Courtesy of James Buckle

James Buckle, middle, with his family.

Culture shift

The importance of fostering a speak-up culture to promote inclusion and psychological safety in the workplace

By Mackenzie Patterson

Now a well-respected mining industry leader, James Buckle has come a long way from his checkered past. In the 1990s, after nearly 20 years of serving as a police officer with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP)—including a decade working undercover on high-profile drug and homicide cases—Buckle had hit rock bottom.

Due to the pressures of the job, his mental health had been unravelling for years, and he was on the verge of a breakdown.

He had developed behavioural issues due to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and was using his job as an undercover police officer as an outlet to act out and chase an adrenaline rush. Dubbed "the rogue cop" by the media, he was facing a slew of criminal charges relating to an incident of arson at a North Bay evidence room.

He was later dismissed from his role as a detective constable with the OPP after being found guilty of four counts of discreditable conduct under the Police Services Act, including the inappropriate use of service credit cards and providing false receipts for reimbursement claims.

Buckle had lost his job, his reputation and his home, and his relationship with his family was breaking down.

At his lowest point, he was ready to end his life and had a plan in place: the note written, a location chosen, the gun secured. If his wife had not intervened, he would have gone through with it.

"The day came that I was going to do it, and I bumped into my wife as I was leaving. I told her, 'I came up with this plan. I'm going to kill myself. I'll leave a note. You guys know where to find me,' and she just broke down," Buckle said. "This was my mindset at the time—I had just given her the best plan. I gave her the solution to get through this nightmare. I couldn't understand why she was so upset."

Once his wife had convinced him not to go through with his plan, he sought help from a psychiatrist, who diagnosed him with PTSD. It was the wake-up call he needed: from there, he began the long road to recovery through regular counselling, healthy lifestyle changes and a new career path in the mining industry. The changes did not happen overnight—Buckle had to work hard and stay disciplined to overcome his mental health struggles—but more than 20 years later, he said he is mentally strong enough to deal with life's challenges as they come.

Although he believes that the conversation around mental health has opened up over the course of his 24-year career in the mining industry, Buckle said there is still plenty of room for improvement.

"If I didn't speak up, I wouldn't be here today," Buckle said. "The messaging needs to be that it's okay to speak up, that mental illness is a serious thing, and we need to address it. If we want to be [a] world-class organization—doesn't matter if it's [in] mining, teaching, policing—we have to get serious about it."

A positive "speak-up culture" is a major component of creating psychological safety in the workplace. In a 2023 *Harvard Business Review* article, author and speaker Amy Gallo defined psychological safety as "a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK [sic] to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes—all without fear of negative consequences."

Without psychological safety, employees may not feel safe enough to speak up about sensitive issues like mental health or abuse.

Breaking the silence

In a webinar held on Jan. 30 about applying speak-up culture best practices to the mining industry, Audrey Hlembizky, the CEO and founder of TeamsynerG Global Consulting—a firm that works with several sectors, including mining, to help create more ethical and sustainable industries—said that it is still commonplace for

people in the mining industry to avoid reporting bullying, abuse or mistreatment in the workplace due to fear of repercussions.

Hlembizky referenced the Mental Awareness, Respect and Safety (MARS) Program Landmark Study: Workplace Policy and Practice Survey released in October 2023, which surveyed 2,550 mine workers from Western Australia to gain an understanding of how they view mental health in their industry. The survey found that safety incidents are still underreported, and bullying is widespread—almost a quarter of women and 11 per cent of men said that they had been bullied in the workplace "at least two to three times per month or more frequently in the past six months."

"There are many reasons why a speak-up culture is sometimes difficult," Hlembizky said. "Some of the reasons behind claim and reporting suppression have been that people are connecting or disconnecting with a [workplace] culture, but primarily because there are decisions that are being made that are unjust."

She said that when leadership does not hold people accountable for inappropriate behaviour in the workplace, or deal with conflict fairly, employees are discouraged from speaking up about their issues. In other words, if they have witnessed leadership not taking complaints seriously in the past, workers will learn to stay silent in case their concerns are ignored, or worse—punished.

Hlembizky said that according to Sharon Parker, chief investigator of the MARS Program Landmark Study, building a true speak-up culture requires developing a culture that values mental health as much as it does physical health. To do this, companies in the mining and resources industry will need to not only update their policies and standards, but more importantly, mitigate what Hlembizky called "psychosocial hazards" such as bullying and harassment to strengthen psychological safety.

