

# Flattening and Shortening the Curve: Personality Matters

Contributed by:

**Optimal Consulting Group**

Zhen Yi LEE, Manager, Consulting Services, Asia

Wan Leng HO, CEO, Asia

**optimal** Developing Leaders.  
Optimising Performance.



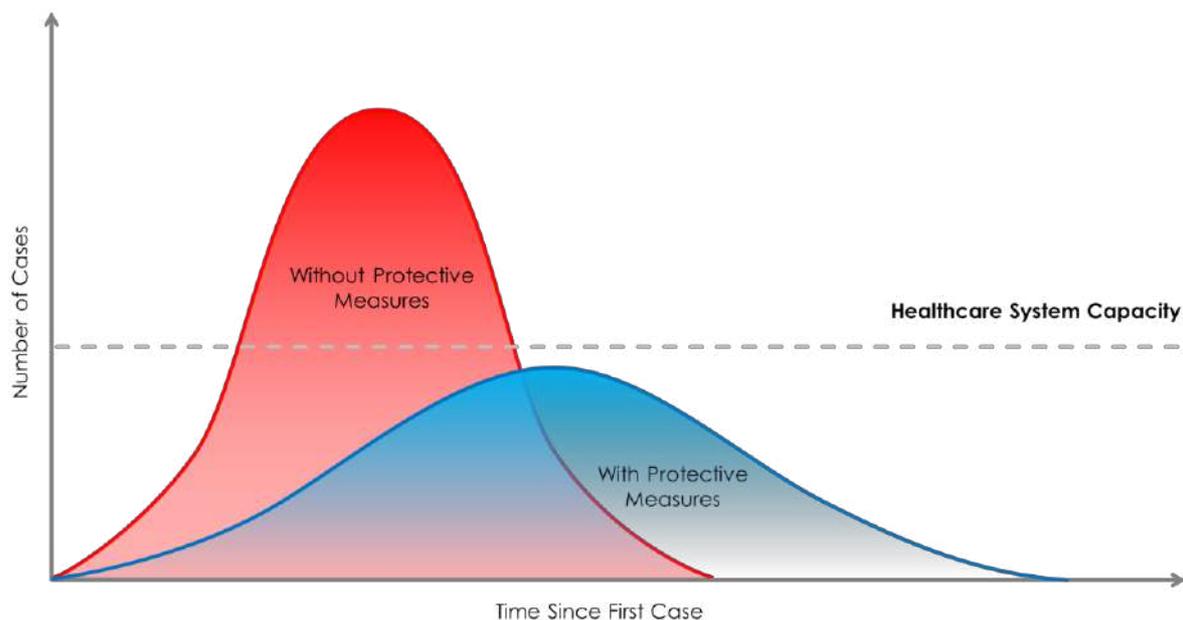
**COVID-19**

## INTRODUCTION

In the past few weeks, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak has escalated exponentially, with cases now reported in more than 150 countries. Rightly so, governments around the world have been implementing response strategies to tackle the pandemic. With measures ranging from partial or full lockdowns that are currently affecting one-third of humanity to aggressive virus testing and contact tracing in countries such as South Korea and Singapore, we can see that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

*Nevertheless, a closer look at the situation reveals to us that it is fundamentally driven by **HUMAN BEHAVIOUR**. For governments, the challenge thus lies in managing people, who have differences in personality and motivation.*

This means that some people will be more predisposed to demonstrating behaviour that positively contribute to "flattening the curve", while others may have a propensity for behaviour that harm themselves, their families and their countries. As we have observed over the course of this ongoing crisis, there are five best practices that can be examined through the lens of individual differences, using key scales from Hogan Assessments.

