sets of processes are critical to the creation of HROs. First, the behaviour of organisational members needs to be informed by a sense of *shared social identity* (a sense of “us-ness”) such that their actions are underpinned by *collective mind*. Second, the *content of that social identity* needs to be informed by a sense that high-reliability behaviours are central to “who we are” and “what we want to be”. Building on this model, **Part 2** of the paper argues that the key challenges of creating HROs are primarily challenges of *leadership*. However, in contrast to traditional approaches to this topic, we argue that in order to create and sustain HROs, leaders need to engage in *identity leadership* that serves to cultivate and then promote a sense of shared social identity built around high reliability. As well as mapping onto the specifics of the 2SIM-HRO, we note that identity leadership encourages processes of *engaged followership* whereby organisational members go ‘above and beyond’ in their response to leaders’ reliability-related directives. In this way, it is the synchronised forces of identity leadership and engaged followership — both of which revolve around the development and realisation of a sense of shared social identity — that can be seen as the key drivers and psychological hallmark of HROs.

## The Two-Stage Social Identity Model of High-Reliability Organisations (2SIM-HRO)

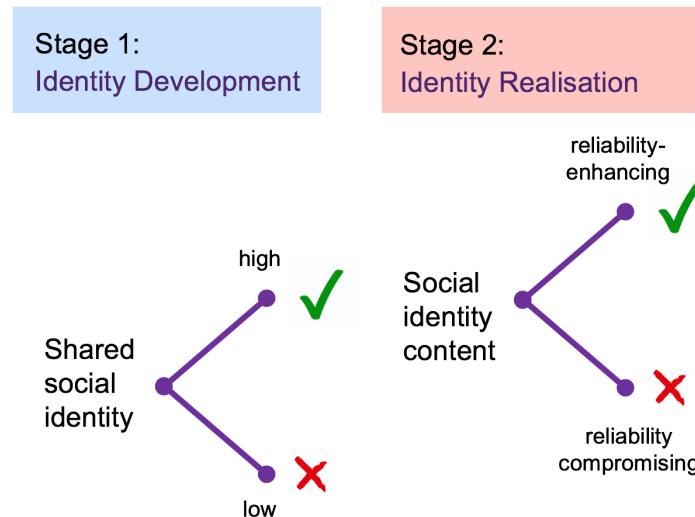
In what follows, we understand a High-Reliability Organisation (an HRO) to be an organisation that avoids serious accidents and catastrophes where these might otherwise arise as a consequence of operational failure in the complex task environment in which organisational activity takes place (e.g., an A&E ward, an aircraft carrier, a mine). As its name suggests, the *Two-Stage Social Identity Model of HROs* (2SIM-HRO) argues that two inter-related sets of processes are critical to the creation of HROs.

*First*, it argues that the behaviour of organisational members needs to be informed by a sense of shared social identity (a sense of “us-ness”) such that their actions are underpinned by what Weick and Roberts (1993) refer to as *collective mind*. In basic terms, this sense of shared identity means that, psychologically speaking, all members of an organisation are “on the same page”. Critically too, it also provides the basis for various forms of *collective mindfulness* and *heedful inter-relating* (Weick & Roberts, 1993). In particular, a wealth of research shows that shared social identity provides a psychological platform for trust, information-sharing and psychological safety (e.g., Fransen et al., 2020; Greenaway et al., 2015; for a review see Haslam, 2004). For example, to the extent that we see others in an organisation as speaking for ‘us’ (rather than for ‘them’ or for ‘themselves’), we are more inclined to divulge sensitive operational information to them — in part because we believe that they are more likely to use it in our interests (and not to use it against us; Bingley et al., in press).

Yet while shared social identity is a basis for group members to act in concert with each other in pursuit of shared goals, whether or not this contributes to high reliability depends, *second*, on the *content* of social identity — what we think it means to be ‘us’ and how we endeavour to live our identity out. Here, then, the creation of HROs hinges on organisational members’ internalisation of high-reliability behaviours that is prepared to deal appropriately with unexpected events (e.g., of a form outlined by Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001) as central to “who we are” and “what we want to become”. Then, the more that they identify with the organisations and its goals, the more they are likely to take these behaviours to heart, rather than merely pay lip service to them or, worse, disregard them altogether (van Dick et al., 2006).

As presented in Figure 1, the 2SIM thus sees HROs as the product of the twin processes of *identity development* and *identity realisation*. However, reviews of the HRO literature (e.g., as reviewed by Johnston, 2021) indicate that it has focused almost exclusively on the second of these processes, largely to the neglect of the first. That is, it focuses *descriptively* on the behaviours that are found in HROs (e.g., sensitivity to operations, pre-occupation with failure, reluctance to simplify; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2011) without explaining the processes which lead to those behaviours being internalised as an appropriate basis for organisational activity (Cantu et al., 2021). In short, the HRO literature gives us a good sense of what a safety manual needs to contain, but little sense of how one gets organisational members to engage with it. This is what the present paper attempts to do. Because this is better understood within the existing HRO literature, our analysis starts by looking at Stage 2 of the 2SIM-HRO — the process of identity realisation — before going on to consider how organisations can best address Stage 1 — the process of identity development.

Figure 1: A schematic representation of the Two-Stage Social Identity Model of High-Reliability Organisations (2SIM-HRO)



## Part 1: Identity Realisation

As noted above, the extant HRO literature does a good job of describing what an HRO ‘looks like’ (e.g., after Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2011). Our aim here, though, is not simply to reproduce this literature but rather to explore it through a different lens. More specifically, we want to examine the behaviours that this research documents as forms of *identity realisation* that map out a particular (idealised) sense of “who we are” and “what we want to become”. We then want to clarify the psychological steps that allow this identity realisation to occur — so that HRO behaviours move from being formally stated policies (words in manuals and strategic vision documents) to socially embodied practices (actions).

In their seminal research on the topic, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001), make a range of conceptual and practical points about the process of becoming an HRO. From these, we abstract five that we see as particularly important — but which tend to be overlooked. These suggest that would-be HROs need to:

1. Focus on people.
2. Focus on collectives and work teams, not (just) individuals.
3. Ensure HR activities become part of an organisation’s social identity.
4. Harness the power of group capabilities.
5. Close the gap between “who we are” and the “HRO we want to become”.

