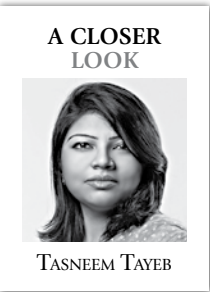


Fighting the demons in our head

How work culture will change post-Covid-19



A CLOSER LOOK
TASNEEM TAYEB

EVEN a few months back, I didn't realise that work from home on a daily basis was possible. Of course, there were those days when I felt under the weather and decided to work from home—mostly coordinating with the reporting staff, instructing them on how to go about the urgent tasks in my absence. And it was mostly on the phone or messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp or Viber. Sometimes there were those Skype calls, absolutely on indispensable occasions. And oh boy, those days were tough coordinating with my team from home—there were so many things I had trouble explaining to them, such detailed instructions were needed, feedbacks, follow-ups and more feedbacks. And then there were those meetings where I had to send a team member on my behalf and then getting them to brief me the next day. And still, despite all these attempts, there was a lack of coordination somewhere. Working from home seemed like an absurd idea—is it even possible to work from home?

And then things changed, and pretty suddenly.

Even while watching the news on Al Jazeera of a mysterious disease claiming lives in a faraway town in China—it was late December I think—I did not realise that, a few months down the line, my life would be turned upside-down by this illness, and I would be scrambling to find meaning of what was happening around... all the chaos, commotion, change and then the calm of the shutdown. And not just me, Covid-19 has torn apart the social fabric in all the corners of the world. There is no longer the world

that we once knew, that we called home. It is a different place now, a difficult navigation, and one that is often riddled with danger. And while Covid-19 has changed the society as we know it, its most visible impact will probably be at the workplace.

For one, we are not going to go back to the same workplace that we had left when we walked out of the office for the last time before the shutdown. It might not look so different but, in practice, it will be. When we go back to work, we will probably be wearing masks and gloves, if not PPE, and see stockpiles of hand sanitisers and disinfectants at every communal space. The offices will feel sterile thanks to all the deep cleaning that they have undergone. But while this might be good for my health, I am not sure how this will affect my emotional wellbeing.

And then, there will be no more handshakes or the occasional high-fives with colleagues after achieving small feats. Probably, there will be no more gossip over lunch at the cafeteria as social distancing will remain a key priority, of course to keep us safe. And we will sit spaces apart. We will fear contagion and our social interactions with our colleagues, co-workers and teams will be coloured by that tacit knowledge.

And for sure, there will be less meetings where we are required to be present physically, and even fewer foreign travels for workshops and trainings, because these will go fully virtual. If we can coordinate with cross-functional teams—both within and outside the country—at the height of the pandemic, then surely we can do it after things become “normal”. And the less we travel for work, the lesser the possibility of contagion. And there will be fewer people we will meet, get to know, and it might feel less humane.

Amidst all these changes and uncertainties, there remains the fear of AI, robotics, IoT,



automation taking over our work. We will always be on the look out to see who will be the first to go and then the next. Despite all the reassurances from our employers, the fear of being abandoned will linger like a foul smell in the air that no deep cleaning can get rid of.

According to a recent survey by a USA-based mental health provider, Ginger, nearly 7 in 10 employees surveyed suggested that this pandemic is the “most stressful time of their entire professional career, which has aligned with stark increases in new prescriptions of antidepressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-insomnia medications,” as reported by The American Journal of Managed Care. And according to the World Health

Organization, “In public mental health terms, the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety. But as new measures and impacts are introduced—especially quarantine and its effects on many people’s usual activities, routines or livelihoods—levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour are also expected to rise.”

And while no one is immune to these spill-over effects of this pandemic—I, for one, fight my own demons every hour of every day, and try to stay positive by reminding myself of all the things I should be grateful for—the question is, does it really have to be this way? Certainly not.

If Covid-19 has been a frightening experience for us, it has also been a lesson at how fast we can adapt to changes and embrace transformations to stay relevant in the face of Herculean challenges. Look how we have changed the way we work, we look at work, overnight! What even a few weeks ago seemed like a dystopian, distant possibility, we are now living it, and what’s more, we are even getting better at it.

While no doubt Covid-19 has caused a hollow in our lives, do we really have to succumb to its ill motive of sucking the lives out of us even while we are breathing? Of making us cold, sterile beings? Can we not train ourselves to turn around to get the better of this disease?