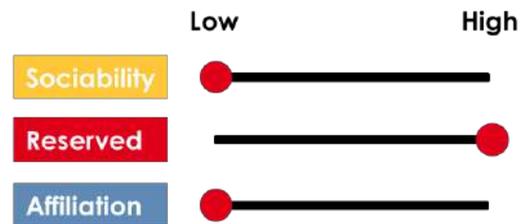


# 1. PRACTISING PHYSICAL DISTANCING

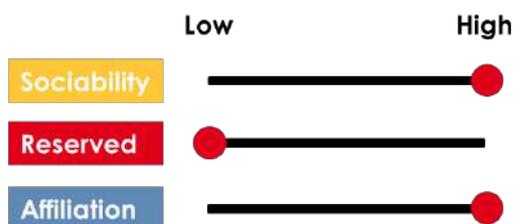


As an infectious disease such as COVID-19 most often spreads from person to person, physical distancing, or more popularly known as social distancing, aims to reduce the amount of contact we have with one another. Examples of physical distancing measures include refraining from taking part in mass gatherings, working from home, and even something as simple as keeping a distance of at least one metre from one another in a queue.

While the act of self-isolation may be foreign to many, it can be said to be second nature to self-professed “introverts”. This group of people typically score **LOW** on the **SOCIABILITY**<sup>1</sup> scale and **HIGH** on the **RESERVED**<sup>2</sup> scale; they limit social interaction and prefer their own company. As they may also have **LITTLE OR NO desire for AFFILIATION**<sup>3</sup>, they do not believe that relationships are a hugely important aspect in their lives.



Although these people are often perceived as antisocial, their inclination to be alone means that they play a critical role in breaking the chain of infection. Even when they have to socialise, they keep communication to a minimum and with a small, tight-knit circle of friends. Hence, an “introvert” with the virus tends to be in relatively few social situations, helping to limit the spread.



On the contrary, people who are **HIGHER** on the **SOCIABILITY** and **AFFILIATION** scales, and **LOWER** on the **RESERVED** scale, with their strong need for relationships, may find it challenging to thrive in a

world where social contact is now frowned upon. As they gain energy and a sense of belonging when immersed in social situations, they seek to surround themselves with other people, and can otherwise feel distressed. This group of people, preferring a communicative, high-touch approach to work, may lack the independence and task focus to stay productive when working from home.

Hence, hypothetically speaking, countries with more “introverts” should find that their people will naturally take to social distancing. However, countries with fewer “introverts” may need to consider drastic intervention in the form of full lockdowns or stay-at-home orders, in order to effectively enforce behaviour that go against the grain for the populace.

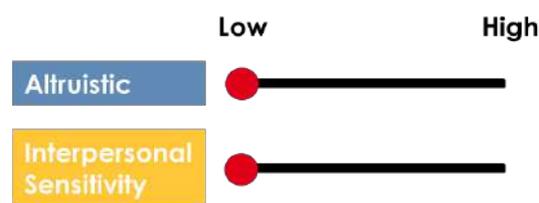
1. **Sociability:** The degree to which a person seems to need and/or enjoy interacting with others.
2. **Reserved:** Concerns behaviour that ranges from caring about the problems of others to seeming indifferent to, or unconcerned about other people.
3. **Affiliation:** Concerns valuing frequent and varied social contact, an interest in working with others, and a lifestyle organised around social interaction.

# 2. TAKE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



The concept of physical distancing is closely linked to the wider idea of social responsibility, which is about acting in a manner that does not harm society. Perhaps one of the most cited examples of socially irresponsible behaviour came from Patient 31 of South Korea. As a member of Shincheonji, a cult-like church, she had attended a service despite developing a high fever, and had also dined out with friends.

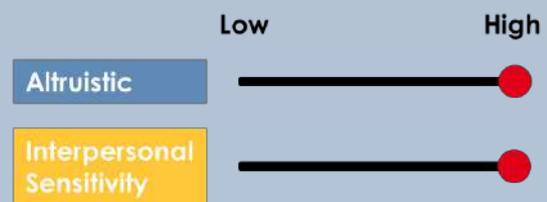
Patient 31 was subsequently termed a “super-spreader” of the virus, as within a week after her diagnosis, South Korea’s infection tally skyrocketed by 30 times. The Korean Center for Disease Control estimated that Patient 31 was in direct contact with 1,160 people, a consequence of her failing to self-isolate and continuing with social activities even when unwell.



