The Social Field of Safety Performance
Building Transformative Bonds
By Cort Dial

As I wrote in Part 1 of this four-part series on modern safety performance, if the self field is me, the social field is we. The social field is the focus of this article (the third in the series). Relationships determine success in this realm, making it the most powerful and intimidating of the four fields.

What makes up the social field? Subjective concepts that are internal and shared by the entire group: customs, social mores, covenants, myths, legends, wisdom, protocols, visions, missions, goals and more. Those collective ideas are spread and reinforced most effectively between people with strong relationships and inspirational leaders.

The Most Powerful Field
What is happening in the social field nearly always trumps every other field. That is a bold statement, but it is rooted in science. Researchers believe our brains are hardwired to pursue group harmony because it was instrumental in ensuring the early survival of our species as we wandered around, hunting and gathering. Those instincts are still present.

Only someone with a highly developed sense of self can resist the social field’s pull. We have all experienced peer pressure, which can lead to either rebellion or commitment. If your colleagues reject certain beliefs, you are more likely to dismiss those ideas, too, even if the rejection contradicts your personal values. If peers embrace a way of being, you are more likely to strive for that ideal.

With respect to safety performance, it is easy to see why the social field is critical. Safety is not an independent exercise. We depend on each other to create safe spaces; these spaces result from people taking care of each other. As teams become more in sync, higher levels of safety performance become possible.

Social vs. Culture
Like the self field, many leaders are unwilling or even unable to work in the social field. Some think they are making progress in this area and call it culture. This is actually a mischaracterization of culture, which is not the social field, but rather the sum of all four fields—systems, behavior, self and social. A healthy safety culture can only be created and sustained by an organization comprised of people who work well in all four fields.

Working in the Social Field
Work in the social field demands consistency, inclusion and patience. Here’s how to get started:

• Plan an immersive event. Gathering for long periods creates opportunities for social bonds to form. Give employees time to get to know each other. It may seem trite, but it is incredibly important and powerful. Whereas working on the self is a solitary exercise, working on the social is a group affair that requires gathering the community together.

• Establish routine together time. Plan regular times for community. Weekly lunches or coffees are a great start. Do not talk business at these mini-gatherings. Just be together.

• Model camaraderie. Take the time to stop and talk to people in the halls. Learn names and important details about everyone, no matter their position.

• Agree on something, then add to it. Get everyone together and establish an agreement. For example, forge a shared belief that working without injury is possible, or agree that each person promises to intervene if s/he witnesses another person at risk. This is the foundation on which you will ultimately realize a mission (e.g., an injury-free workplace).

• Let go. Leaders cannot force anyone to give their peers a helping hand or to believe in your vision. Stop trying to enforce rules and policies. The team will decide what to embrace. Leaders simply must provide the opportunities for the right decisions to be made.

• Work regularly and well in the other three fields. To make the most progress possible in the social field, you must be proficient in the systems, behavior and self fields first. While social trumps the other three fields, it also relies on them.

Systems are important, but it is the social makeup of the group using the system that is the ultimate determinant of any system’s effectiveness. One need only watch a busy crosswalk for a few minutes to see that social customs of jaywalking or speeding can trump a well-designed traffic system.

Ultimately, it boils down to this: Take your team’s humanity into account. Leverage it or be derailed by it. It is entirely up to you.