

Social discipline is the only solution for coronavirus

By Walter Schalka, CEO of Suzano

The exponential growth of new coronavirus cases (COVID-19) in countries such as Italy and Iran makes it clear that to fight the pandemic, we should not only worry about identifying the effective “medicine”, but also about getting the “dosage” right. In other words, it is no use merely stating that social contact should be restricted, but we need to discuss how limited these contacts should be and starting when should these restrictions be imposed. Reports from the health authorities of both countries show that Brazil is already falling behind in the decision to establish a proper “dosage” for the situation.

When we analyze the timeline of these countries, used here only as examples, we see the delay among authorities and society in general in perceiving the spread of the disease through community transmission, a stage when it is no longer possible to identify the origin of the infection. As a result, in extreme situations, there are already cases where doctors are forced to choose one life over another due to lack of hospital beds.

The loss of hundreds, or even thousands, of lives in other countries shows that Brazil needs to decide – today – what story it wants to script. The most successful countries in fighting coronavirus adopted a rigorous process of mitigation or complete elimination of social contact, combined with extensive campaigns to raise awareness among the population about the need for rigorous precautions with personal hygiene and for constant disinfection of surfaces and environments.

São Paulo, Brazil’s most populous city, has just reached the mark of 100 cases. This number is a presage that the situation can worsen very quickly. In this context, I believe we must be proactive and act quickly, proposing a generalized quarantine. It is necessary to suspend for at least 14 days, or for the time necessary, the functioning of establishments and non-essential social activities such as events, bars, restaurants and offices, besides limiting the movement of people for basic activities, such as visits to supermarkets.

It is a question of time and impact. Japan and Singapore are real-life examples of successful contention of COVID-19. Despite being among the first locations to report cases, both countries managed to slow down the spread of virus among their populations. Thanks to measures taken at the start, when initial cases were reported, Singapore is one of the countries with the lowest growth rate of the epidemic. Gatherings were restricted and the government of Singapore closed its border with China.

As citizens, we must be aware of the need to slow down the exponential growth of the virus and adhere – despite personal, professional and economic sacrifices – to a preventive social isolation model in order to contain its spread and protect lives, especially of people in risk groups – the elderly and people with chronic diseases and preexisting disabilities. It depends on all of us.

In the United States, estimates already show that if the number of infected individuals continues to double every three days, the country will have around 100 million cases by May. With the rapid spread of the virus, we will also see a spike in the number people in Brazil seeking hospitals for more critical cases. But, in Brazil we currently have only around 50,000 ICU beds with mechanical ventilation and the capacity to treat individuals infected by the virus. That’s why, prevention must be the only way to save lives.

Collective efforts will be the best remedy to protect the population. Studies in the US indicate that the most efficient way to contain COVID-19 is social distancing, since mass propagation is through community contacts in public places, workplaces, as well as family and friendly gatherings.

Obviously, in Brazil, social distancing is more challenging due to our nature of being affective and having close contact with each other. We, as a people, have the habit of being close, hugging, kissing, sharing and socializing all the time. But we must consider this temporary distancing as a preventive

measure to protect the Brazilian population and to show that we care about each other, to ensure that COVID-19 has the lowest impact possible on our country.

Understanding the concept that it is only good for us if it is good for everyone must permeate decisions at diverse levels – personal, government or business. Whatever may be the impact, human life must be placed above business and personal interests.

The current moment requires tough decisions and the most important and urgent measure is to mitigate the spread of the virus. Hence, it is time to act and have the courage to face any eventual reaction of the population to an absolute restriction on circulation. Although this is a bitter medicine, leaders must do what is right and not choose the easy way out.