



Chemeca2026
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28 – 30 September 2026
Melbourne, Australia



*Chemeca 2026 and Hazards Australasia
28 – 30 September, Melbourne, Australia*

Leadership at the Sharp End of Risk: Strengthening Executive Oversight of Major Hazards

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ABSTRACT

Major accident events in the process industries have repeatedly demonstrated that catastrophic incidents rarely occur solely due to technical failures. Instead, they often emerge from organisational weaknesses in leadership, decision making, and risk governance. Effective management of major hazards therefore requires not only robust engineering safeguards but also strong leadership commitment and oversight.

Senior leaders play a critical role in shaping organisational priorities, allocating resources, and reinforcing expectations around risk management. However, many executives face challenges in maintaining visibility of major accident risks within complex organisations where operational pressures and competing priorities can obscure emerging vulnerabilities.

This presentation explores the role of executive leadership in strengthening major hazard management within high hazard industries. Drawing on practitioner experience from operating environments including mining, utilities, logistics, and chemical manufacturing, the paper examines how leadership behaviours, governance structures, and organisational culture influence the effectiveness of process safety systems.

The discussion highlights practical mechanisms for improving executive oversight of major hazards, including the use of meaningful process safety indicators, structured assurance processes, and clearer accountability for critical risk controls. The importance of leadership engagement with frontline operations is also examined, particularly in ensuring that senior decision makers maintain a realistic understanding of operational risks.

As regulatory frameworks across Australasia increasingly emphasise the responsibility of senior leaders in managing catastrophic risks, organisations must strengthen the capability of executives to understand and govern major hazard exposures. The insights presented aim to support leaders seeking to build stronger alignment between organisational strategy, operational performance, and the prevention of catastrophic events.

KEY WORDS

Process Safety Leadership, Major Hazard Governance, Executive Oversight, Organisational Safety Culture, Major Accident Prevention

BIOGRAPHY

Ardi Sastrohartoyo is a Chartered Chemical Engineer (CEng MIChemE) and Certified OHS Professional with over 20 years of experience across the mining, utilities, logistics, and chemical manufacturing industries. He currently serves as the Manufacturing and EHSQ Manager for Kemira Australia and also holds a regional role as Manager APAC – Process Safety and Risk Management. His work focuses on major hazard facility safety, operational risk management, and strengthening process safety leadership and organisational capability. Ardi is a Board Director of the Australian Organisation for Quality and a Guest Lecturer teaching Safety Management Systems in the postgraduate program at Monash University.

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