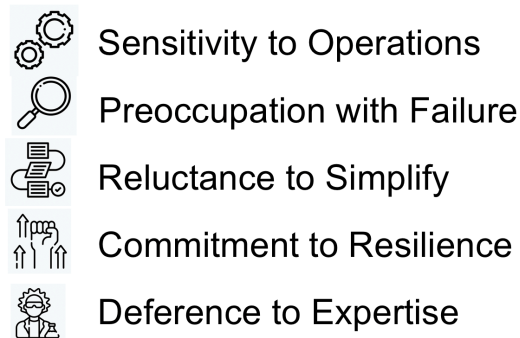
But what precisely do these things mean, and why are they so important? And more particularly, how precisely are they to be achieved? Our sense is that despite their significance, these are questions on which the HRO literature is largely silent. In the process of fleshing out the 2SIM-HRO, it is helpful to unpack some of these points so that it becomes clearer how and why the model provides a path to high organisational reliability.

### 1. Focus on people

The five features of HRO process identified by Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) are widely accepted as a jumping-off point for efforts to understand and create HROs. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the activities that these ultimately lead to focus predominantly on *procedures and operations and only rarely on people*. For instance, when it comes to the five characteristics of HROs that Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) identify (see Figure 2),

much more work has focused on “pre-occupation with failure” than on “commitment to resilience” (Cantu et al., 2021).

Figure 2: The five hallmarks of HROs



Note: Adapted from Weick & Roberts (1993), Weick & Sutcliffe (2001, 2011)

Generally too these characteristics are viewed through a mechanical rather than a human lens. This is unfortunate, because, as Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) note, the various features need to be more than just “*engineering-oriented concept[s] or procedural techniques used as interventions to mitigate against failures*” (Cantu et al., 2021, p.5). Moreover, as Cantu and colleagues (2021) observe, “*it is ultimately through human actors that resilience and high reliability operations are actually achieved*” (p.2). Indeed, they conclude:

The fundamental element of successful resilience is people, and the redesign of organisational systems, processes, and interfaces should focus on facilitating the re-engineering around human factors, rather than the mechanistic, inorganic ones. (Cantu et al., 2021, p. 5)

An important starting point when tackling the challenges of creating HROs is therefore to recognise these challenges as psychological and not (merely) technical.

## 2. Focus on collectives and work teams, not individuals

But focusing on people and their psychology alone is not enough. In particular, we need a psychological analysis that recognises, and taps into, people’s capacity to think and act not only as individuals, but also as members of work teams and collectives. As Weick and Roberts (1993) note, we need a psychology that appreciates the importance not just of ‘personal mind’ (a person’s idiosyncratic sense of themselves as ‘I’ and ‘me’; Turner, 1982) but also the importance of ‘collective mind’ (their sense of themselves as ‘we’ and ‘us’). In particular, this is because this sense of collective mind is observed by Weick and Roberts (1993) to underpin the *collaboration* that is essential for HROs (see also Turner, 1982).

In the classic work on HROs, the importance of this group level of analysis is very much in evidence, and well captured by Weick and Roberts (1993). They make the point that a focus on the psychology of individuals as *individuals* not only fails to appreciate how HROs work but is also likely to be harmful:

A culture that encourages individualism, survival of the fittest, macho heroics, and can-do reactions will often neglect heedful practice of representation and subordination. Without representation and subordination, comprehension reverts to one brain at a time. No matter how visionary or smart or forward-looking or aggressive that one brain may be, it is no match for conditions of interactive complexity. Cooperation is imperative for the development of mind. Reliable performance may require a well-developed collective mind in the form of a complex, attentive system tied together by trust. (Weick & Roberts, 1993, p. 378)

The importance of this focus on group and group psychology is made clear in Weick and Roberts' (1993) analysis of flight decks — particularly, when the system is challenged or tested. Indeed, they note that to understand why on a flight deck (like most HROs) “*a million accidents are waiting to happen, but almost none of them do*”, we need to understand HROs as collectives or social systems.

Speaking to this point, Weick and Roberts (1993) recall an incident that occurred during a night-time launch when planes came back to a carrier and tried to land. Three planes developed engine and technical failures. While two planes managed to land successfully despite their technical failures, because of an inadequate response to the problems at hand, the third plane (valued at US\$38m) crashed in the sea. Weick and Roberts (1993) unpack what exactly went wrong. Interestingly, they do not focus on the individual pilots or the individuals on the carrier whose job it was to coordinate the landings. Instead, they focus on the way that the system broke down, observing:

Activities and people became isolated, the system began to pull apart, the problems became more incomprehensible, and it became harder for individuals to interrelate with a system of activities that was rapidly losing its form. (Weick & Roberts, 1993, p. 373)

They conclude:

Crews that function as individuals rather than teams show this rapid breakdown in ability to understand what is happening. (Weick & Roberts, 1993, p. 378)

This is an important point to underscore. For it suggests that HROs are not successful because they have the best trained people or the smartest minds. Rather, they are successful only if (and when) the people they employ are attuned to the achievement of group goals. As Weick and Roberts (1993, p.360) put it, HROs are organisations that are made up of people “*who act as if they are a group*”.

Nevertheless, having members who act as a group is not enough to make an organisation highly reliable. As Weick and Roberts (1993) observe, the obvious reason for this is that the goals of a group can be ones that support high reliability or that compromise it (see also Andersen et al., 2015). In particular, whether or not an organisation becomes an HRO depends on whether groups “*work with, for, or against each other*” in pursuit of reliability-enhancing goals (p.364). The key challenge here, then, is to get individuals in teams to work effectively together in ways that support safety behaviour. How one achieves this takes us to our next point.

### 3. Ensure HR activities become part of an organisation's social identity

The foregoing observations suggest that rather than focusing on employees as individuals, a more pertinent issue for those who seek to create HROs is to form collectives or work teams that embrace safety as part of their DNA (Andersen, 2015). To understand how to achieve this, we first need to focus on how individuals come to define themselves as group members and as part of the collective.

One important framework for understanding this process is provided by research in the *social identity* tradition (after Tajfel & Turner, 1979; e.g., see Haslam, 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). This argues that the key psychological process that underpins group behaviour is the *shift in self-perception* from a personal level ('me') to a social or group level ('we') (Turner, 1982). As a consequence of this shift, people come to understand themselves, and act, as part of a given group. Moreover, the more that they see themselves as part of the team (i.e., the more they *identify* with it, and the more *salient* the social identity is; Oakes et al., 1994), the more they conform to values and beliefs that are 'prototypical' for the group and the more likely they are to abide by group norms and to internalise group goals as reference for behaviour (Turner, 1991).

