

#DAY3LOCKDOWNSA

YOU CAN BE CERTAIN OF UNCERTAINTY DURING THE LOCKDOWN:

21 unanswered questions

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Today is day three of the national lockdown, and the third last day of the third month of 2020. Think back about New Year's Day three months ago. We were all filled with excitement at the start of 2020, as if we were entering a new exciting time of change, renewal and technological advancement. Now at the end of the third quarter, this excitement is gone. We are consumed with uncertainty, ambiguity, despair and fear.

The only one thing I am certain about today is uncertainty. While we are faced with the lowest level of business confidence exacerbated by the announcement by Moody's of our demise to junk status. This bad news came at the wrong time as we were getting ourselves ready to deal with the lockdown. There are so many signs of increasing levels of uncertainty and disillusionment. Just when we thought that 2020 will be the year of renewal and growth, the corona virus pandemic has turned our world upside-down. There were signs that the tide has turned on corruption and that corrupt officials would be arrested in 2020. None of this happened, the only arrests we saw were during the first two days of the lockdown when people were arrested for non-compliance to the Disaster Management Act regulations. The National Prosecuting Authority appeared to be finding its way, and the Zondo Commission appeared to be ready to conclude the state capture enquiry. Thus, there were some good signs of real and meaningful change, albeit at a pace too slow for some commentators.

And of course, good things still happen. The visit by the German Chancellor, Dr Angela Merkel appears to have been successful with the prospect of increased levels of German investment, in addition to strengthened German-South African collaboration. Not to mention the excitement of Bill Gates, Trevor Noah, Roger Federer and Raphael Nadal arriving in South Africa for the Match of Africa.

While the optimists only see that things would improve, the pessimists were convinced that things would get worse. The recent return to load-shedding shifted the balance back to the pessimists. And looking at the news headlines, it appears as if the pessimists have won the debate, but not even the pessimists could have predicted the devastating effect of Covid-19. Most pessimists would prefer to be called "realists" as they cite all the evidence of demise around us on a daily basis.

Our inability to answer the following 21 questions with certainty highlights the reality of uncertainty in an increased volatile business, political and socio-economic landscape caused by the devastating impact of the corona virus pandemic:

1. Is there any hope that we will get through the initial 21 days?
2. Will the economy ever recover from the lockdown?
3. Does President Ramaphosa and his ministers have the capacity to take us through this storm?
4. Will the SANDF and SAPS be able to successfully enforce the regulations in curbing the spread of the virus?
5. Do we have the right leaders in business and government to get us through this crisis?

6. Are we able to cope with the level of anxiety, fear, panic and uncertainty?
7. Will the education system be able to complete the academic year despite the lockdown?
8. Will the health system cope with masses of infected patients?
9. Will our people and their families survive the 21 days?
10. Will other social ills such as domestic violence surface during this period?
11. Will there be another spike of xenophobia during or after the lockdown?
12. Will we see social unrest and the breakdown of law and order?
13. How will companies survive the cessation of business activities?
14. Will certain industries that have ceased operating such as tourism, restaurants and airlines be able to recover?
15. Will there be mass retrenchments?
16. How will small businesses survive?
17. Will an appropriate treatment and vaccine be found to save our lives?
18. Will the virus spread further with thousands of people dying in South Africa?
19. Will we have a sufficient supply of food and other goods during the lockdown?
20. Will the pandemic slow down our efforts to adapt to the 4IR?
21. Will 21 days be sufficient to curb the spread of the virus?

I can go on and pose a hundred similar questions. Perhaps there is only one real question and that is whether we are able to cope with these increased levels of uncertainty caused by the pandemic. While the daily updates from the Ministers are reassuring that government is trying to do something in dealing with the pandemic, it is also clear that they don't have the answers to most of the questions.

Over the past five years, business and leadership thought leaders challenged managers and business professionals to get ready for the VUCA world, i.e. an acronym for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. We were told that we must be able to deal with uncertainty if we want to be successful. While much of management thinking in the past was about creating stable organisations with principles such as quality, consistency, replicability, simplicity at its core, the recent focus on dealing with uncertainty has become the new normal in business. For instance, over the past thirty years management practice was dominated by clarity and certainty. Management philosophies such as quality management, risk management and project management attempted to create a sense of certainty, stability and predictability in business. The argument was that if you can make it clear how you will produce quality or plan and manage a project according to a clear process and deliverables, then you are in control of your business and its operations. All of this changed overnight with the global outbreak and spread of Covid-19.

