

Humanistic management and the virus

Hopes for a new normal

Paul Harrison



Thankfully, the symptoms I have been experiencing over recent days are definitely not indicative of the terrible COVID-19 affliction, which is so tragically and brutally devastating many thousands of lives around the world. This is the disease which we are now inclined to name simply as “the virus”. At one level, the banality of this term might seem to mask some of the most frightening features which alternative names would highlight (the alien ‘novelty’; the ‘corona’ structure of the thing, with its spikey surface reminiscent of a World War II naval mine). Yet another level reveals the awful truth: that this pandemic has touched every person on the planet. We don’t need fancy names to specify this enemy – it is ‘The Virus’.

Here, I offer a brief account of my personal and professional responses to this phenomenon and draw out some positive aspects of its otherwise devastating impact.

Keywords: humanistic management



[Sea mines](#). Photo: [Andre Kaur](#), [Wikimedia Commons](#)

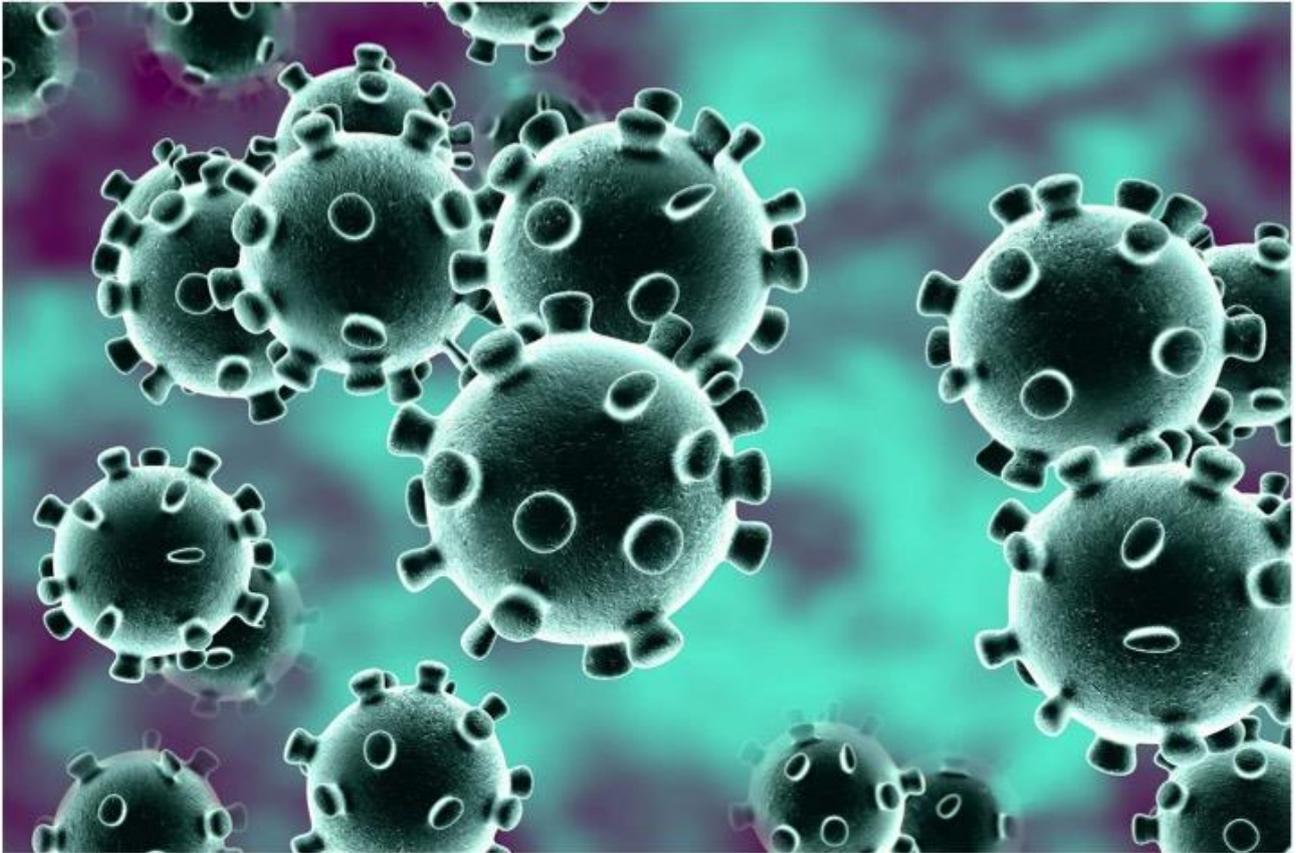


Image: artist's impression of the coronavirus. Downloaded from <https://westbridgfordwire.com/coronavirus-in-nottinghamshire-care-homes/>)

How the virus touches me personally

In my case, my symptoms have indicated a far more prosaic, self-centred condition - one which many writers would call 'writer's block'. I'm a 56-year-old tax advisor working in a large professional services firm, and certainly not a professional writer as is commonly understood by that label. But I'm also a life member of [Humanists UK](#), and part of the small group who helped found the [UK Chapter of the Humanistic Management Network](#). So I ought to have a view about what this pandemic is telling us about how we should go about managing things humanistically: making decisions, formulating policies, communicating important messages, motivating people to do the right thing, encouraging collaboration and treating our fellow humans with dignity and respect. But I have found it extraordinarily difficult to process this whole experience and writing about it is equally difficult. What is there to say at this point? Would it actually make a positive difference to the immediate, present dangers that we face? Why would anyone want to read what I have to say at this point? Things seem to change by the hour, and I might have something completely different to say by tomorrow morning. I'm writing this shortly after the furore broke around [the behaviour of the Prime Minister's chief advisor, Dominic Cummings](#). Looking back at my earlier abandoned attempts at writing something, there is no doubt that what I would have said before that happened would have been entirely different to what I might say now!