In this way, when a given social identity is salient, people no longer face a choice between working for the group or working for themselves — because these have become one and the same thing. Importantly too, social identity provides a basis for group members to align their thoughts and behaviours — specifically in relation to those things that are central to their identity. For example, if (and to the extent that) you define yourself in terms of a social identity as a Brisbane Lions supporter, then you are likely to align your behaviour at an AFL match with that of other Lions supporters (but not Collingwood supporters) in ways that focus on



the achievement of group-relevant goals (i.e., supporting the Lions). This in turn, helps to eliminate fault lines and improve trust and communication within the group (Bingley et al., in press; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Greenaway et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2003) in ways that support enhanced group performance (Campion et al., 1993). The more people identify with the Lions the more they cheer their team on and, critically, the more effectively they do this *in concert with* other Lions supporters (Boen et al., 2020).

How then can an organisation capitalise on knowledge about the importance of group dynamics and normative cultures to enhance the safety culture? On the basis of extensive research within the construction industry in Denmark, Anderson et al. (2015) concludes that safety initiatives need to take account of group dynamics and associated social identifications by (a) enhancing identification with site management and the work team and organisation more generally (a point we elaborate below), and (b) consider how safety can become a salient and valued norm whereby reporting incidents becomes rewarded, not punished.

In regard to the latter point, it is important to be mindful of the fact that within any given organisation there is never just 'one' safety culture (Edmondson, 2004). Because every organisation consists of many workgroups, departments and teams, all with their own subculture, 'the safety culture' in a particular organisation is likely to capture only part of people's everyday experience (and not necessarily the most relevant part; Andersen et al., 2015). Accordingly, a more fine-grained analysis is required that maps out both the safety cultures nested within particular subgroups, and the overlapping safety cultures across multiple workgroups and departments (Bentley et al., 2020). In this, it is important to take account of the fact that there may also be important intergroup dynamics at play whereby work teams seek to contrast themselves from other groups in ways that depart from HR goals (Andersen et al., 2015).

Before we continue, it is important to note that group dynamics can sometimes lead organisation members to act in ways that compromise reliability (and produce other problematic outcomes). This observation has led many researchers and commentators to warn of the dangers of seeking to build strong social identities in the workplace (a view that can be traced back to Taylor, 1911). In particular, they argue that groups are forces which stifle creativity, performance, and rationality (for a recent analysis, see Jetten & Hornsey, 2014). As a consequence, groups are often given a bad name in the organisation literature (e.g., Locke et al., 2001). So, before we can make the case for working with social identities to build HROs, this is a nettle that we need to grasp.

## 4. Harness the power of group capabilities

In line with view that group forces in organisations (and the world at large) are generally negative, research has traditionally emphasised how cohesive groups lead to inferior decisions because pressures for consensus mean that group members process information uncritically. In particular, this is the conclusion reached Janis (1972) on the basis of his *groupthink* model of group decision making — a model that has come to dominate understanding of this topic in the social sciences including (social and organisational) psychology (Turner & Pratkanis, 1998).

Janis's research sought to explain the ill-fated decision by members of President Kennedy's administration to invade the Bay of Pigs in 1961. Janis saw the invasion as a seminal instance of a phenomenon that occurs whenever "members of any small cohesive group tend to maintain esprit de corps by unconsciously developing a number of shared illusions ... that interfere with critical thinking and reality testing" (Janis, 1972, p.35). He called this phenomenon groupthink, referring to this as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive ingroup, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action." (Janis, 1972, p.9). Apparently supporting these conclusions, researchers have pointed to groupthink as an explanation for disasters as varied as the Columbia space-shuttle explosion (Packer, 2009) and the Global Financial Crisis (Valine, 2018). The message here is fairly straightforward: to avoid the problems that groups pose for organisations and society, their members should ensure that there is no material or psychological basis for 'the we-feeling of solidarity' that gives rise to groupthink (Janis, 1972, p. 7).

Yet while Janis's (1972) theory has had enormous influence on theory and practice, it has been subjected to remarkably few empirical tests. Moreover, those that have been conducted provide at best only mixed support for his analysis (see Esser, 1998; Fuller & Aldag, 1998; Turner & Pratkanis, 1998). In particular, detailed archival research by Peterson et al. (1998) found that groupthink processes tend to be implicated as much in good organisation outcomes as in bad ones, and Kramer (1998) found that documentary evidence pertaining to decision-making in the Kennedy administration fails to support Janis's distinction between the hapless Bay of Pigs invasion and other supposedly superior processes (notably those involved in the handling of the Cuban Missile crisis).

A key methodological limitation of work that has tested the groupthink model is that it has tended to focus selectively on decisions that are understood to be foolhardy, reckless and intemperate (e.g., those implicated in the Bay of Pigs invasion; the Columbia space-shuttle; the entry of the US into the Vietnam war), while failing to examine the way in which groupthink can contribute to superior decisions that could be characterised as adventurous, bold and courageous (e.g., support for the 1969 Apollo Moon landing, the rescue of Chilean miners in 2010; Useem et al., 2011). As a result, the capacity for groupthink-type processes to support positive outcomes has been largely overlooked. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that they can, not least in the context of HROs. Indeed, Janis's (1972) model and recommendations stand in stark opposition to many of the conclusions drawn by Weick and Roberts (1993) — which point to the value of building strong collectives in which individual team members are able to act as one and thereby rise collectively to resolve safety challenges when they arise.

In line with the research evidence, the 2SIM-HRO therefore suggests that highly cohesive groups can support *both* progressive and regressive organisation outcomes. More specifically, while the strength of a group's social identity determines *whether* a group is able to act as a group (in Stage 1), the content of group norms determines the *nature* of the influence that cohesiveness has on group decision making and group behaviour more generally (in Stage 2). In line with this conclusion, experimental studies have shown that group norms (e.g., for critical and independent vs. shared and consensual decision making; Jetten & Hornsey, 2014; Mojzisch et al., 2008; Postmes et al., 2001) determine whether cohesive groups are a basis for superior or inferior decisions. In general terms, classical groupthink symptoms (as described by Janis, 1972) are most likely to arise where group norms place a premium on consensus above all else (see also Brodbeck et al., 2007). Yet if group norms support critical thinking (e.g., in line with Weick & Sutcliffe's, 2001, recommendation to defer to expertise) then group cohesiveness tends to lead to superior outcomes.

