On the Current Social Contract in Force (Social Contract, Part 1)

Season 6, Episode 1 – originally released 2 March 2021

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

As the pandemic continued through 2020, there's emerged plenty of commentary about the need for change as the pandemic severity and longevity have wreaked havoc on economies, lives and our social fabric, longstanding inequalities have been exposed and old political tensions heightened from the very beginning of this program. Reflections on management. I have been exploring matters pertaining to the relationship between individuals and society and between individuals and the organizations to which they belong, as even the meaning of belonging is potentially changing. Put another way, the social contracts put in place that guide much of who we are, how we work and interact, and what it means to be a member of society or any other collective appear up for renegotiation. And so in this first episode of a multipart series, I will reflect on what is this social contract and does it need to change?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

It's probably pretty clear what the impetus for this series is, and there's no way that I could cover everything that I'm thinking about with this in one episode. Very clearly and acknowledged by many commentators, we've seen a breakdown of rational discourse on contemporary problems. Indeed the tensions have have built up, but they've been around for quite some time. But I sort of addressed this in a previous episode where, in a situation where in an office one might have had one person very strongly on one side of the political spectrum and one person on the other side, that these two tend to engage in arguments, disagreements, what have you. Those sorts of things were actually common in my military career, in various places where I've been, that sort of a thing. But it was such that you could sort of take these two individuals, you can isolate them from kind of the rest of the workplace. You can sort of let them go, have their arguments and everybody else drives on.

But the pervasiveness of the political dialogue that's is ongoing? Isolating yourself from it is just not very helpful. And I say that because, when we think about what's happened since the pandemic began, since it hit home, since it changed so many things, we are now left to think about, *"Well, what does the future really look like? What is going to be the new normal?"* Because it's not going to be a return to the old normal. I certainly understand there's been a lot of heightened emotions, but in my mind, I'm kind of thinking that at some point we've got to get people back to the table. We've got to get people back to having constructive dialogue -- where it's not about people viewing each other as or viewing the other side as adversarial, but getting together, showing empathy, and trying to work together to solve problems.

I think part of it is [about finally] beginning to really understand the problems that we are facing. And that's actually harder than it sounds, because one of the things that I think has been contributing to the lack of civil discourse is a lack of appreciation for how the other side frames the problem. So when you can't agree on even what the problem means, it's really hard to have a productive conversation. ... The lack of progress has just simply boiled over to the point where there's not a lot there to really discuss. It has devolved into shouting matches, devolved into seeing the other side as the adversary.

So what I thought about in coming up with what is basically going to dominate this new season of the podcast is to take a lot of the things that I discussed sort of in pieces parts throughout the program and look at the social contract as a whole. And what I mean by "social contract" is this idea of the relationship between individuals and organizations, what the individual commits to by being part of the organization and what the organization commits back to the individual. This was explicitly a discussion in several episodes where I talked about organizational commitment to the individual, what organizations provide originally, beginning with Milton Hershey as sort of like the exemplar, the extreme case, because of the way that he not only cared for the workers in his factory, but provided for their very needs by building them in town, giving them basically a social context, which is something far beyond what any of us expect from our organizations nowadays.

The [outcome] of some of those episodes was a recognition that if we're talking about what it is that an individual needs? Some of it is provided to the individual by society as a whole -- basic needs might include things like education. Then there's other things that are provided by the organization. We're talking about work organizations. Then it's pay, it's promotions, prestige, other things. It's also can be care, especially in high-risk organizations where there's risk of injury. And then there's things that the individual must essentially supply to themselves to take care of themselves. The balance of these three sources of satisfying an individual's needs is dynamic, depends on the situation, depends on where the individual is. So the social contract, even at its simplest level, is actually very complex because there is a lot of discussion and disagreement. Should it be entirely left to the individual or should most things be left to the individual to take care of for themselves? Is it the organization's responsibility to satisfy the individual's needs? And to what extent and which part of it is society's responsibility as a provider of basic services or a safety net? That is the background of what I've been meaning about with a social contract. You know, different ways of kind of thinking about this metaphor of a contract, because it's very pervasive in Western philosophical thought.

It's the way we think about what it means to be a member or to have membership in a collective. It's this idea that you contribute something, but you get something back in a way--a transactional component. And then there's also just simply the benefits of being a member, especially when we think about a society, you know, there are things in which we pay to society and we get something in return from society at a transactional level, such as public services for our taxes. And then there are other things like the safety net, which is simply provided by virtue of somebody physically living within the geographical confines of a locality, a state, a nation, you know, whatever political

entity we're talking about. So that sort of agreement is dynamic--it varies according to the individual, could vary according to so many things. It's kind of a useful construct. It makes sense to a lot of us that there is a way of sort of quantifying or qualifying this relationship. But there are other issues with it, because sometimes and I think that this is where the current current discourse comes into play, is that the contract metaphor only goes so far.

And because it is a contract metaphor, there is the potential for the contract to be inherently unequal or unfair or unjust. There's many different ways of looking at it. I'll cite some of the more obvious or the clearest examples. And then I'll get into a little bit about what makes this so much more so complex.

