

Social Contracts: Practice Partnering at Speed





“A group is as healthy as its ‘social contract’ is clear...”

Daniel Augsburg

With the widespread shift to Agile ways of working, today’s organisational structures are flatter and more cross-fertilised than ever before. You may find yourself working on a project in partnership with people you’ve never met, who come from different parts of the business with a different team culture. While this can bring the opportunity for the spark of innovation, it may also create some challenges.

As leaders, how do we bring people together from different places, with different values, and energise them to trust and be vulnerable with each other so, that they can co-create effectively? And how can we do this at pace?

One way is to try establishing a social contract from the outset; it may just be the answer to your need to partner at speed.

What Is a Social Contract?

Generally speaking, a social contract sets the rules for what is accepted behaviour in a group or team. The idea is that by establishing norms, we have a guidance system, which we can use to create a safe space for feedback and to fall back upon to manage conflict.

A social contract explicitly outlines an agreement among teams and leaders, and sometimes organisations and stakeholders that is not financially transactional and is high in psychological safety. It speaks to people, not simply profit.

Unfortunately, the value of social contracts is often completely overlooked in the workplace. This can be because there is an expectation that we all intuitively understand and agree how to behave with each other.

The reality can look quite different. When values and codes of behaviour stay unspoken and are simply expected ad hoc, there is much room for misinterpretation and confusion. However, the advantages of an unanimously-agreed-upon set of rules are manifold. This greater team alignment will act as a shortcut to managing relational issues, procedural problems, communication, and fast-track team bonding. It also sets us up for autonomy and self-organisation.

Unpacking a Social Contract

A social contract can be as creative, aspirational, prosaic, playful, or as visionary as the team wants it to be. It should be a written agreement, shared with all parties, and can even be displayed prominently i.e., consider displaying it on walls or on screensavers.

It can adopt both a macro and micro view. For example, One Australian Digital Agency, chose to include “Talk in the office as though Mum is listening”, and “Dance like Nobody is Watching (it’s safe to be you).” They also agreed to “Seek to use the most effective communication channels” and “To treat people like their time is precious.”

How do we apply it for Leaders?

The best way to set ourselves up for success is by first considering the process of creating a social contract. Here are some tips:

- Facilitate the activity as a conversation not a command. The process, like the contract, should foster a “one in, all in” mentality. Make sure all relevant parties and representatives are brought into the conversation.
- Co-create a set of questions that will cut through to the key sentiments in the group e.g., “What do we value?” or “What do we expect from each other?”
- Establish a clear process for dispute resolution and accountability. This will increase the team’s sense of security and responsibility.
- Role model the behaviour you’d like exhibited e.g., encourage cooperation rather than competition.
- Transparency, transparency, transparency!
- Remember to revisit and renew the contract periodically. Don’t “set to forget.”
- Be explicit that nobody is above/outside the contract.



A way for the team to brainstorm the details of the contract is to break it down into categories such as communication, meeting procedures, ways of working, and values. Focus on one area at a time until a consensus is reached.

Here’s an example of what a category might look like:

Communication

- Show your face in virtual meeting
- Be respectful and listen until your team member has finished speaking, don’t speak over the top of them
- Prioritise a conversation over an email where possible
- Agree upon a primary communication channel
- Share calendars
- Celebrate successes
- Assume positive intent





Challenges/Opportunities

With blended working environments, a highly values-led global workforce, economic hardship, and a change in expectations around leadership, we need to stay attuned and calibrated to the moment. Social contracts created today will have different considerations to agreements made even twelve months ago. So, it's important to review and renew.

Once the team have approved the final document, treat it as any agreement, and have each team member sign it.



Building a social contract between newly minted cross-fertilised teams, intact teams, across organisations, and in teams with external-facing partners, can be a powerful tool in building cohesiveness and channelling focus, as long as all parties invest in it.

While it does not guarantee smooth sailing, an agreed framework will anchor our relationships, so that every new engagement can start from a base of shared expectation and a shared language.



Suite 1E, 19 Lang Parade
Milton QLD, Australia 4064
[P] +61 7 3870 8433
[E] info@performancefrontiers.com
performancefrontiers.com

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