This analysis implies, then, that HR activities should focus not on reducing the cohesiveness in groups and teams (in the way that the groupthink model suggests), but on developing a normative climate that sharpens critical thinking and rewards corrective behaviours when the procedures of groups or teams are producing unreliable and unsafe outcomes. More specifically, these norms and practices need to be directly connected to the five hallmarks of HROs (as summarised in Figure 2). For instance, rather than just being a rule or guideline, preoccupation with failure needs to be embedded as something that 'we do because it is at the core of who we are'. This requires organisation members to be strongly committed to the achievement of group goals in ways that motivate them to challenge practices that they see as harmful to the group. This point is underlined by Packer (2009) in research which shows that *the capacity for collective self-correction is grounded in a sense of shared social identity*. That is, it is only when people identify with, and hence care about, a given group that they will speak out when something threatens it. Moreover, it is this capacity for social identity-based self-correction that transforms a run-of-the-mill system into a *smart system* of the form needed to sustain an HRO.

## 5. Close the gap between “who we are” and the “HRO we want to become”

To recap, so far, we have argued that once people see themselves as collectives, and once these collectives internalise norms that map onto and support the key hallmarks of HROs, an organisation will be appreciably closer to being an HRO. However, we still have not clarified practically how one travels from that state of

“who we are right now” to “the HRO we want to become”. In that sense, we have not done much more than what current HRO work has often been criticised for (e.g., see Cantu et al., 2021; Johnston, 2021). To date, then, HRO work has tended to focus *descriptively* on the behaviours that are characteristic of HROs (e.g., as listed in Figure 2; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001) without explaining the processes which lead to those behaviours being internalised as an appropriate basis for organisational activity. In short, the HRO literature gives us a good sense of what a safety manual needs to contain, but little sense of how you get organisation members to engage with it. As Weick and Roberts (1993) note, the solution here is not to develop a better manual. Rather, it is to better understand “how we currently operate” and “how we should operate”, and then use that analysis to inform appropriate intervention to reduce the gap between the two.

Practically speaking, it is therefore important, first, to get a clear view of the current functioning of an organisation with respect to safety by exploring the normative culture in the various work teams in within it (i.e., the organisation’s *descriptive norms*; see Andersen, 2015, for an example). To answer the question “how do we operate”, it is important not only to map out (a) how many errors and incidents of different types occur, but also (b) whether work teams openly discuss errors and incidents (Edmondson, 2004), (c) whether error reporting is encouraged or whether it is avoided (e.g., because it is seen as damaging to one’s career opportunities; Chassin & Loeb, 2013), and (d) whether work teams view safety rules as proper and important or as “meaningless and annoying” (Andersen et al., 2015, p.649).

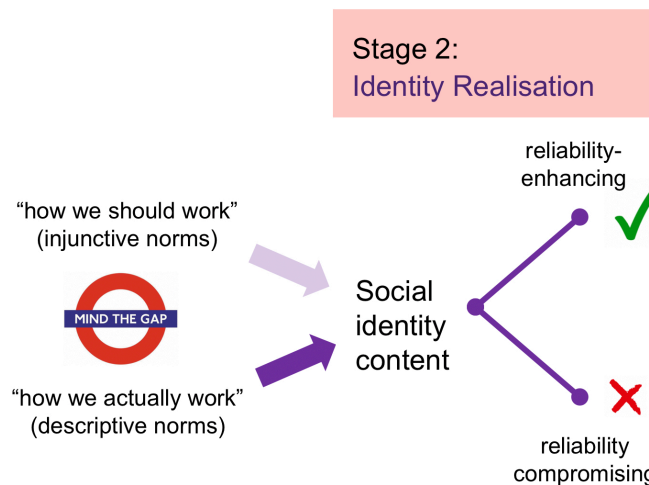
Leaders clearly have an important role to play in all this. How do they communicate about safety — as something that is essential to the team and as something that is embedded in the ‘way we do things’ or as ‘something we just have to put up with’? And, whose responsibility is it to enforce safety? Is this just something that management is concerned about or something that we all do? In this regard, Chassin and Loeb (2013) make a compelling case that effective safety cultures require the involvement of *everyone* in the organisation — members of all teams at every level of seniority.

It is only when an organisation has a good understanding of descriptive norms pertaining to ‘how we operate’ that it is in a position to appreciate the gap between who they are (the normative content of their present social identity) and the HRO they would like to become (so called *injunctive norms* pertaining to ‘how we should operate’ in order to be ‘who we want to be’ — i.e., the normative content of their aspirational social identity; see Figure 3). Importantly too, interventions that aim to increase safety behaviours on the ground should be more effective when they work with relevant social identities of the various employees (Andersen et al., 2015). Amongst other things, this will involve developing and making salient a valued group norm whereby collectives (e.g., work teams) and not (just) individuals are rewarded for effective safety behaviours (e.g., see Andersen et al., 2015).

Such HR activities require not only a RITE plan about what the organisation as a whole and all the subgroups within it need to do to achieve and do better (i.e., a plan that is *realistic, implementable, timely* and *engaging*; Haslam et al., 2020; see below), but importantly too a genuine commitment on the part of management to engage in the necessary social identity change. When it comes to diagnosing why many organisations fail to achieve HRO status it is apparent that this is exactly where the problem lies. For example, Chassin and Loeb note in the context of a transition to HRO in the health care sector that “Many leaders are reluctant to commit to the goal of high reliability because they regard it as unrealistic or unachievable or a distraction from their current serious fiscal and regulatory pressures” (Chassin & Loeb 2013, p. 484).

However, it is important to note too that, in and of itself, leaders’ commitment to high reliability is not enough to create an HRO either. Thus Chassin and Loeb conclude that “Even after they have committed to do so, how long it will take for health care organisations to reach high reliability is unknown, because none has arrived at that destination yet” (Chassin & Loeb, 2013, p. 484).

Figure 3: The importance of minding the gap between descriptive norms for identity realisation



Note: This figure makes the point that the gap between “how we actually operate” (descriptive norms) and “how we should operate” (injunctive norms) needs to be a focus for identity realisation that seeks to shift an organisation’s social identity content so that it supports high-reliability.

