

The 30 D's of people-centered Covid-19 Disaster Management Plans

by

Marius Meyer

According to the United Nations a disaster is a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or society. Traditionally we are used to dealing with natural disasters such as floods and fires and response teams and resources are activated to deal with these disasters using disaster management at the location where the disaster occurred. Typical examples are fires in the Western Cape or the recent floods in Gauteng. The Disaster Management Plans are then implemented and the necessary resources and support allocated to deal with the disaster that normally lasts a few weeks. While the impact of these disasters is devastating, the scope thereof is limited to the affected areas and communities and it is possible to take control of the situation and to effectively manage the disaster until it is fully resolved. In more widespread disasters and state of emergencies such as the rapid spread of fires in Australia, it becomes a more complicated disaster at regional or national level. With the coronavirus crisis and the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus all over the world, it has become a global disaster and pandemic that has become almost unmanageable in several parts of the world when health systems are overwhelmed.

In South Africa, the Disaster Management Act of 2002 is used as the legislative framework to manage the disaster. In essence, the Act provides for an integrated and centralised Disaster Management policy used in preventing or reducing the risk of disasters and to ensure that rapid and effective disaster and emergency responses take place in dealing with the crisis. The United Nations also make it clear that disasters involve widespread human, material, economic or environmental impacts, which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources. Hence, the need for government interventions such as emergency services, the provision of food to poor communities and relief funds for people in distress. What we need to realise is that we are not dealing with a short term disaster such as a sudden tsunami or hurricane, but a pandemic as declared by the World Health Organization. Hence, the World Federation of Physical Therapy highlights that pandemic emergencies involve a sudden onset of contagious disease that affects health, disrupts services and businesses and that it therefore imposes significant economic and social costs.

It is therefore evident that disaster management plays a key role in attempts to manage the impact of the Covid-19 virus. Today I propose some disaster management actions for organisations as the 30 D's of successful people-driven disaster management plans:

1. *Disaster management leadership:* The decision to embark on disaster management is taken by leaders. Good and visible leadership remains the key success factor throughout any disaster management strategy. In South Africa the decision was taken by the President and he is continuously advised by the National Command Council and top scientists. Likewise, other Ministers, Premiers, MECs, mayors, CEOs and other responsible leaders need to provide disaster management leadership in their spheres of influence.
2. *Disaster management planning:* Once leaders have expressed their commitment to lead from the front in dealing with disaster management, the process of disaster management planning can commence and it will continue throughout the crisis period until the disaster is officially

under control. Disaster management planning affects the whole organisation and its stakeholders.

3. *Disease management:* It is essential that disaster management teams realise that you are not dealing with a minor disaster that you are going to fix in a week. This is a global pandemic that requires extraordinary action and expertise in enabling you to make the right decisions at the right times. In addition to your risk management and disaster management specialists, a higher level of expertise is required. Three additional professional experts are key stakeholders to be co-opted: A safety expert, a medical doctor and a psychologist. Co-opt a medical doctor or scientist to your disaster management team in advising you on how to make the right disaster management decisions in responding to the virus from a disease perspective. Furthermore, you need the services of a psychologist to provide professional guidance to your disaster management team.
4. *Diagnosis:* In the spirit of medical practice, do a proper diagnosis of the impact of Covid-19 on your business. Make sure that you position Covid-19 as a high risk and understand fully how the whole business, your different sites and facilities, infrastructure, its people, and in particular high risk groups are affected.
5. *Disruption:* While your business and your whole life is disrupted, adapt to this disruption in changing your work and family lives based on the disaster management regulations. Be clear on how your organisation is disrupted and plan accordingly to address the severity and impact of the disruption.
6. *Data analysis:* A disaster is not declared or managed in a vacuum. There is clear data informing the seriousness of the crisis and this data is used for regular decision-making.
7. *Direction:* Ensure that you have clear direction on where you want to be in terms of your approach, strategy and methodology for responding to the disaster. Be focused around clearly defined and specific disaster management objectives and targets to achieve such as the number of people to be screened or tested. At an organisational level, write them down and commit to drive these goals, for example the deep cleaning of all buildings.
8. *Decision-making:* It is important to make clear, sound and good decisions on a regular basis. But be careful of not making too many new and unnecessary decisions that will confuse your staff and customers. During disaster management planning, management wants to be seen to make decisions, but regular poor decisions will result in management losing credibility and ironically also control when followers don't trust management to make good decisions. Make the principles on which the decisions are made clear, such as safety, protection, health and risk. Professor Arnold Smit from the University of Stellenbosch Business School emphasises the importance of values during the Covid-19 crisis. Make your values visible and practise them in all disaster management decision-making and plans.
9. *Decisiveness:* Building on number 8, disaster management is about decisiveness. Be calm, but be decisive when making and implementing decisions, even when regulations and decisions are changed.
10. *Definitions:* Define your key priorities and terms. It appears as if most people still don't understand and are unable to explain or differentiate between the relevant Covid-19 terms such as self-isolation, quarantine, virus, bacteria, screening and testing.
11. *Design thinking:* Use Zoom groups and other platforms in creating a culture of design thinking in dealing with your internal disaster management plans. Each organisation has its own unique issues from a disaster management perspective, and involving key specialists in developing proper disaster management plans can play an important role in not only developing good disaster management for the short-term crisis, but also in preparing and redesigning your organisation for the post-lockdown period.