From what we know of Patient 31 and other similar cases, it seems that this group of people have a stronger tendency to act based on self-interest. **LESS MOTIVATED** to live by **ALTRUISTIC**<sup>4</sup> values, they may prioritise fulfilling their own immediate needs and desires, such as of meeting up with friends and going to work. Furthermore, these people may have **LOWER**

**INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY**<sup>5</sup> scores; they are likely to overlook the impact of their actions on others’ health and well-being, coming across as self-minded and thoughtless.

On the other hand, people with **HIGHER ALTRUISTIC** and **INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY** scores should readily adopt a socially responsible mindset, given their natural inclination to act with the greater good in mind and with consideration for others. When faced with choices, they tend to live up to the mantra of “It’s not about you, it’s about everybody else” by putting others’ needs before theirs. Therefore, someone who is unwell will be highly mindful of spreading the illness, and will endeavour to minimise the possibility of causing such harm to others by practising self-isolation, even if it means sacrificing his/her daily routine and social life.



This crisis is thus an opportunity for us to review the state of our society and our shared values. Should we continue championing individualism and thinking in terms of “every man for himself”, when it is increasingly clear that in our interconnected world, a virus can spread between cities that are thousands of miles apart? When it comes to survival of the fittest, countries that are more other-focused may eventually win the race.

4. **Altruistic:** Concerns valuing improving society and actively helping others, an interest in helping the less fortunate, and a lifestyle organised around making the world a better place to live.
5. **Interpersonal Sensitivity:** The degree to which a person is seen as perceptive, tactful, and socially sensitive.



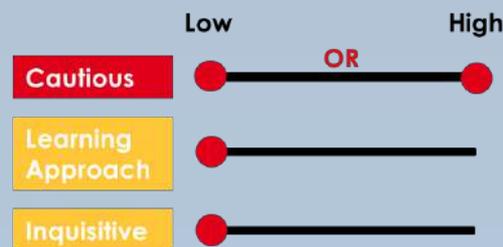
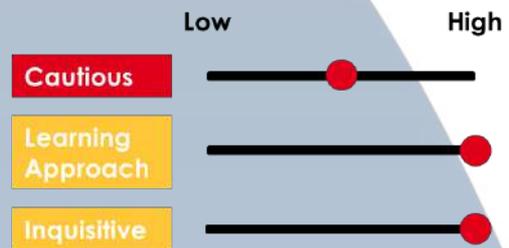
### ***3. ACT IN A TIMELY MANNER***

While we have advanced our understanding of the novel coronavirus in the past few months, much about it remains unknown. Governments have had to work with a lack of data most of the time, but this should not be an excuse to delay action. A study led by Dr. Zhong Nanshan, a top Chinese expert on COVID-19, indicates that if the lockdown of Wuhan had occurred five days earlier, the number of infections could have been cut by one-third.

Amid inaction by many governments around the world, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have been lauded for their early efforts in containing the spread. Authorities have acted with a strong sense of preparedness and urgency, spurred on by lessons learned from the 2002-2004 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak.

In Hong Kong, where memories of SARS remain particularly vivid, many Hong Kongers have taken matters into their own hands, leading ground-up efforts to ensure that their communities remain safe and clean. For example, fed up by the lack of face masks in the early days of the outbreak, a group of citizens came together to invest in mask-making machines and set up a factory.

Responsiveness is key to staying one step ahead of the virus, and some people are more innately agile to act. This group of people, being **SOMEWHAT CAUTIOUS**<sup>6</sup> (i.e., not too low and not too high on the scale), will be wary of threats and try to anticipate issues, while remaining decisive in their actions. These people may also score **HIGHER** on the **LEARNING APPROACH**<sup>7</sup> scale; they seek to stay well-informed so that they are equipped with knowledge to make plans. In addition, **HIGHLY INQUISITIVE**<sup>8</sup>, they are inclined to connect different pieces of news to fully understand the impact of the virus on themselves and their communities.



Therefore, imagine someone who is infected with the virus and is **LOW** on **LEARNING APPROACH** and **NOT INQUISITIVE**. Less inclined to keep up-to-date with the pandemic, he or she may not recognise the symptoms that he or she is experiencing, nor explore the possibility that he or she is infected, thus failing to seek timely medical treatment. Furthermore, **without a moderate CAUTIOUS** score, he or she can either appear oblivious to the

problems ahead when the score is **too LOW**, or seem hesitant to act when the score is **too HIGH**. Both ways result in a reactive and ill-prepared manner of dealing with the crisis.

