



# COMMUNITY & SUPPORT

## In the Safety Profession

By Justin Moloczniak

**Occupational safety and health professionals are united by a common purpose: to protect people. But as many in this industry know, the work itself can feel isolating. Many professionals operate in teams of one.**

**In an environment** of competing priorities and interests, complex regulations, and high-stakes decisions, safety professionals can easily feel lost without a shared sense of purpose and support in the industry. To lessen feelings of isolation, it is vital to establish and maintain a professional community.

A great deal of research supports the role of community in safety culture (Schein, 2010; Teodoro & Giambò, 2022). Shared beliefs and norms guide behavior, strengthened by social interaction. This can be seen in relation to the workplaces supported by EHS, but what about the ability, as James Reason (1997) would ask, to collectively share knowledge, learn from failures, and reinforce common expectations within the industry and among peers? Community allows us to establish a shared emotional connection with individuals in our industry. It helps us validate the challenges and stressors we face and to fulfill basic needs such as safety and well-being. Furthermore, it helps build individual resilience as professionals and as leaders. Community is a space where one's existence as a safety professional is understood, with no explanation required.

The function and organization of a community is characterized by membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Communities can be defined in different ways (e.g., social, professional), and yet, a great deal of crossover exists in how different types of communities serve their members. A professional community such as ASSP can act as a conductor of shared knowledge and learning, but it can also facilitate belonging and meaningful connection. Such provisions are valuable to early-career professionals, underrepresented voices and professionals who often find themselves on the outside.

After holding the ASSP Region I professional development conference "Safe Work, Strong Voices: Women Innovating Health and Safety Solutions" and witnessing the power behind the Women in Safety Excellence Common Interest Group that powered this conference to fruition, I found my understanding and respect for professional

communities supercharged. In real time, I witnessed a community that supports its members' professional growth and reinforces their confidence, effectiveness and sustainability in their industry roles. It was incredible and at the same time humbling to acknowledge that so many communities like this exist within the EHS industry.

Within ASSP, community is created in many ways. Most individuals are connected geographically through their local chapters. Beyond that exists a connection to the region, where chapter leaders interact to serve the broader regional community. This leads into the society, where collectively members are served through the advisory board. Additionally, ASSP has common interest groups that can exist locally, regionally and nationally. These groups create an additional community of specific industry practice or shared relevance or experience. ASSP 2023-24 president Jim Thornton, CSP, CIH, FASSP, FAIHA, stated:

We (ASSP) promote collaboration and knowledge exchange through our chapters, common interest groups and practice specialties. Through our events and activities, we foster a sense of shared purpose. And by harnessing our collective expertise, we position ASSP as a strong advocate for industry advancements, a trusted advisor that influences regulatory and business decisions, and a key industry leader driving positive change. (Thornton, 2024)

While each individual may have their own idea of how ASSP can fulfill their need for community and to what capacity, I highly recommend digging deeper into additional ways ASSP can fortify connection to community.

Most of our careers are about influencing and supporting others, and there are prerequisites to doing this effectively (Kahn, 1990). Connection with the people we serve is important in what we do, and so is the connection to our colleagues in the safety industry. We can look at professional communities as fulfilling our

individual needs, as well as having influence on the group. Collective voices can carry more weight, drive regulatory and systemic changes, and evolve standards, advocacy and education. A community serves both the individual member and the larger group. While the focus has been on benefits to the individual subscribing to a community, do not ignore the power that comes from the group. Community provides belonging in a demanding profession and a shared voice capable of driving meaningful change. By engaging with communities, safety professionals strengthen not only their own practice but the future of the profession itself. When we come together, we do more than support one another—we elevate the standard of safety for everyone. **PSJ**

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