Taking action

It was her own experiences of psychosocial hazards that led geologist Susan Lomas—who has worked in exploration and mining for several decades—to launch Me Too Mining Association in 2018. The organization, which changed its name in 2022 to the Mine Shift Foundation, was created to start the conversation around all forms of harassment in the industry and offer training and guidance to mining professionals.

One of the training workshops Mine Shift offers is a bystander intervention program called DIGGER, the acronym encompassing: direct action; indirect action; get a co-worker; get an authority; engage the target; and finally, record and report.

"The most impactful thing you can do when you see something inappropriate happening is to go talk to the person—engage the target—because there are so many psychological challenges that are happening to that person in the moment: they're questioning 'What just happened? Did I do this?' They're actively denying that this is happening to them," Lomas said. "To go up and say to somebody, 'I just saw what happened to you. I'm really sorry. What can I do to help?' Right away, not all, but a lot of those psychological impacts are dissipating."

To create real and lasting change in the mining industry, Lomas emphasized the importance of involving third-party organizations that can provide support and accountability without bias, whether it is in the form of counselling or an external whistleblower hotline.

"But what we really want to do is change the culture so that we're not having these incidents happen in the first place," she said.

Building a safer culture

Julie Butcher, the vice-president of consulting practice at Refinery Leadership Partners—a human resources consulting firm based in Vancouver—said that creating a psychologically safe workplace is no longer a nice-to-have, but a need-to-have for mining industry leaders. She believes that over the past few years, Refinery's clients have developed a greater awareness of psychological safety and its connection to physical safety, but that there is still more work to do in terms of developing a holistic strategy around mental health and wellness.

"There are a lot of different functional groups being more aware and trying to do something, but I think the challenge is that it's not integrated," Butcher said. "There isn't a strategic view of how safety, DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion], leadership and organizational development activities are all speaking the same language. There are a lot of people that have the right ideas, and there's a notion towards how to influence culture, but it's still a very siloed approach."

Susan Eick, managing partner at Refinery Leadership Partners, said that building a more integrated approach starts with taking an honest look at the organization's current culture to assess the kind of changes that need to be made.

"I would say the starting place is to acknowledge the culture they have currently," she said. "There's a real need to say, 'Is our culture actually the type of culture that is supporting what we're trying to get to—where people do feel safe to speak up, call out incidents and have conversations?'"

From there, she suggested implementing tangible initiatives like safety and leadership training, employee surveys and data analysis to identify any gaps. Eick also emphasized the importance of designing a cohesive message or statement around psychological safety and mental well-being, and being deliberate about how that message is conveyed to employees throughout the company journey.

Buckle's story is just one example of how fostering a "speak-up culture" at home and in the workplace could be lifesaving. With years of experience working in policing, mining and the military—notoriously male-dominated, "tough guy" industries—he now understands that the true sign of mental toughness is having the courage to talk to someone about your feelings instead of pushing them down.

Today, Buckle works as the manager of safety and training for an underground mining contractor, and enjoys spending his free time with his wife and four grandchildren. He is now a fierce advocate for speaking up about mental health issues and encouraging his colleagues in the mining industry to do the same.

Buckle believes that in the future, mental health supports will be viewed much the same way we view seatbelts or smoking laws today.

"I remember when they came up with seatbelts," he said. "I fought back on that. Now, I wouldn't think about starting my car without putting my seatbelt on. So, it's just about understanding and implementing new behaviours [when it comes to dealing with mental health issues]." CIM

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Away from home

The impact of fly-in, fly-out operations on mining workers and how to best support them

By Mackenzie Patterson

Courtesy of Francisco Valenzuela

Francisco Valenzuela, a safety advisor at Imperial Oil, launched the online platform fifo4real.ca, which includes educational content and resources aimed at building a mental-wellness culture for FIFO workers.

Francisco Valenzuela, a safety advisor at Imperial Oil with more than 25 years experience, has enjoyed the perks and suffered the trials of the fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) lifestyle.

As lucrative as it has been, he has seen the physical and emotional toll it can take on others and on himself. These common experiences inspired him to lend support to his fellow FIFO workers, whose unique routines and their impacts are getting more attention.

Valenzuela recounted how when he thought he had finally "made it" in the big oil industry, a coworker, who was a veteran of the industry, stated in a straightforward way, without a trace of spitefulness in his voice, that he was not there yet until he had "a divorce or two" under his belt.

"That will stick in my mind forever," Valenzuela said in an interview with *CIM Magazine*.

Although he dismissed it as a joke at the time, he said the statement rings true for him today, now that he has been through two divorces.