Consequently, to manage such a populace, countries may need to ramp up their efforts to promote health literacy and introduce mass virus testing. Given that people may not know when and/or how to obtain medical help nor have the curiosity to find out, governments will need to be highly involved in preparing their citizens for the worst.

6. **Cautious:** Concerns behaviour that ranges from a confident willingness to undertake new ventures to a cautious reluctance to try new things.
7. **Learning Approach:** The degree to which a person seems to enjoy academic activities and to value educational achievement for its own sake.
8. **Inquisitive:** The degree to which a person is perceived as bright, creative, and interested in intellectual matters.



# 4. COMPLY WITH MEASURES

Even with timely intervention, all best efforts will be futile if people are uncooperative and do not follow rules. In Italy, often known as a country of rule breakers, lockdown of cities in northern Italy in the early days of the outbreak failed to mitigate the crisis, leading to a stricter enforcement of rules and eventually, a nationwide lockdown. Citizens are not allowed to leave their homes, unless they have valid reasons that must be declared in a form.

Since then, Italian authorities have pressed charges against at least 92,367 people who violated the lockdown, with many caught lying in their declaration forms. In Malaysia, which went into a two-week lockdown on 18 March, authorities indicated that the compliance level was only 60 per cent to 70 per cent.

Why do some people continue to flout rules? We believe that personality differences can explain this, as some people are naturally more compliant than others. This group of people, scoring **HIGH** on the **PRUDENCE**<sup>9</sup> scale, is attentive to rules and regulations, and will readily conform to measures such as lockdown procedures and travel advisories. Furthermore, **HIGHLY DUTIFUL**<sup>10</sup>, many of

them tend to view authority in a positive light, and are thus inclined to follow people in power, including healthcare experts and their governments, often in an unquestioning manner. Lastly, these people have a **NEED FOR SECURITY**<sup>11</sup>, valuing order and stability in their lifestyles, and will be motivated to ensure that they remain safe amid such uncertain times.

By contrast, people who are **LOWER** on the **PRUDENCE**, **DUTIFUL** and **SECURITY** scales will be innately less compliant than others. Preferring to operate in a flexible environment, they tend to dislike following process, and seek to be free from perceived constraints. As a result, they may disregard advice to stay at home and not diligently observe safe distancing rules. Even when measures are legally enforced, this group of people can remain defiant in the face of authority, and only act on their own terms.



9. **Prudence:** The degree to which a person seems conscientiousness, conforming, and dependable.
10. **Dutiful:** Concerns behaviour that ranges from being independent and willing to challenge people in authority to being conforming and reluctant to take independent action.
11. **Security:** Concerns valuing certainty, predictability, and risk-free environments, an interest in structure and order, and a lifestyle organised around minimising risk, uncertainty, and criticism.

# 5. TAKE IT SERIOUSLY



It is clear now that the COVID-19 outbreak will be here to stay for most of 2020, with long-term impact on many aspects of society. While we ought to stay optimistic about the end of the pandemic, we should not underestimate the virus and the risks that it poses. Unfortunately, many people continue to have a complacent attitude, and do not take sufficient precautions to protect themselves and others.

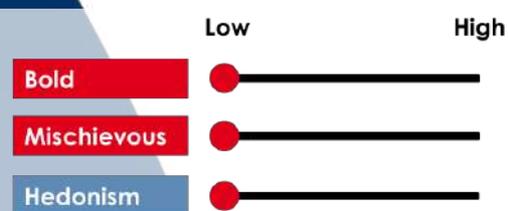
An example is Rudy Gobert, the first National Basketball Association (NBA) player to contract COVID-19. However, in a press conference before being diagnosed, he had displayed a lack of regard for hygiene by jokingly touching the microphones in front of him.

Similarly, we have been hearing stories of college students in the United States travelling to Florida in droves for spring break. There, they occupied beaches, bars and clubs, which are widely considered hotbeds of the virus.