Having shared my anxieties about whether I could usefully write anything at this point, I have finally decided that there might be two things I could do. The first is to share an observation about how the pandemic has impacted the dynamics in my (now virtual) workplace. The second is to share a selection of references to other resources which I have found interesting and helpful: they have been things for me to cling to as I bob around in the turbulence of this crisis. I hope readers will also find them useful.

How the virus is affecting my working relationships



Office buildings at Canary Wharf, London. Photo by [Siddhant Kumar](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Normally (I suppose I should say ‘old-normally’?) my place of work is a very large office block in Canary Wharf, London. But since the lockdown, together with the many thousands of colleagues who also work for my employer, I have been based from home. Fortunately for us all, the kind of work we do lends itself to home-working. Even more fortunately for me, my three children are grown up and live elsewhere, so I don’t have to deal with the enormous challenge of childcare and home-schooling that so many others have to face. I also have the luxury of easy access to outdoor space. But we are all supplied with laptops and software which enable remote working, in particular video-conferencing and collaboration tools. Whilst my employer has adopted a flexible approach to home-working for some considerable time, I think the reality has been that most people felt some pressure (perhaps driven by longstanding work and social cultural practices) to be in the office by default. So the lockdown was a very dramatic change to normal working practices, and in particular the widespread and frequent (many times a day) use of video-conferencing was completely different from previously.



Image: the author working from home, photo from personal records

An increase in openness

The interesting thing for me has been how this new way of working, whilst based on physical remoteness, has had the effect of increasing openness: allowing the individual differences of colleagues to emerge more freely. This is not what I had expected, and I imagine for most might be counter-intuitive. The cultural practices and norms of the physical office, ingrained in all of us over many months and years, were present at the start of the lockdown, but seemed strangely awkward. They didn't really 'work' in this new environment. Issues such as what to wear, when to use emails, when to phone someone, where to meet, how to conduct a meeting, how to behave in a meeting, how often should we meet, are meetings a good thing or a bad thing etc arose. The instinctive understanding of how they should be dealt with in the physical environment of the office dissolved, and people began to answer them differently for themselves, based on their own personalities and circumstances. And we all seemed comfortable accommodating these differences, even relishing them in each other. I've met virtually with more people more frequently than I ever would have done in the physical office environment. Previously, the instinct would have been to use email, even when the other person was on the same floor in the same building! Despite the lack of physical presence, there is less remoteness than before, more humanity, more collaboration (actually, collaboration is so much easier – it is no different to do a video-conference call with a colleague in Germany, Australia etc than with a colleague in Aberdeen, Manchester etc). So I hope that one opportunity presented by this pandemic is to throw away the workplace cultural rule book and start another – one which helps bring out both our common humanity and our individual differences.

Some helpful resources: a short annotated webography

In this section, I share a few references and resources that I am finding helpful as I negotiate my way through uncharted territory into which I have been plunged by the virus.

High Pay Centre briefing, (April 2020). How are UK-listed companies responding to the economic shutdown?
http://highpaycentre.org/files/report_copy.pdf

This paper, published in the throes of the UK's management of the pandemic, analyses the actions of large, listed businesses. It juxtaposes how they have accessed State Aid (notably the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme [CJRS]) with levels of executive pay and payment of dividends. Whilst the paper strongly supports the CJRS initiative – directed as it is at preventing the loss of jobs – it shouts a warning that there will be strong pressure on large employers to show that they have acted responsibly. In particular, it calls on them to reduce pay inequity in their organisations and not to enrich senior executives or shareholders at the expense of their less well-paid workers. This links to the humanistic principles of justice, dignity and solidarity.

Al-Khalili, J. (2020). *Doubt is essential for science – but for politicians, it's a sign of weakness*. The Guardian. 21 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/21/doubt-essential-science-politicians-coronavirus>

Here, Al-Khalili, a celebrated physicist and broadcaster, draws attention to the problematic claim by UK politicians that they are *'being led by the science'*. In the article, he argues that the claim that politicians are *'being led by the science'* appears to misrepresent the key roles that uncertainty and doubt play in the scientific method, especially when dealing with a previously unknown virus. It also – potentially - allows politicians to shift accountability (and blame...) from them to scientists.

