



COVID-19: Golden rules for behaviour change

Unprecedented times call for unprecedented behavioural changes to keep populations safe over the long term

Canada reported its first case of COVID-19 on January 15, 2020. Since then, we—along with rest of the world—have experienced an experiment in human behaviour like no other in history.

Months later, the only real way to combat the spread of the virus is by influencing how we interact with each other and the world around us. Changing behaviour, even on a small scale and for a short period of time, is hard. Maintaining significant changes to population behaviours over a sustained period will be even harder. It is, in effect, the design of—or evolution toward—a new normal.

Behavioural science is a useful tool for thinking about how we might encourage and support people in doing what they know is right, even when it is hard. Fortunately, we have guidelines. We can look to four golden rules to help us sustain behaviour change over time.¹

Golden rule #1: Understand the context

We know our behaviour is influenced by the situation, or context, that we are in. Context can change our mindset, which can then influence our decision about how to act.

Uncertainty: When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, our context changed—and drastically. Governments instituted orders that required the majority of their citizens to stay at home to facilitate the critical changes in behaviour that were required to slow the spread of the virus. Many people were willing to give up personal freedoms for the collective good. We looked for certainty in an uncertain world. Governments provided that certainty by telling people to stay home, and to physically distance from others.²

As governments begin to reopen economies, the context is changing again. Some people are beginning to grow tired of the stay-at-home orders. Others are worried that social distancing measures are being lifted too soon.³ Businesses are reopening and we are told to return to work, yet we are also told to continue physical distancing. With sustained uncertainty, governments must consider how to balance health, economic, and social outcomes. Human behaviour will be the driver of each.

Golden rule #2: Messengers matter

We know our behaviour is influenced not only by the message, but by who communicates information to us: the messenger.

Trust: Government leaders and public health officials have become messengers of required behaviour change during the crisis. The population's trust in government can, in fact, enhance the acceptance of policies that call for short-term sacrifices by citizens.⁴ In New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern has been praised for her leadership in combatting the coronavirus. Trust in her government is the highest among nations (88 percent compared to

the G7 average of 59 percent),⁵ while the country's total cases per million is relatively low at 301.⁶

As economies in Canada begin to reopen, federal and provincial/territorial governments will continue to be messengers of desired behaviours to effect positive health outcomes, and trust will continue to play a role in the population's response. However, municipal governments will become increasingly important messengers in the effort to drive positive economic and social outcomes. This includes messages related to the return to work, use of public transit systems, access to public spaces, and shopping and dining at local establishments.

Golden rule #3:

People look to others for what to do

We know our behaviour is influenced by what other people do. We look to others to inform our own behaviour.

Social norms: At the outset of the crisis, desired social behaviours were made clear and were, for the most part, adopted. As more people engaged in social distancing, it became a trend with its own hashtag (#stayhome, #socialdistancing). As time goes on and as people return to work, many will want to return to normal—that is, return to their previous patterns of behaviour. We are creatures of habit, after all.

However, we cannot return to what had been. We must transition to a new normal, in which new behaviours should be expected. Previous social and cultural norms like handshaking should become a thing of the past. Small behavioural modifications, such as no handshaking, may be relatively easy to adopt and maintain. But what if we ask all citizens to wear masks in public or to sign up for a contact-tracing app? Those behaviour changes may be harder to make. As of late April, 80 percent to 90 percent of people in China, India, the Philippines, and Japan reported wearing face masks in public, while only 13 percent of Britons reported doing the same.⁷ In Canada⁸ and the United States,⁹ more than half the population does not support the use of a tracking app.

One thing that will stay the same is that the collective will establish the norm. We will continue to look to what others do to inform our own behaviour.

Golden rule #4: People are drawn to things that grab their attention

We know our behaviour is influenced by what our attention is drawn to (and sometimes by what we choose to pay attention to). This is the behavioural principle of salience.

Attention: As the health crisis unfolded, we were getting daily updates on the number of infections and deaths. Our own mortality became salient. Our behaviour was driven by fear and uncertainty.

As we transition to the new normal, people will need help along the way to support sustained behaviour change. Simple, relevant, and timely reminders can contribute to establishing a new norm. Reminders to wash our hands and keep our distance, such as with arrows on store floors to indicate direction and lines or circles to indicate spacing, for example, will be important to keep nudging behaviour changes toward the desired norm. We are bombarded by stimuli every day. We must reduce the mental effort required for people to perform the desired behaviour.

Governments have asked their citizens to change their behaviour en masse. There is no tried and tested plan for navigating through this. However, insights from behavioural science can help governments influence citizens to shift their behaviour. These golden rules are not a panacea for achieving desirable outcomes, but they offer a way to think about the messages, the policies, and the solutions that are to be delivered to the population. The world may have changed dramatically, but we can use the science of human behaviour to light our way forward.

Where do we go from here?

