

By Invitation

Drill into what makes people socially responsible

Good social behaviour, like maintaining public hygiene or self-quarantining when sick, can be cultivated. Appeal to people's sense of values and their image; use norms and enforcement to encourage them; and make it convenient to adopt such practices.



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For The Straits Times

Singapore recently announced the setting up of an SG Clean Taskforce in its fight against the coronavirus, to get individuals and businesses to adopt good hygiene habits, keep public spaces clean, adjust social norms and behave in socially responsible ways.

The task force has a dual challenge. It needs to effect changes quickly so that they become the first line of defence in the ongoing battle against Covid-19. It also needs to do it in ways that will develop permanent good habits and norms beyond the current outbreak.

Earlier this week, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong, who chairs the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on tackling Covid-19, reiterated the importance of social responsibility.

He detailed how many locally transmitted cases were caused by individuals going to work, attending social activities and failing to minimise social contact even when they had flu-like symptoms such as cough and fever.

To deal with the outbreak requires not only a united response, but we also need to understand why people think, feel and act the way they do. Specifically, we need to drill down to what makes people behave responsibly socially, so we can find ways to encourage more of this and discourage socially irresponsible forms of behaviour.

BEING SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE

It is not surprising that there are individuals in the community who are unwell but still perform daily routines or participate in group activities with unconstrained

social interactions. They risk infecting others and sparking a chain of transmissions that can spiral out of control.

It is natural to feel angry and frustrated with these individuals because we see them as socially irresponsible, putting their selfish preferences above public health and the well-being of others. They cancel and reverse the positive effects of the control measures put in place.

Why do some people still persist in behaviours that are irresponsible to others?

Perhaps some are ignorant, complacent or overconfident. But psychology also tells us that people tend to underplay their symptoms or illness and their own risk of infection when there is an event they want to attend. This is even if they know that many people with Covid-19 had only mild symptoms but were already infectious.

Then there are those with prolonged flu-like symptoms who refuse to see the doctor because they fear being stigmatised if they were to test positive for Covid-19. Sadly, this fear is not without basis. To deal with stigmatisation and discrimination, we need effective public education to create awareness that anyone can get infected, develop empathy for those infected, and understand that people with the infection discharged from hospitals in Singapore are fully recovered and no longer infectious.

Understanding the psychology behind their actions may explain why an individual decides to do or not do something. It does not justify or condone the socially irresponsible behaviour.

No one has the right to expose others to the risk of illness just because he himself is not worried about getting sick – a person may be cavalier about his own health but must not assume others will feel likewise.

Similarly, fear of stigmatisation does not give a person the right to mask his own symptoms and thus to expose many others to risks of

illness and harm. These are socially irresponsible forms of behaviour.

We have seen from Covid-19 infections worldwide, especially in China and now in Italy, that the danger of widespread community transmission is real.

In other words, infecting someone when going out sick is not a theoretical possibility. Rather, that action carries a certainty of exposing many people to the risk of falling ill unnecessarily, with a real chance of creating a chain of infections and severe negative consequences – all stemming from a personal decision or action.

When deciding whether or not to attend an event, or whether to proceed, cancel or postpone it, we should anticipate the negative consequences and the regret we will experience when they happen.

Health experts say that if many people get infected with Covid-19, hospitals can't cope with the sudden spike in cases. When this happens, some patients won't get the care they need and may die. It is as severe as that. This has already happened in China's Wuhan and in Italy, where doctors are rationing the use of ventilators that help sick patients breathe.

Once we understand the stakes involved and the moral choices it, we can see that social responsibility is also a test of our character, on whether we will do the right thing. Put in another way, social responsibility is not just about what we do to others but also who we truly are.

THE VINCE MODEL

To make people more socially responsible, we need to understand what factors affect behaviours. Based on research evidence, I have put together a five-factor model to help us understand the key drivers of behaviours and how they can be used to promote positive attitudes and change behaviours.

I call it the Vince model, referring to the five factors, namely values, image, norms, convenience and enforcement.

Values

Values are our convictions of what is important and they remind us of what ought to be. They shape our attitudes, thoughts, emotions and actions.

We can increase positive behaviours by reinforcing how they are consistent with our values. We can also decrease negative behaviours by highlighting how they are value-inconsistent. In this way, we can promote socially responsible behaviours and prevent socially irresponsible ones.

For example, social responsibility is based on care and concern for others, rooted in collectivistic values that prioritise the interests and well-being of the larger group (such as our work or social group) over our own needs and desires.

