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Our Invisible Enemy

By Larry M. Starr and Darshi Mody

When President Trump refers to fighting an invisible enemy, he uses the language of metaphor previously applied to malaria in the nineteenth century. The phrase invisible enemy has also been applied recently to air pollution, biological terrorism, insect-size drones, and cyberwar.

Surely Mr. Trump and his advisers know calling the virus that contributed so far 750,000 infections and more than 35,000 deaths *invisible*, increases public terror.

The novel coronavirus is invisible to the eye because it is *microscopic* measuring 80-160 nanometers in size; a nanometer is one billionth of a meter.

While we cannot see it in the air or on a surface, millions of us have seen the virus in full color when we discuss it on the local and national TV news, in articles and stories online, and in print media. This is because the virus is routinely pictured and used to attract us to the information being presented. The paradox is that millions of people can now recognize this invisible enemy.

Repeatedly presenting this image is a good idea. When we have a prototype design in mind, we more readily believe and act *as if* it is physically present. This means that we are more likely to believe and act in ways that can prevent, contain and protect ourselves and others.

When confronted with a direct health threat, we focus on and try to make sense of the effects on us. We usually don't look for deeper understanding, nor do we examine metaphoric meanings. But, if we look closely at the coronavirus image that is regularly shown to us, there is something important to be learned.

The novel coronavirus name reflects that it has qualities of a crown. From a design perspective, we see a sphere-like structure. The outside has the crown spikes popping out and each seems to be a separate or individual element. The inside is different. Within and related to these external spikes is a complex design; a myriad of interlinked elements. A meaningful way of appreciating this relationship is to compare this image to an iceberg.

We think of the outer elements as the events that are reported daily. Like icebergs, these are the terrible forward-facing health, financial, education, travel, and other events, each of which grabs our attention but is only the tip of the problem. Below the surface are the interlinked elements, interactions, and interconnections that coproduce the effects we experience on the surface.

People focus on the surface information because they are pushed by social and news media. The spikes are the metrics including of masks, Dow Jones Index, and students who are attending online classes that are tracked and that keep our attention. But it is also important to be attentive to the underlying events and information. This is where the interactions are occurring, and these provide a broader perspective; they offer another dimension to the whole situation.

If we focus on and try to control the spikes as individual unrelated events, if we play whack-a-mole with health or finance or education, for example, then we leave unaddressed the deeper interdependencies between these and a host of other issues including vacations, real estate, religious observance, and our face-to-face social and cultural fabric. It is their interdependencies that co-produce our experiences as we try to navigate and survive the global pandemic.

We are having so much difficulty with coronavirus and its many interactions with our world because this kind of problem is complex which means it is qualitatively different from problems that are complicated. In a complex problem, you cannot find any meaningful root causes or fix the parts separately and expect the whole problem to be solved. The assumption that a leader can formulate and apply any linear strategy or plan that will control or influence toward a specific goal is naïve.

Instead, like an iceberg and the image of the virus, we need to be concerned with the whole not merely the tips. Systems thinking provides this approach and design thinking as a method of problem-solving offers pathways. Most people are not systems thinkers, so this is not a trivial first step. But these people must be identified, brought together, and they should be drawn from different disciplines because the whole problem covers so many intersecting areas. Design thinking is also not common because it relies on a different reasoning than in business. It asks *what if* questions and seeks creative and innovative solutions to complex problems. We all certainly could use this for an invisible enemy.

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