

MENTORSHIP

A Social Contract

By Justin Moloczniak

As safety professionals, we rely heavily on the collaboration and knowledge transfer of our peers. Sometimes, as chaotic as our jobs can be, we miss the opportunity to act. That is why mentorship is so important; it can formalize the parameters around making sure we accomplish this vital activity in our industry.

We approach the process with good intentions, but it takes a commitment from everyone involved. I can recall several missed opportunities in my career when I worked alongside safety professionals with a wealth of knowledge that I left untapped because I did not approach them about my desire to learn from them or discuss my intentions in establishing the relationship. In retrospect, I wonder how many individuals have felt the same way about me.

How do you define mentorship as a safety professional? Is it a formal relationship with a tenured or senior-level professional contained within your organization? Or could you identify with a different type of relationship, for example, with a respected peer or consultant who has specific expertise such as industrial hygiene or confined spaces? Maybe the relationship is less formal but offers the same benefit you hope to gain.

The answer is not so simple and lies within each of us as safety professionals. How we view and seek the relationships that guide us in our career and personal life are individualized. Additionally, how one chooses to share the knowledge gained to enrich others is a personal undertaking. The motivations to this construct are unique to the individuals participating in it.

However, to ensure that each party's needs are met in a mentoring relationship, there must be an implicit social (or psychological) contract; in other words, you must agree to be part of the formula and understand that you have responsibilities in the process (Haggard & Turban, 2012). By applying a social contract theory to mentorship, the implication is that each individual consents to abide by the rules set in the relationship and to incorporate the appropriate behavior (Friend, n.d.). Take the legalese out, and what you have is a mentor and mentee discussing and agreeing to the terms of their relationship. Easy, right?

But this might be an oversimplification. While some elements are required (e.g., showing up to agreed-upon meetings, being present and engaged), like each person in a mentoring relationship,

the relationship itself is unique. The point to take away is that not all relationships will be highly structured, but establishing an agreement on the social construct of the relationship will be fulfilling for both people.

I recently spoke with Dan Hopwood about mentorship, specifically about what mentorship is and is not. Dan has completed a great deal of research and outreach on the formality of the mentorship relationship and has a passion for setting some universal language for how we define these relationships (Hopwood & Bradbury, 2021). As Dan defines the

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types of relationships, Mentor with a capital "M" as defined by the formalized relationships and mentor with a lower-case "m" for the less-formalized guidance are both advantageous in their specific applications. Understanding what kind of relationship is being established will aid in the conceptualization of the social contract that must exist between the individuals involved.

So, we set the parameters of a mentoring relationship, which is important because it sets the understanding of what to expect and helps establish the desired outcomes. Without setting these expectations, mentors and mentees may create their own individual social contracts and create expectations that can lead to disappointment and discouragement. This is unnecessary. Just as the individuals involved in the mentorship are unique, so are the desired outcomes. But it is unreasonable to think that desired outcomes can be achieved without the understanding between mentor and mentee.

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Using Dan's terminology and social contract theory, a strong start to an "M" relationship might look like an organization's safety and health director and an early career safety professional using their company's mentoring program as a framework for starting their relationship. During their first meeting, both individuals discuss their desired outcomes; for example, the safety director may state they want to share their extensive knowledge in corporate safety management and the early career professional may desire to learn about what their career may be tracking toward. The two then agree upon how the relationship will work to accomplish the outcomes, thus forming the social contract. Keeping this example in mind, how might the "m" social contract look?

Self-reflection is important and, in relation to mentoring, an exercise we would all be better for performing. The best place to start is to first identify what kinds of (M)entorship/(m)entoring relationships you have in your life and determine what the expectation is from those relationships. Once you have completed that exercise, ask yourself, "Are my expectations realistic, or am I living in an undesired (or undefined) social contract?" **PSJ**

References

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Cite this article

Moloczniak, J. (2022, July). Mentorship: A social contract. *Professional Safety*, 67(7), 39.