So, if we truly believe in these collectivistic values, then we should put the group interests before our self-interests. This means we do not participate in a group event when we are unwell even though we have an individual interest to attend. If we continue to attend, then our action is inconsistent with our espoused collectivistic values.

To build a culture of social responsibility in Singapore, we should develop and reinforce collectivistic values as our shared values.

Image

Image refers to how we see ourselves and how others see us.

It is human to want to have a positive self- and public image. It is adaptive when our self-image and public image match up and they reflect the reality of who we are and how others see us.

Self-image is made up of our

beliefs and feelings about our characteristics as a person. For example, I may believe that I am a socially responsible person and I may feel good being one. Our beliefs and feelings are strengthened when we engage in actual behaviours widely considered to reflect the person characteristic.

Possible self-images and public images are powerful motivators for behaviour changes. When we are clear that hygiene behaviours affect the image of whether a person is socially responsible or irresponsible, we will put in effort to keep public places clean and adopt good hygiene habits, anticipating the positive images of a socially responsible person that we want to have and the negative images of a socially irresponsible person that we do not want.

Norms

Norms are cultural standards and social expectations shared by members of a community or society about what behaviours are appropriate or inappropriate in a given situation.

For example, we expect able-bodied individuals to give up their seats in trains to those who need them more. When entering or exiting a room, it is polite to hold the door open for the stranger immediately after you. Colleagues lunching together take turns to pay for the meals because of our norms of reciprocity.

Once established in a community, norms become social conventions of behaviours that are self-sustained. Members of the community follow social norms because they have internalised the normative rules of how to behave.

It is socially undesirable to deviate from norms. In any case, people often do not deviate because the normatively appropriate behaviours have become habits that are somewhat automatic, reflex social actions in a situation.

For good hygiene behaviours to become habits, we need to cultivate cleanliness norms so that it is socially expected for everyone to keep public places clean.

A good normative principle to promote is that we should personally clean up a public place after using it so that it is as clean or cleaner than just before we used it.

Convenience

Convenience refers to conditions that make it easier for someone to do something without having to put in tedious effort. Research and anecdotal evidence has shown that a change in behaviour is more likely if the new behaviour is convenient to perform.

Two key features of convenience are availability and accessibility. That is why hawker centre patrons are more likely to return their food trays after eating if the location of the tray station is highly visible and easy to get to.

To enhance public hygiene and social responsibility, we need to make available and accessible to all individuals the relevant items, including soap in public toilets, hand sanitisers, thermometers and masks.

The authorities, organisations and organisers should also implement control measures in a simple way that will reduce unnecessary inconvenience and make it easy for people to comply.

This is especially when some measures may be here to stay.

It could be something as simple as the way a travel declaration form is designed, the way a contact-tracing question is framed, the procedure for an employee to call in sick, or the ease for a patient to see the same clinic doctor again if he is still unwell or his medical certificate (MC) is expiring.

Enforcement

Enforcement is about ensuring compliance with rules and regulations, through monitoring, use of sanctions and other means. Examples of our current control measures for Covid-19 involving enforcement and compliance are travel restrictions, border controls, contact tracing, activity mapping, stay-home notices and quarantine orders.

We need to be socially responsible and comply with these measures strictly. For example, employers and employees must ensure that a worker who is unwell sees a doctor promptly, even when the symptoms are mild. The sick person must comply with the MC regime. It is critical to stay at home and not move around in the community so as to reduce the risk of community transmission, even when the individual "feels healthy".

Employers and colleagues must not exert pressure on the individual, directly or indirectly, to cause him to choose not to call in sick or quietly come back to work while unwell or on sick leave because he feels that work duty and obligation should take precedence.

Our control measures are time-sensitive, data-driven and resource-intensive. Socially irresponsible forms of behaviour, such as failing to cooperate, providing false information or breach in compliance, add an unnecessary significant load to our systems and workers and create problems that can have serious negative effects on containment of the outbreak and health outcomes.

That is why such socially irresponsible forms of behaviour should be dealt with firmly and swiftly.

For enforcement to be effective, the authorities and employers need to implement rules and regulations that are practical and communicate them clearly, including what to do and what not to do. People must also know that enforcement is applied equally to all without fear or favour, and what the consequences of non-compliance are.

To conclude, we need to do much more to enhance hygiene habits and, more fundamentally, social responsibility.

It is natural to be angry and complain about people who are socially irresponsible. But each of us can galvanise others into taking positive actions.

Start first with ourselves and ensure that we personally practise what we preach about social responsibility.

Be a role model to others and a positive influence to our family, friends and colleagues. Use the different factors in the Vince model to change attitudes and actions.

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