Spending lengthy stretches of time away from family members has one of the biggest impacts on mining workers' mental health and personal lives, but to attribute it as the only cause of familial issues would be an oversimplification. The time spent apart from family puts a strain on FIFO workers' interpersonal relationships, but according to Valenzuela, it can also be the time they spend back home—and the transition between the two vastly different lifestyles—that causes emotional wear and tear over time.

Valenzuela explained that in his own experience, while he may have been physically "there" with his family during his two weeks off, there was a palpable emotional disconnect that eventually began to weaken the bonds with his partner and children.

"It's tough because even before you leave home, you have to start preparing yourself, so you disconnect a little bit ahead of time," he said. "So, you lose maybe a day and a half, two days together, because you've already started to disconnect from your partner. That way, it doesn't hurt so much when you leave."

Valenzuela added that another challenge of flip-flopping between working and living on site and returning home to family life is the vast difference in communication styles between the two environments.

"When you're at work, you're in a high-performing environment with less emotions used in decision making, and your patience is different," he said. "And the other aspect of it is, [when] you leave work, you're in that high-energy, assertive mode, and then you come home, and all of a sudden, now you have to soften those edges a little bit. And it's hard."

For the family that is left behind, it can also be difficult adjusting to having their partner around constantly—or not at all. While the worker is away, many family members eventually adapt to life without them, which means it can become almost disruptive for the two weeks they are back home, because they may not know all the ins and outs of the family's daily routine, or how certain chores are done around the house.

And then there is the issue of money, which is already one of the leading causes of divorce for couples. Valenzuela was the primary financial provider for his family, which he said ultimately led him to question his own place within the family unit: "You start to have all these little disconnects and resentments building up, and you start to feel like the dairy cow just being milked. Or some of us try to buy our way back into the good books, which then creates financial stress. A lot of people say, I'd quit, but I need the money, so we call it the golden handcuffs."

Major stressors

Many of the mental and social challenges Valenzuela mentioned have been reflected in research. Sara Dorow is a sociology professor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and the director of the school's International Institute for Qualitative Methodology. Along with Valerie O'Leary, a trained crisis and trauma responder, Dorow led the research for a study titled "Mobile Work and Mental Health: A Preliminary Study of Fly-in Fly-out Workers in the Alberta Oil Sands," which was published in October 2021.

One of the study's key findings was that distance and time spent away from home is the number one most stressful element of FIFO work, with 87 per cent of study participants reporting that it was the cause of some or a lot of their stress.

"The difficulty of establishing and maintaining relationships with family, feelings of loneliness, and the inability to be at home for family events or emergencies are significant stressors among FIFO workers," the study noted.

Living in camps was another major stressor for study participants, with 77 per cent citing it as the cause of some or a lot of their stress—this is due to a variety of factors like limited healthy food options, poor sleep or even a feeling of "entrapment" on site. In addition, 39 per cent of respondents said that transitioning between their work and home lives was difficult, which echoed many of Valenzuela's experiences.

For Dorow, one of the most surprising findings of the study was that 57 per cent of workers who had access to healthcare services while on rotation were unlikely to use them, while 80 per cent reported "working when sick," and a third reported not taking time off if they had been injured.

"I had not anticipated how many would say [they] will not use health services on site, or even in town, because of the fear that they'll be seen as weak. The fear that [for contract workers] it'll be like, oh, you've got health issues, so we're not sure if you'll be called back. There are all of these barriers to actually accessing health services while you're at work," Dorow said in an interview with *CIM Magazine*.

A mixed bag of emotions

Glenn Nolan is the vice president of Indigenous enterprises at Wyloo, which is currently developing its Eagle's Nest project in Ontario's Ring of Fire region. Part of the Missanabie Cree First Nation, Nolan's community has been involved in the mining industry for more than 80 years. He is a regular commentator on mental health issues and organized the panel on Indigenous workforce development and mental health resiliency at the 2024 Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) convention.

In an interview with *CIM Magazine*, he said that the experience of FIFO work brings with it a "mixed bag" of emotions, and that no two experiences will be exactly alike. For Indigenous workers in particular, the experience can be intertwined with generational trauma, adding an additional layer to a situation that is often emotionally charged to begin with.

"I think the commonality with many Indigenous people—in fact, I would say, almost all of us—is that our families have been traumatized for generations, and we are all survivors... My father's parents both went to residential schools, and they were traumatized by that experience. They downloaded a lot of that trauma onto my aunts and uncles and my father. In turn, he downloaded a lot of that trauma onto me and my siblings," he said.

