

10 NEW ROLES FOR CEOs AS COVID-19 LEADERS: From Chief Executive Officer to Chief Epidemic Officer

by

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Over the past ten years, the role of CEOs has changed to become a much broader and more all-encompassing role than solely managing an organisation and its people. The new expanded role of CEOs is even more pronounced in the Covid-19 era of national lockdowns. Previously CEOs were mainly concerned about the strategy and growth of their business, now they need to think about survival and recovery first. CEOs are the top talent at the top of the organisation, and to a great extent the success or failure of CEOs drive organisational performance or conversely, organisational underperformance. While all CEOs will be forgiven for the underperformance of their companies during the lockdown, they face a serious task ahead in ensuring the recovery of their organisations. Furthermore, it is also a reality that many sectors will be vulnerable to retrenchments and business closures. The government's financial stimulus package is welcome to ease the burden and to provide hope of economic survival in these turbulent times.

Against the backdrop of the devastating economic impact of Covid-19 on businesses, let us reframe the role of the CEO in this difficult period of transition. The traditional role we know is that of Chief Executive Officer, but this role has evolved and expanded in recent times, even more so under the lockdown and the pandemic facing all of us. In addition to being an astute strategist, now a new multi-skilled CEO is needed to lead and manage an organisation in distress and throughout the crisis. Tough decisions will need to be made, but with a human touch.

During this extreme period of crisis, "CEO" also stands for a number of new expanded roles:

1. *Chief Epidemic Officer* – The CEO is the top leader in the organisation responsible for leading the organisation through the lockdown first, and then leading the organisation to survive the post lockdown period. That is a pretty tall order, because MBAs don't teach you how to manage lockdowns and epidemics. CEOs need to demonstrate exceptional leadership during the crisis and to manage risk and collaborate with other CEOs, and their own teams in finding ways of effectively dealing with the corona epidemic. Prioritising health and hygiene is at the centre of this role as Chief Epidemic Officer, as part of the duty and responsibility of CEOs as the accountable officer in accordance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Following the news and daily changes regarding the epidemic will be essential for all CEOs in being informed about new developments requiring a change in decisions at company level.

2. *Chief Emotions Officer* – Not only should CEOs admit to their own vulnerability during this crisis, they need to work on their emotional intelligence (EQ) and that of their management teams. Exceptional levels of self-awareness and relationship building is needed, not only while working through the crisis, but as a key competency in the every day life of a CEO. A high level of awareness is needed of leading in times of extreme levels of uncertainty, volatility, stress and anxiety.
3. *Chief Economics Officer* – We are reminded every day of the devastating impact of the lockdown on the economy and businesses in particular. This painful reality kept many CEOs awake at night during the lockdown. Not only will they be required to turn their companies around after the lockdown, they will need to play a more collaborative role in working with other companies, including their competition and government to rebuild the economy. Transparent communication about the financial position of their companies will be the first step in doing their business and financial planning, and then mobilise their teams to transform their organisations, sectors and the economy at large.
4. *Chief Employee Experience Officer* – Despite the fact that most companies have HR Managers, good CEOs have assumed the role of Chief Employee Experience Officer. CEOs play an active role in providing an excellent employee experience based on employee wellness in looking after their employees, in addition to exceptional customer experiences. Building a new caring culture will be a new task for most CEOs.
5. *Chief Ethics Officer* – With the governance requirements of the Companies Act and the King IV™ Code on Governance released on 1 November 2016, the CEO needs to be the chief ethics champion in an organisation. Covid-19 presents new ethical challenges such as the ethical use of company resources and making decisions that are compliant and ethical during this difficult time. A high level of honesty and integrity is needed in communicating the truth and being transparent about the real situation regarding staff infections and general aspects of not only the coronavirus, but business in general. Already there are some signs of government and business leaders starting to blame Covid-19 for the underperformance of their organisations, while some of their organisations have already been on demise months before the lockdown. Leading an organisation with clear values and principles is now more important than ever before.
6. *Chief Environmental Officer* – The increased focus on sustainability requires a shift from the profit motive as sole purpose of business, to the triple bottom-line in which preserving the environment becomes a top management responsibility. The narrow definition of environment will be expanded. CEOs need to realise that they are now even more part of the broader environment and they have to play a key role in preserving the environment, while protecting all people. Admitting to and addressing pollution and other environmental risks are health issues that need to form part of new thinking and planning in the post-lockdown period. The carbon footprint is now a health issue and therefore even more important than before.
7. *Chief Equity Officer* – CEOs have to create a culture in which differences are accepted and valued, thereby creating diverse organisations based on the principle of equality,

fairness, dignity and respect. CEOs should ensure that there is no stigmatisation or discrimination against any employees who have been infected by the Covid-19 virus.