Use data to drive decisions: Data, including large surveys and polls, can be used to monitor attitudes, sentiments, and behaviours in our new normal. This can help governments to understand the current context and norms of behaviour. It can also identify whether those new norms of behaviour are driving desired health, economic, and social outcomes. Data can be used to enable more targeted solutions where

behaviour is slipping, or more rigorous measures if outcomes are not being achieved.

Inform policies through inclusive decision-making: In a health crisis the likes of which we have not seen in a century, a range of perspectives should be brought in to help inform decisions. All three levels of government as well as business owners, employees, citizens, vulnerable populations, and community groups are part of an ecosystem that should be included in decision-making. The ecosystem stakeholders themselves can then become key messengers of the desired behaviour. This type of policy design can also contribute to trust in government.

Institute agile policy development: There is no playbook for this crisis. Policies designed to drive specific health, economic, and social outcomes will need to be developed in an agile way. If a policy is put in place and it's not working, it should be changed. For example, at the outset of the crisis, Canada announced a 10% wage subsidy for small business and very quickly adjusted it to a 75% subsidy in order to better support small businesses in Canada.¹⁰ It needs to be okay for governments to change their policies without losing the trust of their citizens. We are in unknown territory and our decisions will sometimes reflect that.

Be clear about expected behaviours: People need to know what the right thing to do is at the right point in time. Simple, relevant, and timely reminders will be critical for influencing the adoption of new norms of behaviour across all aspects of our daily lives—at home, at work, at school, and in public. When people don't know what to do, they usually revert to well-worn habits. Shifts in behaviour must be established and reinforced on a micro scale everywhere, be it in the workplace, in the hallways at school, in local restaurants or pubs, even on the streets and in parks.

The new normal is here. Until we find a vaccine, behaviour change will be a critical component to ensuring that our population stays protected from the COVID-19 threat.

Contact

Jane Howe

Public Sector Innovation Leader

janehowe@deloitte.ca

+1 613 786 8608



¹ Dolan, P., Hallsworth, M., Halpern, D., King, D., Metcalfe, R., & Vlaev, I. (2012). Influencing behaviour: The mindspace way. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 33(1), 264–277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2011.10.009>

² Webinar with Delaney, Liam; Hahn; Ulrike; Chater, Nick; Dolan, Paul; Lordan, Grace. Presented by the London School of Economics.

³ Pew Research. (May 15, 2020). *Majority of Americans who lost a job or wages due to COVID-19 concerned states will reopen too quickly*. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/15/majority-of-americans-who-lost-a-job-or-wages-due-to-covid-19-concerned-states-will-reopen-too-quickly/>

⁴ OECD. *Government at a Glance 2017*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/gov_glance-2017-76-en.pdf?expires=1589030956&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=AD9274B1446F89E17BBDCC8476853682

⁵ Colmar Brunton. (April 8, 2020). *COVID Times*. Retrieved from: https://static.colmarbrunton.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CB-COVID-Times_8-April-2020.pdf

⁶ Worldometer. (June 2020). *COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*. Retrieved from: https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdvegas17%22

⁷ Retrieved from <https://yougov.co.uk/covid-19>

⁸ Mainstreet Research. (May 2020). *Survey of Canada*. Retrieved from <https://ipolitics.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Canada-iPolitics-11May2020.pdf>

⁹ Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index. (May 12, 2020). *Americans hate contact tracing*. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/axios-ipsos-coronavirus-week-9-contact-tracing-bd747eaa-8fa1-4822-89bc-4e214c44a44d.html>

¹⁰ Sevunts, Levon. (March 27, 2020). *Ottawa boosts wage subsidies for small businesses up to 75%*. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2020/03/27/ottawa-wage-subsidies-75-small-businesses/>

Deloitte.

www.deloitte.ca

This publication contains general information only and Deloitte is not, by means of this publication, rendering accounting, business, financial, investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice or services. This publication is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your business, you should consult a qualified professional advisor. Deloitte shall not be responsible for any loss sustained by any person who relies on this publication.

Deloitte provides audit and assurance, consulting, financial advisory, risk advisory, tax, and related services to public and private clients spanning multiple industries. Deloitte serves four out of five Fortune Global 500® companies through a globally connected network of member firms in more than 150 countries and territories bringing world-class capabilities, insights, and service to address clients' most complex business challenges. Deloitte Inc., an Ontario limited liability partnership, is the Canadian member firm of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited. Deloitte refers to one or more of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee, and its network of member firms, each of which is a legally separate and independent entity. Please see www.deloitte.com/about for a detailed description of the legal structure of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited and its member firms.

Our global Purpose is making an impact that matters. At Deloitte Canada, that translates into building a better future by accelerating and expanding access to knowledge. We believe we can achieve this Purpose by living our shared values to lead the way, serve with integrity, take care of each other, foster inclusion, and collaborate for measurable impact.

To learn more about how Deloitte's approximately 312,000 professionals, over 12,000 of whom are part of the Canadian firm, please connect with us on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook.

Copyright © 2020 Deloitte Inc. All rights reserved.
Designed and produced by the Deloitte Design Studio, Canada. 20-6536T