Nolan said that mining companies need to find ways to support their Indigenous workforce by recognizing the historical context that influences their work experience and addressing individual needs with this background knowledge in mind.

To support workers' mental health needs, Wyloo offers an employee assistance program to all employees globally, in addition to in-house chaplain services, which provide non-denominational, non-religious spiritual care for life challenges, such as coping with loss and grief. It has also implemented a regular town hall to discuss mental health and "Mental Health Mondays," a weekly meeting for staff at its Esker site, during which the company shows an educational video and creates a welcoming space for discussion.

While Nolan acknowledged the reality that there is no ideal solution to address mental health issues among FIFO workers, he said companies need to be aware of their experiences and be prepared to support them.

"We don't have all the answers, but being aware of that is the biggest step forward," he said. "I'm not a counsellor, I just know that probably the biggest thing that we can do as a company is to have a support system in place."

Christine Korzenko, director of people and culture at Wyloo and a registered nurse by trade, said in an interview with *CIM Magazine* that employees have access to counselling through Wyloo's benefits package, but that the company also aims to maintain a culture of transparency and an open-door policy with its workers.

She added that not everyone will be negatively affected by FIFO work: "Some individuals really like the lifestyle. I find that the individuals that are single prefer it, because then when they're on their two weeks off, they can go and travel and do whatever it is that they want to do."

Finding community

After his second divorce in the summer of 2022, Valenzuela could no longer see a way out. Buried in despair, he found himself tying one end of his climbing rope to a bridge near his rental home, and the other to himself.

"Then I realized if I make that decision, that's a permanent decision during a temporary circumstance," he said.

Since that experience, Valenzuela has been focused on improving his mental health. He found support by connecting online with other men who had lived through similar experiences.

Valenzuela also launched fifo4real.ca, a community and online platform featuring content, resources, members' groups and support groups specifically geared towards the unique challenges of FIFO work.

"If I hadn't shared my story, my vulnerability, my pain, nobody else would have shared with me. Now, we're on this journey together—we are a community. We are a big FIFO family across the world," he said.

In its executive summary, the University of Alberta study noted that industries that are reliant on FIFO workers should "act immediately and on many fronts to better understand, prevent and provide resources and support for mental health challenges faced by mobile workers and their families."

For Valenzuela, this starts with creating an open dialogue. He believes that reducing the stigma surrounding mental health issues through community, conversation and connection is something that everyone can work on, not just industry leaders. Dorow and O'Leary echoed this statement, noting that their research was just the first step towards improving the situation for mobile workers and their families.

"In some ways, this research is a way to more systematically confirm what we know is happening," Dorow said. "But we need to have a more systematic understanding of the problems to make an impact and have the issues be heard. We need to make sure this is on the radar as an important issue to kickstart the conversation and the understanding." CIM

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Courtesy of Nutrien

Nutrien provides regular training sessions for its emergency response teams, which cover first aid, firefighting techniques, confined space rescue and other topics, and it has recently expanded its training to cover mental health.

Caring for responders

Nutrien offers mental health training for its emergency response teams

By Tijana Mitrovic

Responding to emergencies when friends, family and coworkers are involved can have a significant impact on mental health, said Katie Breeze, senior manager of safety and health at Nutrien, who has seen the toll it takes on her colleagues.

"Any traumatic event can create a strong emotional reaction that has the potential to cause harm, and we know that it's even stronger when you know the person [involved]," explained Breeze in an interview with *CIM Magazine*. "A lot of times in our small communities, [our coworkers] are family, are friends, your kids go to school with their kids, and so there are many connections. There is a greater potential for impact when you know them, especially when we don't get the desired outcome [in an incident]."

Last year, Saskatoon-based Nutrien—which employed 24,700 people worldwide in 2023 and is the world's largest producer of potash—piloted its new mental health training for its emergency response teams (ERTs) at its Cory potash mine in Saskatchewan.

Trevor Hallborg, the emergency response and safety coordinator at Cory, oversees the site's five surface ERTs and five mine rescue teams. He requested the training after witnessing how his team was affected by responding to calls that involved people they knew, he told *CIM Magazine* in an interview.

"[It's] something that we can help them better prepare for because the more you're prepared for something, the easier it is to go through it," Hallborg said.

While the ERTs undergo physical and technical training to be able to respond to an incident, Breeze said that Hallborg's request made Nutrien consider how to improve the mental preparation of emergency first responders called to the scene of an incident.

"When I talk to the emergency responders, they say, 'That's my job, we're the ones that are going in to help, don't worry about me,'" Breeze explained. "But it's *our* job to look after [them] as well."

