



The Diverging Point for Rules That Work

With the novel coronavirus, Japan seems to have brought out an endless parade of self-restraint, demands for business shutdowns, and all manner of requests.

This is in contrast to other countries where their bans have been accompanied by penalties. While some people say that Japanese people obey requests that come from “above”, i.e., the government and so there is no need to have any penalties, others say there are a large number of people who choose not to comply with the “requests” because if there are no penalties, there is no compulsion to make people obey.

When thinking about how laws, regulations, orders and rules function in Japan, I always bring up the following two examples.

The first is the prohibiting of mobile (smartphone) calls while on the train as well as the switching off of mobile phones.



You will often see signs on the train that say, “Please refrain from making calls” and “Please switch off your mobile phone when near the priority seats”, but while people obey the rule to refrain from making calls, they tend not to obey the rule to switch off their phones. So why is that?

Another unspoken rule is standing on one side of the escalator.

There are no signs concerning this rule, and people obey it even if efforts are made prohibiting the standing on simply one side of the escalator. This rule is obeyed and people even queue up at the bottom of the “up” escalator in order to stand on one side even if no one is walking up the other side. So why is that?

My theory is that people follow a rule even if there are no penalties for breaking it because they can see that there is a clear disadvantage in breaking the rule. The reason why people don't obey the instruction to turn off their mobile phone is because the probability that someone will be affected is perceived to be low, and even if you break the rule, no one complains. On the other hand, if you make or take a call, you will probably feel the cold, hard stares of the people around you. On an escalator, the only person who might complain is the person walking up behind you. Of course it would be even worse if the person behind you is a scary hulk of a guy. This is easy to understand.

So the real reason why some people don't comply with the request for self-restraint might not be due to the fact that there is no penalty, but because it isn't possible to clearly visualize a disadvantage in breaking the rule. Then again, a "sending someone to Coventry" approach is a human rights violation and a humanitarian issue. As adverse acts go, there is no ingenuity in this form of penalty, and it doesn't lead to any good ideas. "God is watching" is seen as archaic, and so it's frustrating that, at the end of the day, the only thing we can do is raise awareness of the impact that an infectious disease has on society.

(YAMASHITA Terutoshi)

Editor's note

SOCIAL DISTANCING? PHYSICAL DISTANCING?

The declaration of a state of emergency is set to continue even after May 7th. Despite the nation's efforts, it seems that it will take more time for the spread of the novel coronavirus disease to end. Meanwhile, a dramatic social change seems to be taking place as a by-product of being compelled into a period of long-term self-restraint. In fact, there has been rapid boom in things that previously had been considered but had been set aside as being impractical such as remote work (working from home, satellite office work) and web conferencing, and the sense of distance between work and home has had to change all of a sudden.

Obviously, what is important in order to prevent the spread of infection is to avoid the so-called 3 Cs (closed spaces, crowded places and close contact). From a global perspective, the emphasis has been on the concept of SOCIAL DISTANCING, but recently WHO has stated that this term should be PHYSICAL DISTANCING rather than SOCIAL. In this sense, since SOCIAL also means being sociable, it is important to ensure that we increase the physical distance between people and preserve our mental closeness and avoid anxiety and isolation. This being the case, communication using IT takes on even greater importance.

What I've personally been worried about of late is the issue of DOMESTIC DISTANCING (that is, family distancing, although such an expression doesn't exist!) When people who are usually out are suddenly home all day, we feel blessed to have our family with us, but at the same time, this also causes unexpected burdens and trivial squabbles. So it's also particularly important to work out how to keep a family distance.

So to finish, everyone, please take good care of your mind and body.

(SHIMAOKA Seiya)