

COVID and Culture: Understanding the Pandemic's Effect on Society

I no longer cross the street to say hello to neighbors and greet them with a big hug. I don't bring my children with me to the grocery store. I don't visit my ailing mother in her nursing home, hundreds of kilometers away. We celebrated my daughter's prom at the kitchen table as a family of five – all dressed up and nowhere to go. Her high school graduation celebration could look very much the same.

Americans are still under different variations of a "Safe at Home" request. This means that while the government allows the slow reopening of businesses, keeping our physical distance is the safest route for everyone. Countries and communities around the world are all on varying places on the respond and recover spectrum.

We may be creeping closer to life after the coronavirus, but people still feel lonely, isolated and scared. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, how 2020 is playing out is significantly different than the high expectations we had of the beginning of the decade.

COVID-19 is a collective enemy that follows no rules, boundaries or strategies. It has revealed societal cracks that were easy to cover up when economies were flush or overlook with more prominent distractions. It's easy to ignore the impact of business on climate when the dividends keep rolling in. It's convenient to brush off the digital divide when companies put technology in people's hands. And, it's handy to pretend the world is as we want to see it when it's actually crumbling around us.

However, despite all the hurdles society still faces, we've begun to see change. Enough people are tired of the 'real' world and choose this time to pivot toward businesses, governments and lifestyles that make room for the humanness of life and the planet on which we live.

As leaders, we have three areas on which to focus to make sure that change continues to move forward for the betterment of everyone.

Consumption. Did you have any sense of how much you consumed before we all spent time in quarantine? How much and what you consume affects your physical, mental and spiritual health. There's news and data consumption about the world around you, particularly with daily updates on the number of coronavirus cases, deaths and finger pointing. There's the amount of food, booze and drugs you consume to dull boredom and fear. Consuming an animal-based diet increases methane levels. You choose to consume the thoughts, focus and priorities that affect your mental health issues. Consumption is a sedative that keeps you from feeling your life just like anything else you do to deaden yourself to the world.

The mind-body connection matters more now than ever. What happens when you change your consumption habits? Life. You can see the Himalayas for the first time in 30 years because the air is clean. The air quality has improved 30% in Italy, China and parts of the United States because of short-term changes in consumption. Fewer hours of consuming work means families

have become reacquainted. It's led to people rediscovering themselves, their lost passions and a greater sense of what's important in the world.

These are gains we need to keep hold of.

Expectation. The coronavirus has changed everyone's expectations. The pandemic shouldn't have caught the world off-guard to the degree it did. We expected students to study in schools and workers to stay in physical locations. Before 2020, society expected the economy would continue in a fairly predictable manner with the inevitable lows to balance the highs. However, no one expected any kind of economic impact that indiscriminately affected everyone to the degree it has. We expected common sense, rational responses from leaders in government and business and that these were the pillars on which society could rely.

We've shifted our expectations about who we depend on. Instead of heads of state and businesses, it's front-line workers. In fighting for our protection, it's not traditional militia but rather ill-equipped healthcare workers. It's the low-paid and underappreciated workers along the supply chain that keep countries operational.

After years of procrastination and failure, the unimaginable happened almost overnight – digital transformation. We've seen incredible pivots in healthcare delivery, and our expectations changed about how quickly workers and students could adapt to a virtual environment. As we see what even a short-term reprieve can do to the environment, we've shifted our expectations about our control over climate change and how quickly we can experience results. Our expectations about human interaction have changed. Some believe our work-from-home lifestyle is here to stay while others hope the rebound from our isolation will lead to a greater appreciation for face-to-face gatherings and relationships. How long will we question the danger of public interaction?

With fear and conspiracy theories running rampant, we've changed our expectations about trust and transparency in communications. World leaders and corporate executives have shown extremes in how they handle their response, ranging from swift and immediate initiatives to preserve human life to bungling, bureaucratic incompetence to save their positions. Both groups will be held to a higher standard going forward for both truth and transparency.

We've essentially become our own prototype. How will we shift our expectations to make society both proactive and responsive?

Action. For decades we've spun in circles while making little progress. A quest for cash has led corporations to make decisions based on the bottom line while refusing to take action toward those left behind. This includes wage inequalities, skimping on healthcare coverage as a benefit, or a focus on profit over philanthropic efforts to help those underserved and under protected.

The coronavirus has sparked action toward the systems designed to care for the most vulnerable and ill-attended. Governments are expected to come to the aid of small businesses.

Even with the infusion of cash to save small and medium-size businesses, we still see grassroots efforts to keep community employers open. Instead of online ordering from eailers far away, consumers show a renewed loyalty to brands in their own backyard.

As we continue our struggle in the wake of the pandemic, we'll see citizens demanding action from world and business leaders for improved regulation. The question isn't *if* there will be another wide-scale healthcare crisis, but *when*. People will demand action to ensure proactive preparation with healthcare equipment, response systems and personal protection materials for everyone's safety and well-being.

The interdependent society

The vulnerabilities that the coronavirus has unveiled are socially driven. To understand how we address things such as climate change, wage inequalities and healthcare coverage for everyone, we have to understand our consumption habits and expectations about how we define "success." To make change happen on a bigger scale, we have to start by changing individual expectations about what's possible. We also have to reevaluate our values and why we prioritize ones over others. It's then that we'll have clarity with our actions.

I remain optimistic and excited about the future. I know I'll soon embrace neighbors, celebrate milestones, and reunite with family and friends. But when I do, I'll be a changed consumer with different expectations who's ready to take action. Because when we have a collective path forward as a society, we will always have hope.