

## Covid-19 ushers in a new VUCA world

by

Marius Meyer

Over the past five years, management and leadership thought leaders challenged us to embrace the new business world of VUCA, i.e. a world full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. If we look at the current coronavirus pandemic it is clear that these experts were indeed correct. But I am sure that none of the VUCA champions could have foreseen a situation in which countries would be locked down because of the Covid-19 virus causing such major havoc and disruption throughout the world.

Today let us look at how VUCA is relevant in helping us to understand the Covid-19 crisis:

- *Volatility:* Everything is volatile – stock markets and exchange rates, infection and death rates, and businesses and people running out of money.
- *Uncertainty:* We are faced with unprecedented levels of uncertainty. There are so many questions without answers such as whether we will be able to curb the spread of the virus, whether a treatment or vaccine will be found, and how long it will take to turn the situation around. People even question whether the lockdown is having the desired effect, and we are all faced with uncertainty regarding returning to work after the lockdown, in addition to the risk of major job losses in most industries.
- *Complexity:* The world has become very complex, even more so with the spread of the virus. So many different government departments, hospitals and businesses are dealing with very complex issues on a daily basis.
- *Ambiguity:* There are so many different interpretations of the way forward. It appears as if government leaders, business people, scientists and medical practitioners, the media, economists, and other specialists have different interpretations and perspectives of what to do during the crisis and sometimes they contradict one another. Hence, the rules of the game are changing continuously.

The approach used by government and business leaders over the last 18 days of the lockdown has been to help us dealing with the Covid-19 crisis by addressing the VUCA challenges in several ways. In most cases, government and business leaders were open, transparent, and even vulnerable where necessary in first trying to make sense of the pandemic itself, and then crafting appropriate responses in assisting all of us to cope with the crisis. For instance, by informing us of the extent of the crisis in different countries and our own provinces, we acknowledged the level of volatility globally and locally. In responding to the level of uncertainty, our leaders admitted to the high level of uncertainty, but by providing daily updates, regulations and guidelines, they managed to bring some level of certainty and hope despite the high level of uncertainty and many unknown factors we are dealing with. In an

attempt to address the high level of complexity, our leaders were excellent in converting regulations and guidelines into user-friendly and attractive infographics making it easier for all of us to obtain a basic understanding and doing the basics in terms of changing our behaviour. In other words, they tried to use simplicity in assisting us to deal with complexity. As far as ambiguity is concerned, an extensive list of statements, regulations and FAQs were used by our leaders from different government departments to make sense of some of the different interpretations, and to counteract the spread of fake news during these confusing times.

Although some of the myths about the virus were dispelled, a lot of work still needs to happen in raising awareness and influencing people in changing their behaviour. However, there are already some positive signs that the level of awareness and knowledge is improving throughout the country. Queues are shorter, physical distancing is improving, sanitizers are readily available at shops, and people are in general washing their hands more often.

In the light of the above, it is evident that the coronavirus crisis epitomises what the VUCA world is all about, and we have all learned very quickly on how to deal with it. But this is only the beginning, we need to continue with significant levels of learning and unlearning if we really want to flatten the curve while scientists intensify their research work. The first two and a half weeks of the lockdown was a steep learning curve for most South Africans. We also learned new skills and habits in the process, such as to do shopping much faster and more focused, to maintain physical distancing and to be more aware of hygiene.

Today I want to conclude, by suggesting that we move beyond the first phase of the VUCA crisis (i.e. the immediate crisis response) to a new world of VUCA (the problem-solution approach). I want to reframe the traditional VUCA approach to a more dynamic action-orientated approach in enabling us to become better change agents. Let me suggest a new way of thinking of VUCA in the light of the time and refocus we now have with the extended lockdown:

1. *Virus*: It is important that we focus on the issue at stake. The crisis here is the virus, and we need to ensure that we intensify our research, our safety, our hygiene and whatever it takes to enable us to deal effectively with the virus. It is easy to get distracted by focusing on other issues not relevant to the common enemy, i.e. the Covid-19 virus.
2. *Unity*: The first two weeks of the lockdown amplified our deeply divided and unequal society. The dichotomy and divisions between the rich and poor, blacks and whites, suburbs and townships, cars and taxis, formal and informal economy, locals and foreigners, employed and unemployed, central and provincial and local government, private and public sector, were again and again illustrated in all aspects of our response to the crisis. We also created a new division: Essential and non-essential workers. The reality is that we have to be united in fighting the virus. No division is more important than the virus. We need to look after each other's health, save lives and once this goal is achieved, use this united experience to tackle all our other problems in our divided society – poverty, unemployment, inequality, education, and the recession.
3. *Crisis planning*: We now know enough about the crisis that we need to co-ordinate all efforts in planning co-ordinated responses. Our planning must be excellent so that we

can scale up our response in effective and efficient ways. Management experts remind us about the need to get the balance right between doing the right things (i.e. effectiveness), and doing things right (efficiency). For example, we are doing the right thing by testing people, but the numbers are simply not enough. We need to test masses of people every day. The current low testing rates will not help us to get on top of the crisis and waste 35 days of economic activity if it does not have the desired result. Learning from the mass testing model of South Korea in particular will enable us to ensure that our crisis planning is more effective and efficient. Again, the focus on coordinated efforts is of utmost importance.

4. *Actions:* Lastly, but most importantly, is our biggest South African weakness and that is execution of our plans. We need clear actions implemented in a disciplined way. Allowing overloaded taxis to transport masses of people defeats the purpose of the lockdown. Actions should be clear, specific and well executed with precision, consistency and disciplined action. None of us are immune to the virus and none of us are above the law. Good actions well executed are the only way to turn the pandemic around.

We are probably facing the highest level of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity ever experienced by humankind. Thus, the conventional notion of VUCA is like a virus, it simply spreads faster all over the world from individuals, to organisations to our homes. But remaining in the space of the traditional VUCA model will simply perpetuate our mentality of being victims of the pandemic. We now need to make the transition to the new VUCA paradigm, and that is to face the virus head-on, show unity, commit to crisis planning and embark on clear actions to stop the virus from infecting, spreading and killing us. The new more all-encompassing action-orientated approach to VUCA will enable us to win the war against the virus so that we can be victorious in saving lives and sustaining humanity.

The coronavirus pandemic also presents us with an opportunity to reflect on humanity. Arundhati Roy said: "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it." Let us deal with the short- and medium term crisis with both the conventional and reworked VUCA philosophies, but continue to seek a bigger purpose of creating a better and more meaningful world for all of us.

*Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit [www.sacoronavirus.co.za](http://www.sacoronavirus.co.za)*

*This article was first published by SABPP on 13 April 2020, see [www.sabpp.co.za](http://www.sabpp.co.za)*