Bish, A. & Michie, S. (2010). *Demographic and attitudinal determinants of protective behaviours during a pandemic: A review*. British Journal of Health Psychology. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2a92/d1735d3bc0fa58d9f342d8bd173e62725763.pdf>

Page 22 of this article references research showing the importance of trust in Government, and the role of communications in the prevention of disease (e.g. the previous SARS epidemic. In particular, it stresses the need for openness, transparency and the honest voicing of doubt, which helped to build trust in the population and strengthened willingness to comply with restrictions. For example, Singapore is considered to have fared better than Hong Kong for these reasons during the SARS epidemic. This shines a spotlight onto recent events in the UK. These include the furore over Dominic Cummings; the sometimes controversial use of data (or 'number theatre' as one leading scientist describes it) in particular in relation to testing (remember the '100,000 tests per day'?).

Blunt, G. D. (2020). *Coronavirus: why we should be sceptical about the benevolence of billionaires*. The Conversation. April 2020. <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-why-we-should-be-sceptical-about-the-benevolence-of-billionaires-136448>

This article also links to the humanistic principle that the dignity of life deserves unconditional respect. In other words, it compromises the dignity of human life if health and well-being in the event of a pandemic depends to any significant degree on philanthropy, notwithstanding the good intentions.

"Once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, we will take time to mourn our dead and celebrate everyone who helped save lives, including people like Bill and Melinda Gates. But then we should ask why so many lives depended upon the munificence of billionaires rather than transparent, accountable and adequately funded public agencies.

We should ask why we don't have stronger international organisations that are not beholden to wealthy states or persons. We should ask why billionaires are allowed to endow immensely wealthy, tax-protected philanthropic trusts, rather than paying more taxes. We must ask why health was treated as a privilege, not a right."

Carney, M. (2020). *The world after covid-19*. The Economist, 16 April. <https://amp-economist-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.economist.com/business/2020/04/16/by-invitation-mark-carney-on-how-the-economy-must-lead-to-human-values>

In the above article, Mark Carney, until recently Governor of the Bank of England, comments as follows:

“In this crisis, we know we need to act as an interdependent community not independent individuals, so the values of economic dynamism and efficiency have been joined by those of solidarity, fairness, responsibility and compassion.

All this amounts to a test of stakeholder capitalism. When it’s over, companies will be judged by “what they did during the war”, how they treated their employees, suppliers and customers, by who shared and who hoarded.”

It is difficult to find a more compelling statement from such an authoritative source expressed in terms which map very closely to those of Humanistic Management.

Humanists International (2020). *How humanists around the world are responding to the coronavirus crisis*. 20 April. <https://humanists.international/2020/04/how-humanists-around-the-world-are-responding-to-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

Everyone interviewed in this report agreed on one thing: the necessity for empathy and solidarity with the most vulnerable. Another common theme was promoting evidence-based approaches to dealing with the pandemic, especially in countries where science may be regarded with increased suspicion.

Kerrissey, M. J. & Edmondson, A. C. (2020). *What Good Leadership Looks Like During This Pandemic*. Harvard Business Review, 13 April. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/what-good-leadership-looks-like-during-this-pandemic>

This article presents empathy, solidarity, transparency and honesty as leadership traits which may be particularly important and effective in responses to the crisis. These are traits which sit much more readily within the framework of humanistic management than, say, traditional economic management (which, viewing humans as units responding in a self-interested way, might not so obviously do so).

Reicher, S., Drury, J. & Stott, C. (2020). *The truth about panic*. The Psychologist. 15 March. <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/truth-about-panic>.

The ideas expressed in the Kerrissey & Edmondson HBR article above are reinforced from a psychological perspective in this piece. It seeks to show that solidarity and collective support will come to the fore as the most likely response from humans in the crisis, especially when reinforced by appropriate leadership language and behaviours. It also argues for a re-framing of what has been termed ‘panic buying’ for what it, in the main, actually was: i.e. a natural and common-sense approach to preparations.

Watts, A. (2020). *What does purpose look like in a crisis? A blueprint for better business*. 26 March.
<http://www.blueprintforbusiness.org/purpose-in-crisis/>

This posting from Blueprint for Better Business includes a handful of concrete examples of some larger businesses whose actions can be fairly described as 'human centred'. It remains to be seen whether these organisations and others of similar ilk will fare better than others during and post-crisis.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this piece, I mentioned the difficulties I experienced in deciding whether I could write anything useful about the pandemic from a humanistic perspective. My conclusion is that at least part of this difficulty arises because the pandemic is so all-consuming and has challenged the status quo so fundamentally. In a sense, so much *needs* to be written that knowing where to start is a huge challenge. Starting somewhere, almost anywhere, is sometimes the best option – and personal experience is perhaps the most immediate place. For me, the changed working environment has opened up the opportunity to rewrite the office-cultural rule book – not before time – and I do hope this opportunity is not lost. My conversations with my friends and colleagues from the world of humanism and humanistic management have been a great source of support and solidarity, in particular the sharing of resources. I hope some of the resources I have included in this piece help to provoke and develop your own thinking and ideas.

About the author

Paul is a senior tax consultant working for a global professional services firm. He is also volunteer coordinator for Humanists in Business (under the auspices of Humanists UK, the charity and campaigning organisation), and a Member of the Humanistic Management UK Chapter Steering Group.

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