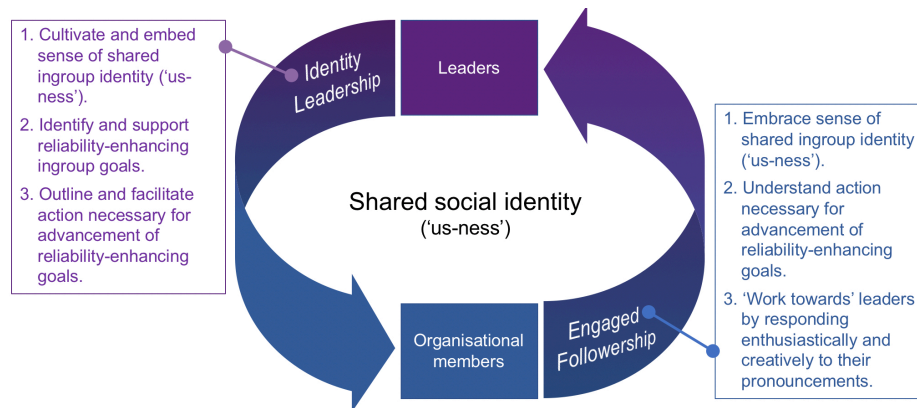
In summary, then, there are myriad challenges that stand in the way of identity realisation of a form that allows organisations to progress to the state of ‘being the HRO we aspire to be’. Nevertheless, the 2SIM-HRO gives a clearer theoretical understanding of what precisely these challenges are, so that organisations are better able to forensically address them. How precisely they can do this, is the focus of the second part of this white paper.

## Part 2: Identity Development

In setting about the challenge of understanding how an organisation can overcome barriers to identity realisation that stand in the way of it becoming an HRO, we follow Veazie et al. (2019) in seeing these challenges primarily as ones of *leadership* (see also Carroll & Rudolph, 2006; Chassin & Loeb, 2013). Here, though, we depart from traditional models of leadership which see this centring exclusively on the psychology of (great) leaders. Instead we draw on a “new psychology of leadership” (Haslam et al., 2011, 2020) which argues that leadership is a group process that rests on the cultivation and realisation of a sense of shared social identity — a process we refer to as *identity leadership* (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014).

As well as mapping onto the specifics of the 2SIM-HRO, this “new psychology” also shows how leadership is bound up with processes of *engaged followership* through which leaders do more than simply secure compliance with their directives (e.g., those that support HROs) but, more fundamentally, encourage organisational members to go ‘above and beyond’ in their response to those directives. As set out in Figure 4, it is thus the synchronised forces of identity leadership and engaged followership — both of which revolve around the development and realisation of a sense of shared social identity — that we see as the key drivers and psychological hallmark of HROs.

Figure 4: Identity leadership and engaged followership as key drivers of HROs



Note: Leaders are not simply those formally designated as such. Indeed, HROs are characterised by *leaderful* teams in which all members feel empowered to help others work towards the achievement of group goals.

## The importance of identity leadership

Leadership is generally understood as the process through which one or more members of a group influence other group members in a way that motivates them to contribute to the achievement of group goals (Haslam et al., 2015; Rost, 2008). Because leadership mobilises people and focuses them on the achievement of valued goals (e.g., for would-be HROs those associated with performance, reliability, and safety) it is highly prized and a major focus for academic and public debate. In light of this, two key questions have preoccupied scholars and commentators for over two millennia. First, what makes people effective leaders? And, second, if we discover this, can we train others to be effective leaders themselves?

Answering these questions has spawned an industry so vast that its scale is hard to fathom. For example, although their value has been seriously questioned (Kellerman, 2012; Westfall, 2019), there are close to 1,000 different degree courses in leadership in the US alone, and it is estimated that US companies spend around \$366bn a year on leadership training. The search for answers has also spawned an academic literature that is so vast that no-one could digest more than a small fraction of it. The British Library, for example, holds over 15,000 books on the topic.

Given all this, it might seem arrogant, if not foolhardy, to suggest that there is a need to fundamentally rethink the nature of leadership or that we require a “new psychology of leadership”. Nevertheless, as we argue in our book with this title (Haslam et al., 2011, 2020), we believe that we do. Moreover, we believe that this “new psychology” is especially important for leadership of HROs — where “old psychologies” have provided a pathway only to disappointment.

This conviction derives from the fact that classical and contemporary understandings of leadership have been constrained by individualistic framing which sees the source of effective leadership as residing largely (if not wholly) within the psychology of the leader. In very basic terms, this means that the psychology of leadership is widely seen as revolving around the “I-ness” of leaders — what it is that makes them different from, and that sets them apart, from followers. In contrast, we argue that leadership revolves around the “we-ness” of leaders and would-be followers and leaders’ ability to connect with those they seek to lead, and to be seen as having something in common with them. If, as Adair (2003) has observed, “the most important word in the leader’s vocabulary is ‘we’ and the least important word is ‘I’”, why is the psychology of leadership written largely in the first person singular?



This question assumes particular relevance when it comes to understanding leadership in the context of HROs. For as Weick and Roberts (1993) argue:

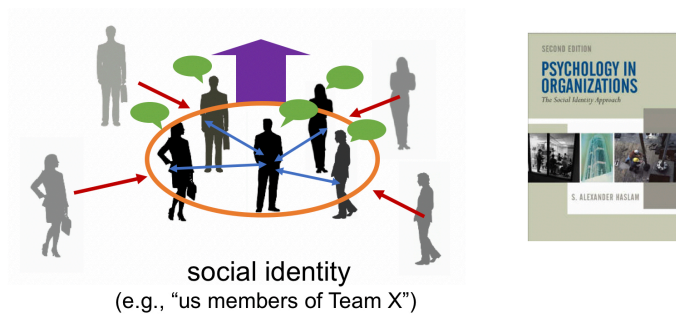
A well-developed organization mind, capable of reliable performance is thoroughly social. It is built of ongoing interrelating and dense interrelations. As people move toward individualism and fewer interconnections, organization mind is simplified and soon becomes indistinguishable from individual mind. With this change comes heightened vulnerability to accidents.

In short, a preoccupation with leaders' individuality and their (and others') 'I-ness' leads organisations away from high reliability. In contrast, zeroing in on we-ness — that is, social identity — leads them towards it (Haslam et al., 2003).

Why is social identity so important for leadership? As articulated by Turner (1982), the key reason is that, as we noted above, *leadership is a group process and* — as we saw in Part 1 — *social identity is what makes group processes possible*. Because this is such a pivotal point it's worth pausing for a moment to flesh it out with an example, albeit a rather mundane one. Imagine that you wanted to play a game of football as a member of a particular team (the blue team, say). What, psychologically, would allow you to do this? Turner (1982) argued that the answer hinges on your having the capacity to define yourself, and hence to behave, as a member of the blue team. That is, rather than simply seeing yourself and other team members as *individuals* (i.e., in terms of *personal identities*; e.g., as Alex, Bill, Cath), in order to have a meaningful game of football you need to be able to see yourself and fellow team members as exemplars of, and united by, membership of the same social category — in terms of your shared social identity as '*us blues*'. Amongst other things, then, it is your social identity as "me, the blue" that would mean you passed the ball to another blue player even if you didn't like them as an individual, and wouldn't pass to a red player, even if she were your best friend.