Such dismissive behaviour, especially evident in the youth, has prompted the World Health Organisation (WHO) to caution against having a sense of invulnerability in the face of "one of the most serious diseases [we] will face in [our] lifetime". While this behaviour can be attributed in part to ignorance of the disease, it is undeniable that personality plays a part as well.

The excessive positivity that many people have towards COVID-19 can be explained by **HIGH** scores on the **BOLD**<sup>12</sup> scale. This group of people, believing that they are young and/or healthy, may overestimate the ability of their immune systems to fight off the virus. In addition, many of them tend to be **HIGHLY MISCHIEVOUS**<sup>13</sup>; adventurous by nature, they may continue their risk-seeking ways instead of taking the necessary precautions. Finally, **driven by HEDONISM**<sup>14</sup>, they seek out fun and enjoyment in whatever they do. Hence, despite knowing that partying and travelling can increase exposure to the virus, these people can be easily tempted by the prospect of such activities.

While the above-mentioned group may think of themselves as invincible against the virus, it does not mean that those who are **LOWER** on the **BOLD**, **MISCHIEVOUS** and **HEDONISM** scales will feel highly vulnerable. Rather, this group of people will view the pandemic in a serious and realistic manner. They are inclined to regard the virus as a valid threat to their health, and will acknowledge that they are also at risk of being infected. Keen to avoid negative consequences, and having a lower need for fun and enjoyment, they will take steps to minimise their exposure to the virus by not participating in non-essential activities.



12. **Bold:** Concerns behaviour that ranges from modesty and self-restraint to assertive self-promotion and unrealistic expectations of success and power.
13. **Mischievous:** Concerns behaviour that ranges from seeming quiet, unassuming, and responsible to seeming bright, charming, impulsive, and limit testing.
14. **Hedonism:** Concerns valuing good company and good times, an interest in pleasure, excitement, and variety, and a lifestyle organised around entertaining friends, good food, and having fun.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The COVID-19 outbreak is shaping up to be a trial by fire, straining many healthcare systems to their limits and testing the abilities of governments around the world. Similar to how companies need to manage their employees to beat their competition, governments need to manage their citizens to emerge victorious against the pandemic.

Even though “flattening the curve” seems to be our best hope of ultimately eradicating the virus, it can be a long-drawn-out process. What if it were possible to not just “flatten the curve”, but also to “shorten” it? While this is an emerging theory based on recent epidemiological studies, we believe that when coupled with effective governance and sufficient public health interventions, an understanding of personality and motivation can be key to “flattening and shortening the curve”. For governments, it is important to know your populace and their likely behaviour. As individuals, we can all play a part by consciously being aware of and managing our innate tendencies, which can be counterproductive during this pandemic.

In this article, using scales, we have theoretically predicted the traits that would allow one to naturally demonstrate five best practices aimed at minimising the spread of the virus. Please contact us if you would like to:

- obtain country-specific norms and insights based on Hogan Assessments to develop a more targeted strategy in flattening and shortening the curve;
- understand how this prediction can be similarly applied to assess and identify talents in your organisation;
- obtain country-specific norms and insights based on Hogan Assessments to develop a more targeted HR strategy for your organisation; and/or
- acquire strategic self-awareness of your strengths and challenges for continuous personal improvement.

### About Optimal Consulting Group (OCG)

OCG is Hogan Assessment Systems distributor in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Hong Kong and Japan and the author of Optimal 4Cs Talent Review and Succession Model, Resilient Leadership Model, The Fruitful Team Model and Optimal e360. OCG partners clients to build a continuous pipeline of future leaders in Asia for social, economic and political roles.

This article is brought to you by Optimal Consulting Group Pte. Ltd.  
([www.optimalconsulting.com.sg](http://www.optimalconsulting.com.sg)).

For further discussion, please contact the contributors:

Zhen Yi LEE, Manager, Consulting Services, Asia ([zylee@optimalconsulting.com.sg](mailto:zylee@optimalconsulting.com.sg))  
Wan Leng HO, CEO, Asia ([wlho@optimalconsulting.com.sg](mailto:wlho@optimalconsulting.com.sg))