As volatility increased in the external business environment, this uncertainty spilled over inside companies with business leaders now realising that a more flexible approach is needed. Yet, even before the rise of the pandemic, many businesses resisted increased calls for more flexible and innovative ways of doing things. While you can map your processes, and chart your plans and projects with beautifully designed project plans, the new reality is that business does not work like that anymore. The new age of disruption makes this even more difficult, and business leaders often come short when they are too slow to adapt to the forces of change and disruption. In the past you could even determine the rules of the game and then manage your business according to these clearly defined principles and rules. Now the rules of the game change in the middle of the game, and business leaders are simply unable to cope with this fast changing environment. The disaster management regulations were published within days, and clearly there are gaps in interpretation and implementation, let alone several gaps in the rules itself. And we are again reminded that people don't follow rules if there is no buy-in, understanding, communication, change management and

monitoring. But political leaders and armed forces are driving compliance. They are punishing non-compliance from ordinary citizens, while corrupt politicians and government officials go unpunished for decades of non-compliance to laws, rules, codes and standards.

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and new and disruptive business models are forcing business and government leaders to think differently about how they do business. While we were promised that AI would lead to major medical advances, little is known about what AI can do regarding the corona pandemic. With the outbreak of the virus, it almost feels as if we are back in the previous century with more traditional approaches of medical care. It is hoped the scientists will have the answers and solutions soon.

Business leaders and human resource managers, and all other employees working from home are expected to continue working towards the achievement of business objectives irrespective of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. This is unrealistic, as the pandemic is now consuming our thinking and behaviour on a daily basis, while we are also trying to continue with our work where possible. Despite the high level of uncertainty, the need to navigate change and sustaining some form or business activity will remain a top priority during and after the lockdown. The mistake we all made over the last year was to think that disruption will happen from a business force such as technology only. The ability to be resilient when dealing with uncertainty and to keep on giving direction, leveraging talent and engaging staff and other stakeholders from a distance while entering uncharted territories in an increasing uncertain and volatile business environment will be a key capability for survival and success going forward during and after the lockdown.

Furthermore, we need a new type of hope and positivity, one that is much more than simply staying blindly loyal or optimistic despite the pandemic and chaos around us. The new pragmatic positivity will drive new behaviours required to build the new world - people who are active in shaping the uncertain future and being able to navigate uncertainty. In fact, the only way of dealing effectively with uncertainty is to see it as an opportunity by shifting your focus to learning, survival, reflection and a new culture of creativity and innovation.

We are now in a new age of business unusual, and as Napoleon Bonaparte said: "Leaders are dealers in hope." Notwithstanding the despair around us, and our frustrations in staying at home for 21 days, leaders need to be able to provide some hope to their teams. First of all, we must admit that we are all vulnerable and at risk because of the virus. None of us are immune to the virus, as infected politicians, members of royal families, celebrities and many others have shown us over the last two weeks. The playing field is now level, and business and government leaders are busy learning that people come first, and everything else follows. That is the main reason why we are working and staying at home now. Our health is more important than anything else and we must prevent the spread of the virus. Globally, in most countries, it is the first time in the history of the modern world that people have been prioritised before profit. However, we now need to lead from a different space, and that is the space of uncertainty.

Being in a permanent state of uncertainty, learning, reflection and creativity will help management teams and employees to not only cope over the short term, but to survive when caring and compassion becomes the new norm of doing business. Many leaders are not ready for this paradigm shift. Let us all admit that we were not ready for the corona pandemic. We were also not ready for the lockdown. We are adapting very quickly. We are making many mistakes and we will continue to make more mistakes. We neglected hygiene at our homes, our workplaces, public places and society at large. We are paying a huge price for this omission. We must admit our discomfort and face the

reality of the need for all of us to co-create a new world - a world in which the dignity, health, wellness, importance and value of people will never again be under-estimated.

In conclusion, the only thing we can be certain of during the lockdown is uncertainty. We may not even be able to answer the 21 questions now, but perhaps some of them will be answered near the end of the lockdown or afterwards. Developing a new mind-set and people skills to cope with uncertainty will be the key individual and business differentiator in this new uncertain and unpredictable world. Welcome to the new real world of uncertainty. Reach out to your employees, customers and other stakeholders. Admit to your own level of uncertainty and acknowledge that you are vulnerable. Acknowledge the uncertainty faced by employees, but provide a safe space for people to share their true feelings. See if you can offer some hope that we are all in the same boat, and as President Ramaphosa said: "We shall overcome." This is a learning period for all of us. We are learning to cope with uncertainty.

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