Importantly too, the internalisation of social identity provides the essential platform for a range of other psychological and behavioural phenomena that are critical to group success (e.g., in sporting and organisational contexts; Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2020). We hinted at some of these in Part 1, but as Figure 5 suggests, these include (a) a sense of *similarity and commonality* (i.e., a sense that members of your team, the *ingroup*, are 'in the same boat') and (b) a sense of *shared interest and purpose*. Moreover, these things in turn are a basis for (c) *information sharing and trust*, (d) *mutual influence* which serves to coordinate the thinking and action of ingroup members (but not of an *outgroup*; e.g., reds), and (e) *heedful inter-relating* with reference to emergent group norms that advances the perceived interests of the group as a whole (Bisbey et al., 2021).

Figure 5: Products of social identity that are essential for HROs (e.g., as reviewed by Haslam, 2004)



underpins

- a sense of **connection and similarity**
- a sense of **shared interest and purpose**
- **trust and information sharing**
- capacity for **mutual influence** (particularly as associated with both leadership and followership)
- **heedful inter-relating** with reference to emergent group norms (e.g., those that support high-reliability) to advance the group as a whole.

The latter point is particularly important for leadership, because, as we also noted above, at heart, this is an *influence process* in which leaders inspire other group members to act in the interest of the group. More generally too, we can see that the various things that flow from social identity are critical to organisational performance — especially of a form that creates and sustains HROs. For example, they were all very much at play on the aircraft carriers studied by Weick and Roberts (1993). Moreover, a wealth of other research points to the specific role that shared social identity plays in supporting and sustaining a reliable safety culture in hospitals, on construction sites, and a range of other domains (e.g., Andersen et al., 2015, 2018; Bisbey et al., 2021).

We can see this by reflecting again on our football example and considering how social identity not only structures perceptions (so that Sam reacts to other players as ‘one of us’ or ‘one of them’) but also determines behaviour and behavioural expectations. Imagine too that we are not just talking about ‘any old’ team, but an elite team — like the Matildas or the Hockeyroos — for whom errors can be disastrous (Charlesworth, 2001; Slater & Barker, 2019). Here not only does shared social identity determine who Sam would pass the ball to and who she would expect to pass the ball to her, but also who she would develop and discuss tactics with, who she would look out for on and off the field, who she would confide in and trust, who she would give instructions to, and who she would take instructions from (Rees et al., 2015). The more general point is that social identity serves to determine both who we influence and who we are influenced by (Turner, 1991). More specifically, the capacity for another person to influence us in ways that shape our behaviour (e.g., behaviour which supports high reliability) depends critically upon that person being seen to embody a social identity that we share (Turner & Haslam, 2001). So too does the capacity for us to influence them (e.g., when someone in a junior position suggests to someone more senior that “we have a problem”).

What a social identity analysis suggests, then, is that the leadership capacity of HROs is fundamentally grounded in people’s sense of shared social identity. In the case of our football team, for example, it’s a fairly obvious (but routinely overlooked) point that the individuals who will influence and motivate us — that is, the people whose leadership we will respond to enthusiastically — will need to be on our team. Moreover, they are more likely to be seen as a good leader and to be effective in that role the more they are seen to represent and promote the interests of that team (Steffens et al., 2021).

This analysis also speaks to the problem that all too often in organisations and institutions, the agents of change (not least, those who design and implement high-reliability policy) appear to people on the ground to

be working for a different team — for the reds, if you will, rather than the blues (Andersen et al., 2015; Chassin & Loeb, 2013; Edmondson, 2004). For example, in their investigation of safety-related behaviour of work teams on construction sites, Andersen et al. (2015) observed:

The crews perceived management of the employing company to be an outgroup. The work crew very often perceived the site managers as one social category, often labelled 'they' and often described in a sarcastic way, e.g. as the 'fine gentlemen' or the 'royal visitors', which reframes the management's higher status at the construction site to be the opposite: ridiculous and conceited, unaware of what the real work is like on the site. (p. 646)

To the extent that 'us-them' dynamics of this form prevail in organisations, they are obviously a major impediment to the engaged followership that is needed to translate leaders' aspirations for high-reliability into the concerted and motivated forms of social action that make this a reality (e.g., as extensively documented in the HRO literature after Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2011).

Importantly, these are not just interesting theoretical ideas. There is a large scientific literature that bears them out. To give just one example that speaks to the significance of shared social identity for leadership, an archival analysis of the formal election speeches of prime ministerial candidates found that 34 of the 43 federal elections that were held in Australia between 1901 and 2012 (i.e., 80%) were won by the leader who referred to 'we' and 'us' most frequently in their speech (Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Indeed, winners of elections used collective pronouns about twice as frequently as losers (once every 79 words vs. once every 136 words). Relatedly, a recent archival study of reports authored by 73 CFOs of companies listed on the DAX (the German Stock Exchange) found that each collective pronoun that appeared in the company's financial reports added €820k (A\$1.23m) to the future value of the company (Fladerer et al., 2021). In contrast, when leaders used personal pronouns this added no value at all.

There are two significant dimensions to such findings. The first is that leaders who speak to, and for, shared social identity (i.e., a common sense of 'us-ness') are more likely to exert influence over the groups they lead. The second is that this in turn is more likely to advance the group towards valued outcomes (e.g., winning elections, providing a return to shareholders). Importantly too, the work of Weick and Roberts (1993) suggests that this is no less true — and in fact may be more true — where the outcomes in question relate to high reliability. For here, as we noted above, collective mind ('we-ness') is observed to be the foundation upon which reliability-enhancing heedful interrelating is built.

More generally, what emerges from the broader corpus of social identity research on leadership is that people are motivated to follow and engage with the mission of leaders who are seen to *create, advance, represent* and *embed* (i.e., *care about*) the social identities that matter to them (Haslam, 2011; Steffens et al., 2014). Indeed, just as shared social identity is what makes group behaviour possible (Turner, 1982), so too it is what makes leadership and HROs possible (Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2003). Put another way, *without social identity, there can be no leadership and there can be no highly reliable organisation*. Accordingly, a core task for would-be leaders is to mobilise this through what have been termed acts of *identity entrepreneurship* (i.e., the cultivation of a sense of 'us'; Reicher et al., 2005) and *identity impresarioship* (i.e., activities that translate a sense of 'us' into material reality; Haslam et al., 2011). In short, in order to succeed in creating HROs, leaders *at every level of the organisation* need to turn the idea of 'us' into a psychological and material force that serves to embed high-reliability goals and practices within the groups and organisation they lead.

