
Covid Has Accentuated Our Every Vice



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

Of all seven deadly sins, leaders need to guard against pride.

I was recently admiring Bruegel the Elder's prints depicting the seven deadly sins. Although these prints were made in the 16th century, the list of sins (or vices) was introduced at least a thousand years earlier. Aside from lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, sloth, envy and pride, an ancient list by Egyptian ascetics included acedia, a state of listlessness and complete lack of preoccupation with one's position in the world. However, this was eventually folded into the sin of sloth.

Coincidentally, very soon after I saw these prints, a friend sent me a cartoon which portrayed a man pointing at a blackboard that showed an organisation chart that listed these seven sins with the added note, *"Welcome aboard Manfred. Where do you see yourself in the general scheme of things?"*

Where do I see myself? Certainly, I fit somewhere. These cravings are part of the human condition; perfection is an illusion. What makes each one a sin is indulgence in excess. But could circumstantial factors contribute to this excess? For example, hasn't the pandemic affected how these vices manifest

themselves?

Lust, gluttony and greed

Take lust. Our sex life very much depends on our sexual fantasies, the quality and the duration of our relationship, our parental status and many other factors. In pre-pandemic times, a relatively common scenario was a long-term couple living parallel lives, each busy with their many commitments. As the pandemic forced many couples to slow down, it may have given them an opportunity to reconnect and spend more intimate moments together. But as time went on, health or financial worries may have contributed to depression – the opposite of the state of mind needed for lust.

What about gluttony? Since the pandemic, the waistline of many people has expanded. According to one American study, people’s weight has steadily **increased** by about 0.7 kg (1.5 lbs) per month. Over-eating has allowed us to compensate for Covid-related anxiety and fears. In stressful times, people often resort to comfort foods, especially sugary ones. Another factor contributing to weight gain has been the consumption of **greater amounts of alcohol**.

Sadly, greed is very much alive and well during these pandemic times. While Covid has taken a terrible toll on millions of people across the globe, it has also been an opportunity for the wealthy to further enrich themselves. Many pharmaceutical companies have been lauded for finding vaccines, but we shouldn’t forget that they sold virtually their entire stock to rich countries, securing sky-high profit margins. At the same time, they tried to block attempts by developing countries to temporarily waive patents on their vaccines. But if these companies looked beyond profit – all the vaccines were distributed equitably – most of the world could be vaccinated much quicker. The slogan “No one is safe until we are all safe” captures the epidemiological reality that the world is facing – and the devastating impact of greed.

Wrath, sloth, envy and pride

Let’s move on to wrath, or its more familiar synonym, anger. With the pandemic creating great uncertainty about the future, many people have become extremely angry about their current situation. Furthermore, the lack of social interaction has given rise to feelings of helplessness and distress. This has translated into an increase in the number of cases of **domestic**

violence and abuse.

Regarding sloth, much has been written on the **changes** in people's working habits due to the pandemic. Many people have been wondering, while working at home, how to accurately "anchor" their productivity. How can they be sure that they're doing a good job? Some people think that every moment at home should be spent working. They don't realise that taking short breaks – or even cyber-loafing – is very similar to having a chat at the coffee shop at the office or a working lunch with their colleagues. And as some people will experience mental health problems and depressive reactions, it is unreasonable to expect the same level of productivity as before the pandemic.

We should not forget envy, a feeling that most of us experience at one point or another. Unfortunately, envy has also been heightened during pandemic times. In particular, two major forms of envy have made their appearance. First, there is the *quarantine* envy. Many people stuck in small apartments became envious of those who were able to move to lavish country estates, or even a house with a garden. Some people are now experiencing feelings of unfairness towards places in more advanced stages of reopening. A second form is *vaccine* envy. Many have decried the vaccine glut in a few nations and the relative drought almost everywhere else. This has rightfully led to a rethink of the intellectual property and trademark laws that have been governing vaccine manufacturing.

Finally, there is pride, thought to be the source of all sin. During the pandemic, pride has become magnified in the context of leadership. When put in a position of power, leaders can become irrationally self-confident about their abilities, increasingly reluctant to listen to advice and progressively more impulsive. Faced with extraordinary challenges during Covid, many leaders have proved to be arrogant. Their incompetence has led to a loss of life on a massive scale. Some have used restrictive lockdown measures as an opportunity to dent democratic norms and to seize more power.

Leadership virtues post-pandemic

The pandemic has brought our vices to the fore, but also given us a chance to rethink what business leadership should look for the foreseeable future. As mentioned, too many leaders refused to acknowledge their own limits, faults or wrongdoings during the pandemic.

In comparison, the leadership style of many female leaders – a style that tends to be more relational, empathetic and inclusive – has been an important factor in promoting the legitimacy of the lockdown measures and compliance with them. It also offered affective support and longer-term vision to overcome the crisis. While other natural calamities like climate change are already besieging us, we need to change perceptions of what effective leadership should look like.

Perhaps, in searching for the most effective leadership style in this day-and-age, we should keep in mind the opposite of the deadly sins: the seven virtues. These were originally presented by the poet Aurelius Clemens Prudentius in “Psychomachia”. In this work, *chastity* or self-control overcomes lust by controlling passion, leveraging this energy towards the good of others. There is also *temperance*, which cures gluttony by implanting the desire to be healthy. In addition, *charity* tempers greed by putting the desire to help others above our own selves.

Furthermore, *patience* disarms wrath by letting us understand the needs and desires of others before acting. *Diligence*, or careful and persistent work, is the counterpoint to slothfulness. *Kindness* prevents envy by placing the desire to help others above one’s own needs. Finally, there is *humility*, which dampens excess pride by removing boastfulness and promoting an attitude of service.

Of course, the seven deadly sins will always be part of our true nature. All of us possess a modicum of lust, gluttony, greed, hate, sloth, envy and pride. Like it or not, these will always be with us. In fact, life would be quite tedious without them. Our challenge will be, however, to exert a degree of control over these so-called vices. If not, as the pandemic has shown dramatically, the results can be disastrous.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/covid-has-accentuated-our-every-vice>

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