8. *Chief Electronic Officer* – Given the rapid growth in technology and notwithstanding the presence of CIOs and CTOs, our CEOs are now also the chief electronic officers of their companies – opening doors and providing for increased technology investment and utilisation of online meetings and other technology solutions, including social media based on a clear digital business strategy for the business. Many CEOs have stepped up significantly by producing regular podcasts, videos and other virtual messages for their staff and stakeholders during the lockdown. This should continue after the lockdown.
9. *Chief Excellence Officer* – One of the most critical roles of CEOs is to ensure that the company performs, and a commitment to driving and achieving excellence is thus a core competency of all CEOs. Higher levels of excellence will be needed to make up for lost time and production. CEOs as the top managers of a company is the head of the enterprise, and thus should ensure that the company is well managed and continuously innovate to survive, grow and prosper again in the future.
10. *Chief Evaluation Officer* – Ultimately the CEO needs to ask the right questions from managers and check whether the business is achieving its objectives and drive its employee health and hygiene plans, and will hence monitor and evaluate the company in its totality. Moreover, CEOs need to be ready to answer more difficult questions from boards, employees, the media, government, unions, customers, suppliers, staff and all other relevant stakeholders. If there is one lesson all CEOs can learn from government over the lockdown period is that transparency is a key success factor in managing a crisis such as an epidemic. The opportunity for CEOs is to share regular dashboards of the health situation of their employees with them, as well as the performance of the business. Admittedly, the coronavirus pandemic required extraordinary levels of daily reporting and Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize has done an excellent job in releasing daily figures to the public. And yes, it included some errors on certain days that were quickly corrected, but he was immediately forgiven as a result of his consistent commitment to openness, transparency and good communication.

In the light of the above new roles of CEOs, it is evident that CEOs need to play a more balanced and all-encompassing role in navigating their organisations through the turmoil. Depending on the size of the organisation, directors and managers are appointed to manage some of these roles, but ultimately in the spirit of good governance, and accepting responsibility and accountability, the buck stops with the CEO. Balancing and performing in these roles will contribute significantly to good leadership, management and governance, and therefore create more socially responsible, recovering and sustainable organisations.

The reality is that while CEOs in the past were appointed based on one aspect only, i.e. financial performance, the CEO in the coronavirus era will be required to navigate these ten roles simultaneously. Neglecting any of them at any given time may be the downfall of a CEO in the post lockdown period. Being in charge of the health of your employees and customers

is an uncomfortable role for most CEOs. Drawing on the right expertise is essential to ensure that you have a good team of experts advising you as the CEO of the organisation. It was evident throughout the lockdown, that President Ramaphosa did not make any health decisions without consulting top scientists and health experts. It is only hospital CEOs who are comfortable with the role of health manager, and even they will admit to the additional pressure they are facing when dealing with an epidemic. While it was previously possible to manage a company without an executive coach, that will be impossible now. Working with an executive coach is now a necessity for all CEOs and other executives, given the fact that they are now faced with additional pressures that will require an advanced level of executive coaching.

The key message in this article is balanced performance in all CEO roles. This implies that good or even outstanding performance in one or more roles may not be good enough, if other roles are neglected in the process. Also, appointing strong functional directors in areas such as IT, HR, supply chain, environment, finance, operations, is essential to mitigate the risk of under-performance in any of these ten roles. The fall of Brian Molefe, previous CEO of Eskom following the release of the previous Public Protector's report into state capture is a case in point. Molefe was brilliant as "Chief Excellence Officer" turning load-shedding around into a surplus of electricity within months. However, his involvement in unethical business deals in relation to the state capture by the Guptas, is an example of failure as "Chief Ethics Officer" and eventually contributed to his down-fall. With the economy in tatters, businesses cannot afford to lose their CEOs. The role of CEO is now more critical than ever before, but we need responsible leaders to take their organisations through the crisis until we can reach the point of normal business activity and performance, but business as usual will be a thing of the past.

Many CEOs and other business and government leaders have stepped up significantly during the lockdown period. While moving from the corner office to the home office was a transition for all of them, they succeeded in leading individuals at their homes. This created discomfort for some CEOs, but most of them have risen to the occasion during this difficult period. But even higher demands and expectations will need to be managed that will require exceptional levels of leadership. Moving through and beyond the crisis is not an easy task, it constitutes significant business transformation and employees will also need to step up in supporting their CEOs on this unenviable journey of fixing their companies.

The post or revised lockdown period requires a new CEO - one who is more health centred, caring, social, people-centric, human, tech savvy and visible not only inside their organisations, but also when engaging with the public. This is a wonderful opportunity for authentic leaders to rise to the occasion in taking their organisations, its people and society forward. The level of trust CEOs can build during this period will stand them in good stead as they rejuvenate their organisations for a totally different world in which health, hygiene and safety will be three new priorities to manage internally and externally. The rules of the game have changed forever, and CEOs are the people who will lead these efforts in reconstructing a new business environment in which context has become the main driver for making decisions about business and people.

In the new pandemic economy, the role of CEOs is multi-faceted. They are now required to manage the impact of an epidemic, not only in their companies, but also in their countries.

And global CEOs have to make decisions across many different countries, regions and continents, all faced by different regulations and stages of lockdown. We need the best talented CEOs to manage an epidemic at their organisations in a balanced way. A new type of crisis management has been born, one that requires leaders to make decisions during times of uncertainty, anxiety and turmoil. Fortunately, many companies have talented CEOs – top leaders who have the extraordinary skills needed to successfully navigate the ten expanded roles of CEOs in creating a new sense of hope, renewal, refocus, stability, growth and sustainability.

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