## Developing identity leadership in HROs: A 5R framework

Having made the case for the importance of identity leadership as a platform for the development of HROs, the next obvious question is whether these insights can actually be used to help people become better leaders on the ground. Put simply, can we leverage our appreciation of the nature and importance of identity leadership as the basis for practical leader development?



Efforts to answer this question have been the focus of concerted research efforts over the last decade. In particular, researchers at the University of Queensland have worked with colleagues around the world to develop and test a *5R Leadership Development Program* that centres on a structured set of modules in which participants — who have leadership roles at all levels of an organisation — not only learn about identity leadership but are helped to put theory into practice by working closely with the groups for which they have leadership responsibility. The programme can be adapted, and has been used, to address a range of challenges across a wide range of sectors. The structure of an adaptation designed to support leadership for HROs is presented in Figure 6. Note, however, that the specifics of any such programme would need to be honed through a co-production process that involves relevant parties in a given organisation or industry, and further refined on the basis of ongoing empirical research.

## Readying

The 5R program starts with a *Readying* session in which participants learn about the importance of group and social identity processes for leadership. In effect, this is an introduction to the ideas that we have outlined above. This ensures that participants are ‘on the same page’ and that they understand the logic that informs subsequent phases of the program. Although experience suggests that this introduction makes a lot of sense to participants, it is important precisely because it relates to a ‘new psychology’ whose formal principles are likely to be unfamiliar to them. In particular, this is because the messaging around the 5R program is very different from that of other leadership programs to which participants may have been exposed previously — where (as we have noted) the focus is typically on the psychology (and behaviour) of participants *as individuals* rather than as group members.

Figure 6: A 5R framework for leadership to support high-reliability



## Reflecting

The practical component of the program then starts with a *Reflecting* module. This explains why it is important for leaders to try to identify and understand the social identities that are important for members of the groups they want to lead. So, rather than making assumptions about “who we are” (e.g., in ways that organisational charts and organograms typically do), the onus here is on would-be leaders finding this out by talking to people and getting a sense of the way they actually see their social world. A central activity here is *social identity mapping* (Bentley et al., 2020; Cruwys et al., 2016). This involves asking people to generate a map of the groups that are important for them in the organisational context where the program is being conducted (e.g., a particular mine, or a particular hospital) and to characterise the relationship between those groups and their experience of them. Importantly, when people go through this process, this provides

those who are trying to lead them with insight into subjective representations of the key identity-based relations that are likely to impinge upon, and structure, reliability-relevant behaviour in the context in question (Peters et al., 2013). For example, before trying to lead a given group it can be instructive for a would-be leader to see which groups participants see as important and how much (or how little) participants identify with those groups (rather than with others). In this way the process helps to identify the key group memberships that are important for people in a given context, and allows leaders to develop an integrative understanding of “our” social identities that is much more faithful to people’s lived experience — and hence psychologically much more informative — than the formalised representations that they are often encouraged to work with in such contexts.

At the end of the Reflecting module, participants are encouraged to work with the teams for which they have responsibility and take their members through the same mapping process. In this way leaders gain some practical experience of identifying, and engaging with, the social identities that matter for the people they want to lead. Although the prospect of doing this is sometimes daunting, leaders — and their fellow team members — generally report finding this activity both enjoyable and useful. Not least, this is because it provides a basis for having meaningful group discussions about exactly ‘who we are’. Such discussions are fundamental not only to followers’ ability to develop a sense of place and belonging, but also to their well-being and sense of purpose (Haslam, et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2012).

## Representing

After they have done this, leaders then report back on their experiences at the start of the next module and use information from the maps as a platform for the next stage of the 5R process: *Representing*. This phase emphasises the importance of *group voice* for effective group engagement and draws on research which shows that people are much more willing to embrace a sense of shared identity when this is something that they have helped to create (rather than have imposed upon them; Eggins et al., 2003). In particular, the module shows how leaders can help to build team cohesion by working with the different groups that have been identified as important in the previous phase to clarify (a) their values and aspirations and (b) the behaviours that members want to define them. Amongst other things, participants work through exercises that encourage them to think about what makes their group special and about what distinguishes it positively from other relevant groups — thereby increasing the fit of shared social identity (Oakes et al., 1994).

## Realizing

Participants then come back for the third module to address the challenges of *Realising*. The focus here is on processes of *participative group goal setting* in which leaders bring members of different groups together (a) to identify goals associated with their shared identity, (b) to identify obstacles that interfere with the achievement of these goals, and (c) to develop strategies and plans that align these goals with higher-level organisational objectives that support high reliability. The specifics of this session are informed by research which shows that groups are far more likely to persevere in their pursuit of goals (and hence ultimately achieve them) if these are goals they have agreed upon together and hence collectively ‘own’ (Wegge & Haslam, 2003). Indeed, this proves to be especially important if those goals are challenging, as they are when an organisation is striving for high reliability (Haslam et al., 2003). In line with core social identity principles that we outlined in Part 1 as well as other well-tested organisational theory (e.g., Locke & Latham, 1990), the workshop also encourages leaders to help groups develop strategies and plans that are RITE (i.e., realistic, implementable, timely and engaging).

Once more, having reflected on these activities in the module, participants then go back to their groups and run through them with them. Where there are multiple groups that would-be leaders have responsibility for (as identified by the mapping process), leaders are also encouraged to first work through the activities with different groups separately before then bringing all groups (or their chosen representatives) together to present their ideas to each other and then work on developing *higher-order* goals, strategies and plans. Importantly, the value of this sequencing is supported by empirical studies which show that members of

disparate groups are much more likely to acknowledge and embrace a sense of shared superordinate identity — and engage in identity-enhancing behaviour (notably of a form that supports high reliability) if they have developed this ‘bottom up’ in ways that not only give voice to distinct lower-level identities but also allow that voice to be heard and acted upon (Eggin et al., 2008; Peters et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2014).