Building the curriculum

When creating the training, Nutrien engaged local mental health professionals who specialize in workplace mental health training. Hallborg worked with them to create a three-module training over four hours that helps first responders prepare mentally for an emergency, explains the emotions and feelings

they might experience during an emergency and teaches them how to address those feelings afterwards.

The training is delivered in person by facilitators and the ERTs work through case studies and problem-solving with them. "We have been very deliberate in doing [the training] in person so that [the employees] can ask questions," Breeze explained.

One of the most important ideas that the training emphasizes is ensuring that people are emotionally prepared to respond to an emergency. "If you have something that's [affecting you], it might not be good for you to go and expose yourself to something [potentially traumatic]," Breeze explained. "When you are responding to a physical emergency, you want to go in and help the person, but you also don't want to put yourself at risk doing so."

The training also covers tools to manage emotions during a response and the importance of zeroing in on your focus and compartmentalization, or what Breeze described as "not letting those [emotions] come to the surface right away and just going into action mode." The post-incident module of the training covers building psychological resiliency, as well as tools to take care of mental health and well-being. A post-incident questionnaire about the responder's mental state is also sent out two to three weeks after responding to an incident, which can prompt a follow up from Nutrien's health and safety team.

After finalizing the training content, Hallborg and the team invited some of Nutrien's safety people and management from the other potash sites to sit in on the training and later presented it to the company's senior leadership and executive teams. In 2023, 39 people at the Cory site—including emergency first responders and some management—completed the training.

A piece of a larger program

Now that training has been completed by all of the ERTs at Cory, Nutrien is currently rolling out the training at its other potash mine sites. Hallborg has been closely involved in the process, which included sending delegates from each site to the company's head office so that they could take the training session and give feedback on it.

"There was some feedback after each component [of the training] to see if we want to tweak this, change that, and it was really good back and forth from [everyone] to hone it and develop it more for a broader spectrum of mine sites," Hallborg said.

Other employees might also be good candidates for the training: Breeze said that 16 people they trained in 2024 are part of Nutrien's human resources (HR) department. "We wanted HR to be included in the training as they typically support the families when there is an incident. And so it's a different kind of exposure: they are not usually seeing the event, but they are experiencing it through the eyes of the family," she said. According to Breeze, there are also discussions at the Cory site about expanding the training to front line supervisors since they are often one of the first ones on the scene during an incident.

The training is the latest initiative at Nutrien focused on mental health. "Traditionally when we thought about safety, it was more the physical side of things," Breeze said. "But it's really [about the] overall health and wellness of our employees. It's both physical and mental health. We see it as one."

A decade ago, Nutrien developed an introduction to mental health course for its employees, which provides a base understanding of mental health and teaches the importance of coping strategies, managing stress and more. According to Breeze, the company plans to put all employees at its potash sites—over 3,000 people—through the training and 85 to 90 per cent of them have completed it to date. Nutrien also has a volunteer peer support group whose members are trained in mental health first aid and help connect employees who are struggling with mental health with the appropriate resources.

Courtesy of Nutrien

Aside from regular training, the emergency response teams at Nutrien are also sent a post-incident questionnaire to determine if they need follow-up support.

Hallborg said that the mental health training for ERTs has been very well received and that he sees its impact on the emergency first responders. "We have had some incidents since the training and it has really changed the mind frame of the responders before they even get to the scene," he said. "[They ask] is everybody good, is everybody ready? How are you, what state are you in right now? And then after [an incident], they are looking out for each other. Days or even weeks later, there are check-ins and accountability with each other to ensure that everyone is in a good state. There is [now] some really good communication that happens after [an incident], some comments that I don't think people would be comfortable talking about unless they had that training."

Cody Johnson, mine maintenance heavy duty supervisor and mine rescue member at Cory, said that the training opened his eyes to how mental health affects everyone. "[Going] through the training, you realize that what you think somebody is going through is not always what they are going through," he said in an interview with *CIM Magazine*. "The mental health side of it was a huge learning curve for me. It was an eye-opener that we all need help in one way or another."

The changes have reverberated to Nutrien's head office as well. "If something happens, [our sites] are phoning and are [asking] to do a mental health debrief," Breeze explained. "We're seeing a lot of culture change, making sure that we are recognizing that people might need some extra help."

Johnson said that the mental health training has improved camaraderie at work: "At Cory, we're all there for the same reason and we all try to keep each other safe. So I think it impacted our site for sure." CIM

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