Auditing the vulnerability to failure pathway

An evidence-led exercise for auditing your own organisation through the Dark Pyramid framework.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What combination of conditions could allow serious organisational harm to develop, persist and escalate?

STAGE 1 · 5 MINUTES

01 Define the case you will audit

Choose a real organisation, division or organisational process that you know reasonably well (anonymise if you prefer).

Organisation / activity under review

Your vantage point (role / team / source of knowledge)

Plausible failures

Who might suffer the consequences?

02 How to work through the exercise 45 minutes

5 MIN	10 MIN	15 MIN	15 MIN	OPTIONAL
Frame	**Scan**	**Connect**	**Challenge**	**Debrief**

03 Use scores as prompts, not predictions

For each statement on page 2, circle a score and your confidence in that assessment. Use examples or evidence where you can; if you cannot judge, mark '?' rather than inventing a score.

0	1	2	3	4
Strong evidence of resilience	Mostly resilient; minor concern	Mixed evidence; potential vulnerability	Significant vulnerability	Serious vulnerability

Confidence: H = direct/repeated evidence; M = some evidence; L = impression or limited view. ? = unable to assess. Neither "?" nor low confidence is a low-risk score.

NOTE Do not disclose confidential information or identify colleagues.

Based on Stephenson, Bolden & Witzel (2026), The Dark Pyramid, *British Journal of Management*. doi:10.1111/1467-8551.70057. Scores indicate areas for inquiry, not a validated probability of failure.

STAGE 2 · 10 MINUTES

Rapid vulnerability scan

Circle one vulnerability score (0–4) or ? (unknown); then circle confidence H, M or L. Avoid adding up the scores.

Internal	People, power, culture and systems	SCORE	CONFIDENCE
I1	Powerful people can bypass normal challenge or controls.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
I2	Bad news is filtered, softened or delayed before reaching decision-makers.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
I3	Challenging influential colleagues could carry a personal or career cost.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
I4	Targets and incentives can make risky shortcuts attractive.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
I5	Complexity or organisational silos could allow serious problems to remain hidden.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L

External	Customers, investors, advisers and market expectations	SCORE	CONFIDENCE
E1	Outside stakeholders benefit from the organisation continuing to appear successful.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
E2	Dependence on key customers, investors, funders or suppliers shapes decisions.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
E3	Advisers or partners gain commercially or reputationally from the current strategy.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
E4	Critics and uncomfortable external voices are dismissed or discounted.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
E5	Competition or industry norms normalise behaviour that deserves questioning.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L

Regulatory	Boards, audit, assurance, compliance and formal regulators	SCORE	CONFIDENCE
R1	People expected to stop harmful conduct lack independence, information or authority.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
R2	Commercial priorities can override legal, professional or compliance concerns (Who pays the regulator? What are the pressures on them?).	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
R3	Oversight bodies rely on information selected or interpreted by management.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
R4	Responsibility for a key risk is fragmented, so everyone assumes someone else owns it.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L
R5	The organisation could meet formal requirements while still causing serious harm.	0 1 2 3 4 ?	H M L

After the scan

Mark the 2–3 items most likely to reinforce one another (not necessarily the highest scores).

Selected item codes (e.g. I4 + E2 + R3)	Key observation or evidence gap to investigate

Weak evidence is not evidence of resilience. These figures are not failure probabilities.

STAGE 3 · 15 MINUTES

Build the failure pathway

The goal is a credible explanation of how conditions interact - not three separate lists of problems. Select the conditions that form the most plausible harmful combination. Include at least two faces of the pyramid; use all three where relevant. An item can play more than one role.

FACE / ITEM	WHAT IS HAPPENING?	HOW DOES IT CONTRIBUTE?
Internal Code: _____		
External Code: _____		
Regulatory Code: _____		

Trace what happens and why

Give each link a mechanism

Use these as steps in a possible sequence, not as a rigid causal order. Label the relevant I / E / R items and describe how each step affects the next.

Trigger — What change, decision or pressure starts the process?

↓

Enables — What permits the problem to continue or remain hidden?

↓

Reinforces — What incentives, norms or interested parties amplify it?

↓

Fails to stop — Which gatekeeper or safeguard should interrupt it, and why might it not?

↓

Harm — What happens if the pathway continues? Who bears the consequences?

Make the interaction explicit

Repeat as necessary

Factor _____ strengthens factor _____ because:

A safeguard would interrupt that link if:

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STAGE 4 · 15 MINUTES

Test and interrupt the pathway

Challenge your assumptions, identify the outcomes and propose one credible intervention.

01 What are the risks? Not every category need apply. Specify the consequences that are plausible.

Economic / financial
Employees, customers, suppliers, investors, taxpayers

Human / social
Safety, wellbeing, communities, trust

Environmental
Pollution, resources, long-term impacts

Who receives the benefits?

Who bears the risks / costs?

02 Challenge the story before trusting it

Which assumption or missing evidence most threatens this explanation?

Whose perspective would/could reveal something different?

Do any current safeguards break the pathway or have the potential to do so? (if so, specify)

03 Break one link, not just one behaviour

Choose a practical change that weakens the combination you identified - for example, independent information, safer escalation, changed incentives or stronger scrutiny.

The link to interrupt (item codes)

Who could authorise or influence it?

One action / further measure

What evidence would show that the vulnerability has reduced?

04 Peer challenge / group discussion

In groups, explain your pathway without naming people or sharing confidential information. Ask: What supports it? What might disprove it? Where does one face amplify another? What protection should work but might not?

One takeaway: the area I would investigate further is

> If you identify a real, urgent concern, follow your organisation's appropriate reporting or safeguarding process.

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