## Reinforcing

After they have done this with their groups, participants then return for a *Reinforcing* module. This provides an opportunity for leaders to feed back about their groups’ progress towards the goals they have previously set with a view to ‘closing the loop’ and ensuring that the lessons, activities, and objectives of the 5R program are embedded in group and organisational practice. This session also allows leaders to discuss their program-related experiences and provides a platform for ongoing group and organisational activity.

A key message here is that 5R is not a set of discrete activities that, once performed, ensure leadership success and high reliability in the present and on into the future. Instead, it is designed to expose leaders who genuinely want to know how to engage more constructively with the groups they lead to a new framework for thinking and behaving in relation to those groups and their members—a framework that encourages them to integrate insights gleaned from social identity research into their ongoing activity in leadership roles. In this, too, it speaks to meta-analytic evidence that, to be successful, leadership programs need (a) to be demanding for participants, (b) to involve action not just thought, (c) to be conducted in the contexts where leaders actually operate (i.e., on-site rather than off-site), (d) to have clear activities and purpose, and (e) to involve engagement with the people who are actually being led (Day et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2015; Hodgkinson et al., 2006; West et al., 2014; Westfall, 2019). Rather than wafting leaders off to a luxury resort to reflect at leisure on their own leadership styles and hang ups (something which may be fun but is unlikely to improve their leadership), the program encourages them to get their hands dirty doing complex work at the collective coalface. Indeed, recognizing that many people who find themselves in leadership positions are inherently fearful of group encounters, more than anything else, 5R seeks simply to give leaders the *confidence* to initiate meaningful conversation and collaboration with their colleagues, and build the trust and open communication upon which high-reliability is founded (Edmondson, 2004; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

## Evidence of 5R’s efficacy

But does 5R work? Over the past few years this is a question that we and others have sought to address in a range of studies that have subjected the programme to empirical test. The first major study was conducted with senior allied health professionals in Queensland and found that participation in 5R led to a significant increase in leaders’ assessments of their ability to engage in identity leadership and also served to increase their goal clarity and group identification (Haslam et al., 2017). Moreover, statistical analysis indicated that this was more true, the more participants reported engaging with the program and the activities that it encouraged. At the same time too, participation did not affect participants’ leadership ambitions in the abstract. Indeed, on the contrary, taking part in the program led to a significant *reduction* in leaders’ desire to advance their personal interests at the expense of their group’s interests.

These patterns are significant because they indicate that the program had an impact on participants’ perceived capacity to build a sense of shared identity with their teams while at the same time *not* fuelling a sense that they were, thereby, great leaders. The latter finding is particularly noteworthy because other commentators have observed that leadership training programs routinely cultivate a sense of superiority among participants that actually compromises their capacity to lead (Bennis, 1999; Kellerman, 2012). In this way, 5R can be seen as an antidote to the individualistic pitfalls that we identified earlier (e.g., as discussed by Weick & Roberts, 1993) in so far as it cultivates respect for the group rather than hubristic indifference.

On the back of this first study, other research teams have provided equally positive evidence of 5R’s efficacy but with other groups in quite different contexts. For example, In Britain, Slater and Barker (2019) tested a variant of the program over a period of two years with leaders of the national paralympic football team. And

in Belgium, Fransen and colleagues ran trials of 5R with professional and semi-professional basketball, soccer and volleyball teams (Fransen, McEwan, et al., 2020; Mertens et al., 2020). Both research teams found that 5R led to significant increases in social identification among staff, and also to increases in the degree to which athletes themselves felt that their leaders were displaying identity leadership. Significantly too, Slater and Barker found evidence of increased commitment to group goals in so far as the program led to an increase in the number of hours of practice that those athletes completed away from training camps. Critically, these findings speak to the fact that *the 5R program is beneficial not only for the leaders who take part in it but also for the teams they lead*. Importantly too, these patterns have been confirmed in more recent studies using randomised control designs — a level of empirical scrutiny to which other leadership programmes are almost never subjected (Day et al., 2014).

Empirical evidence of the utility of a 5R framework in helping specifically to support HROs has also been provided by studies of medical personnel working in high-stress military theatres around the world (Peters & Haslam, 2018), water engineers working in rural Queensland (Gopinathan, 2017) and air traffic controllers and managers in the construction industry around Australia (McMillan et al., 2018). All of these studies provide evidence of the value of 5R as a platform for leaders to build a sense of shared identity with those they lead and then leverage that shared identity in ways that support the embedding of consensually valued safety behaviour across the teams they lead. Their findings also align with other meta-analytic evidence of the capacity for programmes that build social identity to produce increases in organisational citizenship, performance, and health (Riketta, 2005; Steffens et al., 2019). Interestingly too, a recent systematic review suggests that leaders whose actions have aligned with principles of identity leadership 5R have generally done a better job of helping their fellow citizens safely through the COVID-19 pandemic than those whose actions have been informed by traditional models (Haslam et al., 2021). Indeed, this research speaks to fact that social identity principles provide the framework not just for a new psychology of leadership but also for a *new psychology of health* (Haslam et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

As Edmondson (2004) observes, leaders who are looking to set their organisation on a course towards the elimination of accidents face immense challenges. High reliability is a lot easier said than done. As she and others have noted, a key reason for this is that many would-be high-reliability entities (e.g., hospitals, construction sites, mines) are extremely hierarchical and conceptualise and enact leadership as an “I-focused’ authoritarian exercise in command and control. As noted above, this often contributes to an ‘us-them’ dynamic — and an associated sense of psychological distance between leaders and followers — which ultimately means that those on the frontline have little motivation or interest in aligning their reliability-related behaviour with the injunctions of the organisation’s leadership (Andersen, 2015, 2018). Here, as Andersen observes:

Crew members [perceive] management as having meaningless and irrelevant safety goals, as well as having an ... unsuccessful strategy for motivating others. Management is often perceived as a group of academics, not knowing much about the real work tasks, risks and working conditions for the crew. (2015, p. 647)

At the same time, though, research shows that this problematic sense of psychological distance is not an inevitable consequence of hierarchy per se. In particular, the work of Edmondson (2004) and Weick and Roberts (1993) shows that, hierarchical organisations (e.g., hospitals, aircraft carriers) are capable of achieving a sense of collective mind that supports safety and reliability. However, as Edmondson (2004, p.87) concludes, understanding and tackling this appears to require a *group-level analysis and strategy* rather than (just) an individual-level or a structural approach. The 2-SIM-HRO provides this. Importantly too, it also points to ways in which a 5R framework that focuses on *developing and realising a sense of shared social identity* can be an important vehicle for the co-development and delivery of organisation-level solutions to otherwise intractable problems of poor reliability.

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