We can hone our creatives skills, leadership skills—skills that make us humans, help us survive in this ever-changing world. We can choose to embrace whatever human contact we are allowed even with social distancing and relish in that. There will certainly be losses, distances, and voids that will be difficult to fill. The worries, the qualms, the uncertainties are going to be around for the next few years, if not decades, and while these feelings can trigger depression and make us feel lonely and anxious, we can still win this game of survival, even against all the odds.

Covid-19 has certainly put us in a nightmare situation, both in our social lives and how we interact professionally. But it has also enabled us to see the bigger picture: of the ability of the humans to remain resilient, to be agile, to stay relevant.

It is up to us now how we want to utilise the limbo we find ourselves in. We can either choose to be proactively productive or do nothing and be bitter about it. The choice is really up to us.

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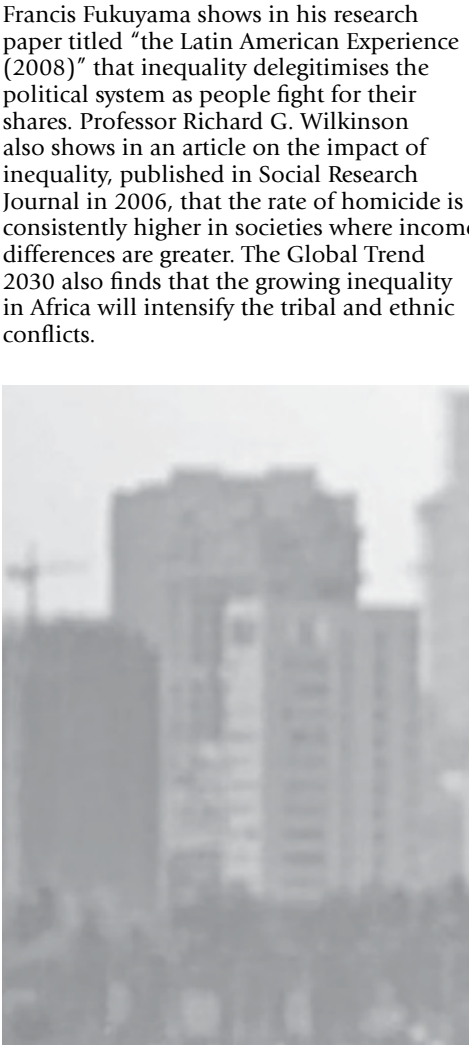
Why should we care about inequality?

RAJIB TRIPURA

INEQUALITY is now one of the top global issues as it poses a major threat to economic growth and social crisis. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) shows in its World Social Report 2020 how much income inequality has increased in many developed countries, and in some middle-income and developing economies. The report finds that income and wealth are increasingly concentrated in the hands of the top one percent. It shows that technological innovation, climate change, urbanisation and international migration are the reasons for this inequality. The coronavirus crisis is only worsening the poverty and inequality within and among the societies. It is hurting school-going children and affecting more the students of underdeveloped and developing countries that do not have the opportunity for virtual learning. During the pandemic, people who work in low-pay sectors are suffering more than those working in high-pay sectors. For example, the educated and high-paid employees can carry on their work from home but low-paid workers like the garment workers and individuals engaged with small and medium-sized enterprises are hit the hardest.

Why should we care about inequality? Some argue that we should focus on poverty reduction—not inequality. A model by the economist Simon Kuznets, known as a Kuznets curve, is a significant model used for this argument. Kuznets argues that inequality is an undeniable result of the early stages of economic growth and it will reduce eventually as growth advances with an increase of per capita income. So he suggests focusing on growth and poverty reduction. But many studies find that economic growth does not help to reduce inequality until the government takes special measures. There are powerful arguments in support of why inequality requires urgent policy attention.

Firstly, a society that has higher inequality tends to have more internal conflicts and destabilisation of social cohesion. It is because when inequalities continue through the generations, the excluded people tend to contest the progress that has bypassed them.



The gap between the rich and the poor goes back hundreds of years.

