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- **James Lopata,**
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Return To Normal? No Thanks!: Renegotiating The Social Contract

How to create an environment of inclusion, creativity, and freedom

 By [Jeff Evans](#), Designed Learning

Return to work. Return to the office. Return to normal. These phrases can be wrought with excitement, apprehension, and sheer terror! Many people are relieved that the world is beginning to open and that we will physically be with others again. We yearn for things to be “normal” again.

Yet, as we reflect on our pre-pandemic life, we’re not so sure “normal” was as great as our memory recalls. For many of us, we fought the traffic and headaches of a long commute via car, train, or other transportation. Even with a short commute, the preparation time to get “office-ready” was definitely longer than getting “Zoom ready”.

Many of us have deeply missed the interactions with co-workers and friends at the office. Being physically present with others allowed us to connect in a way that can’t quite be duplicated virtually. At the same time, working from home gave us the flexibility to deal with all aspects of life.

Our work lives and personal lives were much more integrated during the pandemic. Many had children at home experiencing the virtual learning environment. Pets, neighbors, and family members, who don’t realize the significance of an important work call, interrupted at the worst possible moments. Yet this integration was, somehow, more real and human.

There is an intimacy on a video call where we are invited into people’s homes and get a glimpse of the whole person, not just the office colleague. Yes, on video calls we can blur the background or even select one that depicts an exotic place we would rather be. But in the end, we are home, experiencing all the joys and challenges that home brings.

In addition to the physical presence, we had at the office, there was also the culture that we experienced. Depending on your situation, that culture may have been productive and nourishing, or it may have been toxic and draining. Maybe some of both depending on the day. This varying culture is present in our home environments, as well. Some homes are nourishing. Some are toxic.

Whether in the office or at home, we yearn for a sense of belonging. And yet, even when surrounded by people in the office, we could feel isolated and then the pandemic put a spotlight on our isolation. For many months, we couldn’t leave our homes. When we did, we practiced social distancing and wore masks. This physical separation from others definitely contributed to a sense of isolation. Yet, if we’re honest with ourselves, there was a sense of isolation prior to the pandemic. We isolate ourselves and others based on political beliefs, race, gender, socio-economic status, religion, and many other factors.



We rebel against isolation by seeking a sense of belonging. This yearning for belonging can manifest into agreeing to a social contract with our employer, where we want them to take care of us. We agree to be a good employee, follow the rules, do as I'm told, and fit into the culture. In turn, we expect our employer (boss) to take care of us, provide benefits and create a safe environment. Even though this social contract has not been articulated with clarity, it is an assumed contract when we are employed by others.

Unfortunately, this social contract can, at best, only support my membership in an organization, not belonging. Belonging goes beyond the parent/child social contract and moves into a space where I am valued and seen as a human being. I have skills, gifts, idiosyncrasies, and flaws. My differences are celebrated and encouraged. We co-create the future we want together, regardless of hierarchy, power, and authority.

If the dominant social contract has been a promise of safety, security, and predictability, what is an alternative? An alternative to the dominant social

contract is one of co-creation, freedom, and personal accountability. In the alternative, we aren't looking for an organization or boss to take care of us. We are responsible for our own well-being, and we engage in collaborative partnerships with others to bring our full selves and others together.

This new contract takes courage in the face of a culture that values command and control. As Peter Block states in "The Empowered Manager", this new contract taps into an "entrepreneurial spirit where all members of the organization take responsibility for themselves and the organization. It fosters the belief that they can co-create a workplace that they believe in".

The pandemic has allowed us to re-examine, or examine for the first time, the social contract we have entered with our employers. We can be very productive working virtually without anyone watching what we do. In fact, this freedom helps us be more productive. But what about those workers who take advantage of working virtually and don't do their work? If the work outcomes are well-defined, we can measure success by the results we get whether we are in the office or at home.



This does take a leap of faith for the leader. They must trust that team members will get their work done with high quality, efficiency, and creativity. They don't promise to take care of anyone. That's the job of a parent. They create an environment of inclusion, creativity, and freedom where people have a sense of belonging and experience psychological safety. They co-create an environment where people choose to be accountable to each other.

So, as we contemplate returning to the workplace, examine what we have to gain, and what we have to lose. What is the social contract that makes you come alive? It may be with your current employer, maybe not.

We all need some sense of security, especially from a financial perspective. However, have we given away our freedom to be who we really want to be? Enter a social contract that values diversity, freedom, and individual accountability. This can be realized working from home, working at the office, and in a

hybrid environment of both. It may seem a bit risky at first. At times, we like the idea of someone taking care of us. But in the end, we will all be disappointed that we put our well-being and happiness in the hands of others. Take the courageous step of examining your current social contract and re-negotiate it if it isn't working for you.



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