12. *Direct communication:* Effective direct communication is the most important factor in raising awareness and to implement effective disaster management plans. Government Ministers and the Minister of Health in particular have done a good job thusfar, despite some exceptions.
13. *Drastic actions:* A disaster management plan is an emergency response to a crisis, in this case the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Drastic actions are required to manage the crisis.
14. *Discipline:* The virus will not be defeated if people lack discipline in terms of the safe behaviour expected. The success of the disaster management regulations depends on discipline by all managers, employees and citizens.
15. *Dates:* Government and business leaders have to plan and make sure that all key dates and milestones are clearly visible to their stakeholders. Start planning towards these target dates and stay on track where possible. Identify key dates for actions to be taken, but be flexible and responsive to change these dates if the situation is changing as we already learned from the lockdown being extended.
16. *Discussions:* Disaster management requires co-ordinated efforts involving different stakeholders, hence the need for extensive planning discussions to inform decision-making about further actions to be taken.
17. *Digital solutions:* We live in a digital world and this is the time to leverage digital platforms for the effective implementation of your disaster management planning.
18. *Determination:* Be determined to achieve success. Be positive, focused and determined to attain the goals of your disaster management plans.
19. *Dedicated teams:* Once your goals are clear, the next important thing is to commit to these goals, thus you need to be dedicated in executing your disaster management plans with dedicated teams making it happen, even when you encounter obstacles.
20. *Disaster funding:* Disaster management requires extensive resources, hence the need for funding to support people in distress. The various funding mechanisms, including relief funds and donations have played a significant role in ensuring that the disaster can be managed with the necessary financial and other resources.
21. *Detail:* Most aspects of the Covid-19 disaster management work require incredible levels of attention to detail. For instance, you need to have detailed information available about all aspects of the virus, e.g. health, transport, police, defence, social development and essential services. Plan how you can improve in paying more attention to detail for all aspects of the Covid-19 crisis.
22. *Departmental co-operation:* The silos that we typically have in organisations are not conducive to effective disaster management and it is good to see how different departments in government and companies are working together in implementing disaster management plans.
23. *Documentation:* Similarly, your documentation must be in order - from your own risk and disaster management policies and programmes, to the overall disaster management plans and regulations of government. The month of April will be remembered as the month of mass communication from government, and within the spirit of sound disaster management, everything is documented. A proper documentation and administration system is needed to keep track of new documents being released on a daily basis. With the regular amendments to regulations by government, version control of documents is of utmost importance.
24. *Development of staff:* You should have clear learning and development programmes for staff in dealing with the disaster management. All staff need general awareness training, and information about specific policies and procedures, while safety representatives and cleaning staff need specialised training in hygiene and occupational health and safety.

25. *Deal with discomfort:* Staff members will experience extreme levels of inconvenience, uncertainty, discomfort, stress and anxiety. Show empathy and provide the necessary support services and counselling to staff. Prioritise the mental and physical health of all staff members.
26. *Deeds:* Essentially, what counts is action as expressed in your disaster programmes. Drive clear actions and deeds to leverage the full impact of disaster management in the workplace and society.
27. *Deliver on promises:* Management must deliver on all their commitments and promises. People look up to management for direction and hope. Show that you care, but if you give a sense of hope by committing to resources and support, make sure that you deliver on all the expectations you have raised. If the crisis gets out of hand, and it becomes difficult or impossible to deliver on certain commitments, for instance when all resources are depleted, apologise and explain the situation. Management will be forgiven for speaking the hard truth during a crisis, but not for hiding or distorting the truth. Now is the time for management to apply the same principle we teach our staff when dealing with customers: Rather under promise and over deliver.
28. *Deep insights:* As top scientists and experts have admitted, there is a lot about this virus that is unknown, and given its rapid spread, it is a learning curve for all of us. Generate insights from lessons learned and make this part of your disaster management refinement and alignment.
29. *Disclosure:* Be open and honest in your communication and engagement with staff and the public. Covid-19 affects all of us, and it is in the public's interest to disclose key facts and developments pertaining to the virus in a transparent manner. The daily updates from the Department of Health released by the Minister of Health is a good example of proper disclosure. Where discrepancies are observed, proper explanations must be provided.
30. *Dashboard:* Your success of disaster management work will depend on the results you achieve with your actions and interventions. Use an attractive dashboard for this purpose and celebrate milestones and successes along the way, while you address any gaps and challenges with urgency, follow-up and follow-through.

The above guidelines can be tailored to the needs of each organisation according to its unique situation. In line with the *People First* approach adopted by President Ramaphosa, in this article I proposed a people-centred approach to disaster management in dealing with Covid-19 as a disaster impacting organisations and its people. Disaster management is about disaster planning to protect people. You can select and prioritise some of these actions according to your needs, but ultimately my overall recommendation is to use all the expertise you can get inside and outside the organisation to ensure effective disaster management during this crisis.

We must be careful not to fool ourselves in thinking that disaster management will stop after the 35 days of lockdown. This is only the beginning phase of the crisis. While we all look forward to the end of the lockdown, all forms of contingency planning, risk management, disaster management and compliance systems will need to continue over an extended period of time. Moreover, our biggest challenge will be to create a new culture of hygiene in our organisations. We have started to practise hygiene at hospitals, shops and our homes over the past 23 days, but our next paradigm shift is to make it part of the safety culture at our organisations and society at large.

Ultimately the overarching goal for all of us is to defeat the virus, by curbing its spread within organisations, public places, houses, communities, and indeed society. Traditional disaster management focuses on a problem you can understand and carefully plan for, such as dealing with a natural disaster like a fire or flood. Its impact is visible and you can fully plan a number of basic steps and actions of dealing with it effectively. However, with Covid-19 we are facing an invisible enemy that we don't fully understand and that we cannot control. We are now entering a new paradigm of

managing extreme levels of uncertainty and discomfort that must be managed in a multi-disciplinary way with risk and disaster management at the centre of our planning. The coronavirus disaster requires effective disaster management to ensure that we can turn the situation around.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information about the coronavirus and Covid-19 visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za

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