Secondly, higher income inequality is an obstacle to poverty reduction. Poor people have fewer chances of getting their share of the development pie where inequality is high. Economists Roy van der Weide and Branko Milanovic found in a study on the impact of overall inequality that high inequality has a positive impact on economic growth, however, it benefits mostly the rich group of a society. They also argue that economic growth in a highly unequal

society further increases the gap between the rich and the poor. Thomas Piketty in his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* also argues that the return on capital is always higher than economic growth which makes richer those who have the capital and poorer those who don't have it. Poorer people also suffer more where the market mechanism is weaker, because a poor person will not have a loan if he or she cannot satisfy the lender without a guarantee. So, lack of income limits their investment in business, health, and children's education. Thus the poor



PHOTO: REUTERS/ARKO DATTA

experience the vicious circle of poverty.

Thirdly, income inequality traps can trigger an increase in intergenerational inequality and hinder social mobility. Inequality traps describe a situation where the total income distribution is stable due to the different dimensions of inequality (social, economic, political, and cultural) that interact to defend the richest group from downward mobility and to inhibit the poor from moving upward. Economist

Vijayendra Rao argues that in a patriarchal society, women are not given an equal share of property and have to confront restriction of movement. Besides, the girls are often not sent to school, and women are less likely to work outside. So, this social system keeps women dependent on men and keeps them remaining in an inequality trap. Like the example of women and girls in a patriarchal society, the unequal distribution of power enables the rich to have a good policy in their favour and to keep their social status, Vijayendra Rao argues. In an unequal society,

income growth of the bottom 40 percent of a population at a higher rate than the country's national average by 2030. Inequality is also an important determinant to attain the aim of zero extreme poverty by 2030. A World Bank study finds that poverty rate will fall to below 3 percent if the income of the bottom 40 percent of a population increases by 2 percent faster than the national average, but the poverty rate will remain at 10 percent if the income of the bottom 40 percent grows at below 2 percentage points of average national income.

So to achieve a good democratic system, stable political and social structure, as well as sustainable growth, we need to reduce inequality. Initiatives have been taken to address the issue but these have proved to be mostly unsuccessful. Moreover, the coronavirus crisis has worsened the situation by impeding the present actions of reducing poverty and it will pull back the households that have crossed the poverty line. More social policies and actions are needed to reduce inequality. The UNDESA suggests in its report that promotion of equal access to opportunities, inclusive fiscal policies that benefit employment and disability, and legislation that tackles prejudice and discrimination and promotes greater participation of marginalised groups are necessary to minimise income inequality. An anti-poverty group, Global Citizen, together with a research agency, Glocalities, have done a poll in 25 countries during this pandemic and found that eight out of 10 people think billionaires should come forward during this crisis to end poverty and inequality. Oxfam showed in a report that the world's richest eight billionaires are as wealthy as half of the world's population. Oxfam finds that if an additional 0.5 percent tax could be imposed on the wealth of the richest 1 percent billionaires over the next 10 years, it would be equal to investments needed to create 117 million jobs in education and healthcare sectors. The bottom line is: a global concerted effort and a burden-sharing attitude are required to fight against poverty and inequality.

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Rajib Tripura is a foreign affairs analyst and a graduate from Crawford School of Public Policy, the Australian National University.

NIDO QUBEIN
(Born 1948)
American businessman and motivational speaker.

Your present circumstances don't determine where you can go; they merely determine where you start.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Blacken

5 Tourist stop

10 Make movie changes

12 Battery end

13 Restaurant patron

14 Japanese comic books

15 Quarterback Manning

16 Hoppy pint, for short

18 Collins base

19 Gobble up

21 Pool sticks

22 Cub Scout leader

24 Silas Marner's ward

25 Common sense

29 U2 singer

30 Amateur

32 Crumb carrier

33 Hallucinatory drug

34 Opposite of post-

35 Native group

37 Brighten

39 Space sighting

40 Light fare

41 Listens to

42 Indiana city

DOWN

1 Guiding principle

2 Made better

3 On the go

4 Deplore

5 Baby's call

6 Words before tear or dare

7 Taste bud setting

8 More nervous

9 Inclines

11 Victory

17 Pushes onward

20 — a customer

21 Like caramel

23 Rants

25 Madison's successor

26 Prompt

27 Gazelle's cousin

28 Toothbrush target

29 Cookie quantity

31 Poor

33 "Why don't we!"

36 Garden area

38 Fall back

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT