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5-2021

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Citation

YOUNG, Juan Humberto. Learning from the bats: Cooperation a fundamental sustainability principle. (2021).

Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/576>

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Learning from the bats: Cooperation a fundamental sustainability principle

31 May 2021

By Juan Humberto Young

Most scientists agree that COVID-19 was transmitted to humans from bats. In an ironic twist, their social behaviour could help us solve many of our collective problems

COVID-19 is a sudden disruptive factor that has brought new challenges besides the technical aspects, the real challenge being adaptive, requiring a fundamental change in our behaviours.

Looking at the global COVID-19 landscape, one cannot help but wonder about the wide variety of responses from country to country. [Sociologists found that some societies are characterised by what they call a "tight culture"](#) with strict norms and sanctions for violations, while other communities have looser, more permissive cultures with weaker standards.

Their studies showed that tight cultures have almost five times fewer cases of COVID-19: for example, 1,400 cases per million population compared to 7,100 per million in loose cultures. And in terms of deaths, the number was 21 per million in tight cultures compared with 183 per million in loose cultures (as of October 2020). As these results suggest, tight groups coordinate collective activities better and have a better chance of success and survival than loose groups.

So what does it take to achieve the kind of tight culture that the COVID-19 situation calls for? It is strategic awareness: the ability to take complete note of the devastating magnitude of the pandemic and still be able to identify opportunities for well-being, success, and personal advancement. No matter how dire the situation is, there are options at all levels. The importance is to take collaborative, constructive actions.

OPTIONS FOR ACTION AT THE LEVEL OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Many businesses are doing well in the private sector due to a surge in demand for their products and services. Firms in this advantageous position could support affected sectors of society, using the unexpected surplus to mitigate effects in disadvantaged sectors of the economy.

This should not be difficult to accomplish; one needs only to average the sales and profits of the last few years before the pandemic and compare them to the sales and earnings during the pandemic. The extraordinary surplus could be used to support sectors of the economy that are experiencing difficult times due to the pandemic. Of course, the funds calculated in this way should not be used to finance businesses that were not viable already before the pandemic.

On the other hand, it is conceivable that supporting companies could even increase their market capitalisation and reputational value because, as we know, company valuations are based not only on financial fundamentals but also on their narrative. So, in essence, beneficiaries of the

pandemic have some incentive to contribute to reducing imbalances voluntarily. The resulting stability and sustainability would also be beneficial for them.

The idea presented here is indeed a viable proposition; many events point to this. Amazon's Jeff Bezos, for example, recently came out in favour of raising taxes on the wealthy. Moreover, CEOs in the U.S. are taking increasingly vocal stands on social and economic justice issues. Generosity in times of crisis is an investment in the future.

OPTIONS FOR ACTION ON A PERSONAL LEVEL

For all of us, this may be the time to explore new possibilities or tackle projects we have always wanted to realise but never found the time. The mere act of slowing down and imposing leisure brings with it beauty and enrichment. My friend and academic partner at Singapore Management University (SMU), Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour & Human Resources, Jochen Reb, has found time to practise the piano. I have friends becoming gourmet chefs; others are learning new languages. I have now found the time to finish writing my second book and expand my teaching online to several continents.

There are so many opportunities for everyone as we dig beneath the surface of the negative aspects of the pandemic. And that, I would say, is our responsibility to ourselves and our fellow human beings, namely developing ourselves.

OPTIONS FOR ACTION IN POLITICS

For policymakers, a constructive contribution is to reduce uncertainty and, perhaps more importantly, use the pandemic as a creative moment to focus more on training the population to transition to a digitised society.

Driven by the pandemic, the pace of digitisation is accelerating rapidly. Economists predict unemployment of catastrophic proportions as a result of the resulting tectonic shifts in society. However, there is much that can be done to mitigate the consequences: Building training programs, getting universities and other educational institutions to accelerate the transition to a more digitally intelligent society, for example, with massive open online courses (MOOCs) on topics that matter to people in a postmodern culture with its discontinuities, and to anyone who wants to stay à jour.

In a [March 2021 interview](#), Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said:

"We will work hard... for people who feel that competition is relentless and the future is unpredictable. We want them to know that there is extra help and support for them, so they are not alone, but that we in Singapore will make sure that they are well taken care of, provided that they themselves also make an effort to further their education. We are putting a lot of effort into making that happen. We have SkillsFuture, a comprehensive program to train and develop people throughout their working lives after they leave school. It includes courses, awards, special programs, agreements with employers, government subsidies... Every country is trying to do

something along these lines, but we're doing it quite systematically and putting all our resources into this effort."

Part of SkillsFuture is a programme designed by the author, Mindfulness-based Strategic Awareness Training (MBSAT) developed to strengthen smart decision-making. It has been adopted by SMU and included by the Singapore government in its "skills-building" program. Programs like SkillsFuture can use a government mechanism to help reduce the oppressive uncertainty that digital and social upheavals bring, provided that fellow citizens do their part.

COLLABORATING LIKE BATS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

The proposed solutions are ultimately based on cooperation, the mechanism that social scientists say is essential for living well in groups.

There are pronounced cooperative behaviours in nature. For example, in Costa Rica and Panama, there are colonies of bats that feed on blood. To survive, they must find and ingest some blood every 24 hours. It is a tough job; every night they fly out, some bats come back hungry because they haven't found food. In an impressive display of natural cooperation, the successful bats share the captured blood with their less fortunate, hungry conspecifics, thus sustainably ensuring the group's survival.

The bat colonies, however, have social control mechanisms. Non-cooperative bats that do not share their food are kept in check, and if they return to the night roost hungry themselves one night, they receive no help from the group. The principle is reciprocity: I offer so that you give. In this way, the group purges uncooperative members in a quid pro quo behaviour that ensures essential cooperation.

According to game theorists, a quid pro quo game is an efficient behaviour to provide win-win situations, just as collaborative scientists have used innovative methods to develop vaccines in a short time. The challenge is to find opportunities to develop a sustainable culture that is strong enough to make us fit for the challenges of the future. In an ironic twist of life, maybe we can learn from the bats to solve problems that, in the case of COVID-19, pandemic scientists tell us they created for us.

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