

CORONA VIRUS BEHAVIOUR CHANGE:

It is all about discipline

Marius Meyer

On 15 March when President Ramaphosa announced a State of Disaster in accordance with the Disaster Management Act, the nation was in shock. When the President followed it up on Monday by announcing the national lockdown of 21 days it became evident that we are in for a serious time of social distancing. Some people rushed to shops for panic buying and bought trolleys of stock to prepare for the national lockdown on midnight 26 March. Overnight, the very same employers who have been asked for three decades to let their employees work from home and refused to do so, sent their staff home to work remotely. Most of these employers acted out of panic themselves, despite the fact that they do not have proper working from home policies in place. Fortunately, many of them did manage to quickly put together some guidelines for this interim period.

The Corona virus pandemic reminded us of the importance of discipline in society. But what exactly is discipline? Discipline is to behave in a consistent way according to a clear set of values and guidelines.

But how disciplined are we as a society? These questions may answer this question:

1. Do most people attending a braai or function where alcohol is consumed, drive back home with more of the allowed alcohol limit in their blood?
2. Do most people conform to the rules of the road in terms of the speed limit?
3. Do most drivers stop for pedestrians at the designated lines?
4. Are most people 100% honest on their curriculum vitae?
5. Do most people pay all the income tax that they should be paying?

Unfortunately as a nation we must be honest with ourselves and admit that we are failing in answering some of the above five questions affirmatively.

Now let us get back to the crisis of the moment, i.e. the corona virus pandemic. If we really think about it, the spread of the virus is all about discipline. All of us must be disciplined to prevent the spread of the virus. Here are some examples:

- All of us should be disciplined to stay at home.
- All of us should be disciplined to practice social distancing.
- All of us must be disciplined to wash our hands for 20 seconds many times a day.
- All of us must be disciplined to practice the highest level of personal hygiene at home, at work (if we are essential services over this time) and in the shops and pharmacies.
- Health, retail and other staff should be disciplined to practice the utmost level of safe behaviour and wearing all the correct protective clothing.
- The SANDF and police officers should practice discipline to consistently and humanely enforce the regulations by treating all people with respect and dignity.
- All of us should be disciplined not to spread fake news.

Observing the behaviour of people during the last week, and particularly on Day One of the National Lockdown, it is evident that many of us have failed already when it comes to being disciplined in following the regulations of the lockdown. To put it more bluntly, we were non-compliant to the Disaster Management Act and its regulations. Or as

Police Minister Bheki Cele would put it: “We are threatening our own lives and the lives of other people.” Gauteng MEC for Health, Dr Bandile Masuku said he was really disappointed that people flocked to the streets and shopping centres. A total of 55 people were subsequently arrested for non-compliance to the law. On the retail front, several companies were penalised for unfair price inflation of certain products, while customers are now

While there are indeed many historic and structural inequalities and limitations in South Africa such as long distances to the nearest shop in many areas and townships, it is clear that while a vaccine has not been found, there is only one way to limit the spread of the virus and that is social distancing. If you don't have the virus, and you stay away from other people who could be infected, you will not be infected.

Staying and working from home also requires discipline. Your employer still has performance expectations in terms of outputs to be achieved. Most employers will be reasonable and realise that these circumstances are unique and that your performance may be adversely affected in certain areas. But the onus is still on the home worker to do his or her best for their employers and customers.

Now is the time to be disciplined despite the inconvenience and discomfort to all of us. Yes, many people experience more inconvenience and hardship than others, and their level of frustration will be much higher. But the reality is that your level of inconvenience and frustration will only get worse if you are infected with the virus.

In other countries with more than 10 000 infections and more than 1000 deaths we are now seeing that health workers are also dying. And the first reports of police officers dying in other parts of the world have been received. We now need to first change our mind-set and then our behaviour to improve our level of discipline in responding to the pandemic. We have another 20 days to improve our behaviour. If we fail, the 20 days may be extended. Moreover, we will see thousands of people dying when the health system will no longer be able to cope with the increased demand for resources and emergency medical care.

Despite the high level of anxiety, despair, panic and indeed ignorance around us, we are now in a position to practice discipline. If we overcome this pandemic, it may pave the way to creating a positive and disciplined society on the road to recovery. As a nation, we have already done it in 1994 when we defeated apartheid and showed the world how disciplined we were during our first democratic election. Again, in 2010 as a country we demonstrated the utmost level of discipline when we presented the world's best World Cup Football tournament and now 10 years later, we are at the crossroads yet again. Yes, there is indeed doom and gloom, especially in the light of our downgrade to junk status last night by rating agency Moody's. However, if we don't recover from the corona pandemic as a nation, there is no chance of economic recovery. Let us rise to the occasion and behave responsibly with commitment, discipline and perseverance. Our disciplined response to the corona virus is about saving the lives of people and saving our nation.

Unprecedented times require unprecedented discipline. Responding to the pandemic requires us to build a new national culture of disciplined behaviour and citizenship. The purpose of this article was not to blame other people for their lack of discipline, but rather to encourage all of us to start with ourselves. It starts with self-discipline. I have stayed in my house yesterday, and I plan to do so today as well. I do realise that for many people it will not be possible to do so. A special thought and prayer to all our essential service workers as you are risking your lives again for the rest of us. The rest of us should honour the call of government and health workers for the rest of us to stay at home. It is all about discipline.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is the Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). This article was first published by SABPP on 28 March 2020, see www.sabpp.co.za

For more information on the Corona virus visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za or World Health Organisation: www.who.int