First off, I've got three examples of some of the criticisms towards the social contracts. These are all books. One of them is about the social contract between the leaders of an organization and its members such that those who are in power decide that they prefer to stay in power. So this is described in the book The End of Leadership by Barbara Kellerman from 2012. Second one is in relation to inequality by gender and how the social contracts--in particular what Pateman (1988) described as The Sexual Contract--is the way in which the social contract metaphor is applied to allow men to sustain dominance over women. And she offers several different case studies looking at that. And then, of course, for the racial and ethnic side of things, we have Charles Mills's book The Racial Contract from 1997 in which social contracts inherently establish differences between those who he refers to as fully human versus those who are less than human, which he particularly applied to relations between whites and African-Americans, but he expresses in terms of whites and other racial minorities.

When you look at those, then the thing that strikes one is that indeed there are many ways in which the [contractual] relationship is as sort of like the driving metaphor for the relationship between individuals and collectives. It doesn't take very much to see how you can have problems with unevenness, inequality just stemming from one's particular standing or one's membership. Now all of those examples that I cited are largely [in] the context of just the individuals in society, then we add this organizational layer to it, which is really, really complicated. [This] becomes an amplifying problem because marginalization in the social contract with society can be reinforced in organizational life. Individuals are parts of many organizations throughout the course of their lives. You know, some of these relationships vary in time and other ordinary circumstances. You know, you have this issue where the organization and society have a disagreement or a situation where they decide or one of them decides that it's. Really, the others responsibility to provide for the needs. If you have marginalization or discrimination going on in one or both, it's kind of a double whammy. So let me just use medical care real briefly as an example, because medical care is an expense.

Providing medical insurance is something that organizations, a lot of organizations, they provide the insurance to their workers, you know, through some sort of a program. And then there's the question of whether or not the organizations can really afford to continue to do so, because not just the expense of it, but also what they're able to provide through the insurance plans may not be

adequate -- how you deal with gaps? Those who don't have adequate insurance, so those costs get back to society. Is that the individual's responsibility to determine what it is that they require and to procure health insurance themselves? All of these have been active questions. I won't get into it here, but just understand that this is a case where 'who' provides for the needs is an active discussion. If you have a social contract that does not consider the individual case adequately, then what happens to those individuals who have special needs or requirements? Or if it gets a little bit too individualized, then it can become unfair. It can treat certain people--using Mills's metaphor--as humans and others as less than humans. And it may not necessarily be intended that way, but that may very well be the effects felt to those who are perhaps being unfairly treated, in the form of lack of access or poor quality of care available to them.

So this is very complex stuff, even for something like a single issue like medical care. [You] can compound that with other things, such as well, what happens if you have discrimination such that the opportunities for employment are better for one group of people who can also at the same time be able to get the better medical plans? Whereas the other group is not able to get jobs that include the medical plans and therefore having to turn to society and exercise the social safety net? Now, that can have an amplifying effect, such that disadvantage is felt in more than one way or coming from what appears to be more than one source.

So this is where we get into things like accommodation. One hopes one aspires that, you know, whatever the social contract is, that ultimately it has the ability, if it if it truly is operating in the collective good, you hope that the contract accommodates individuals to the maximum extent possible without becoming ineffective or inefficient. And if accommodations cannot be made, then there has to be a process by which the contract is reviewed. And what I mean by contract is reviewed. This it could be a legal process by which a law has to change or a policy process or some sort of a normative change. But all of those sorts of change processes, all of those accommodations have to come from rational discourse.

And the reason why I say that is because very, very clearly, when we're talking about something complex, especially in a social setting where we may be talking about the distribution of resources or the availability of resources, there's a second order effect almost ensured whenever a change is made to some aspect of the social contract. Some sort of fallout Some sort of implication on other aspects of what organizations are going to be expected to provide to individuals, what societies are going to be expected to provide individuals, what individuals may be expected to provide in return. And all of it's got to make sense. This is where the importance of the rational discourse and the ability to sit at the table in my mind becomes really, really important. Especially when we are talking about things that have a lot of emotions attached to them. Things such as, for example, systemic racism.

The outcome of this series, although some of it is going to certainly have some controversy associated with it. My ultimate goal is to try to find a way, a language that allows us to get people back to the table, allows people to have a constructive dialogue, not so much to try to remove the emotions from the issue, but to allow the emotions to be a constructive part of the dialogue. That is to say that we don't want the emotions to to cause the two sides to devolve into arguments or name-

calling, but to highlight the importance and the urgency of the perspectives felt on all sides so that the dialogue can ultimately lead to constructive action ideas approaches something that all sides can pursue, not just to talk, not just to show empathy, not just to be aware, but to have actually something substantive to talk about that helps them to solve problems in a synthesized negotiation or a negotiated fashion.

A lot of that is going to be sort of the the running theme throughout the rest of the series. What is driving people away from the table or what may be precluding people from coming to the table? And what I think that requires is giving a very, very holistic look at this whole complex problem space and tried to resist the temptation to simplify it or oversimplify it in unhelpful ways. In the series, I'm going to first talk about some of the things that I think are making these discussions difficult. What is the complex problem space that we're talking about? And then I'm going to offer some solutions towards the end of the series that I think are feasible and suitable. Just a question of whether or not society or members of society are prepared to accept them.

I hope that this interests you and that you'll join me as this series continues.

… And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

All the Best!
Tom Galvin