

Locking down yourself but not your development

by

Marius Meyer

Although the Disaster Management Act compliance was highlighted as the top priority during the lockdown, we must realise that while many of us are working from home during lockdown, we should not neglect the development of staff during the lockdown. Working from home should not exclude development from home. Learning and development should be repositioned to adapt to the needs of both the lockdown and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Learning happens every day, and most learning occurs outside traditional class-rooms in personal settings and working from home environments, including online learning.

Let us do a quick test on your development during the past 41 days of lockdown:

- Did you learn about the coronavirus, Covid-19, hygiene and the Disaster Management Act?
- Did you learn anything from your colleagues while working from home?
- Did you learn anything from your family members, including your children?
- Did you learn anything from your friends?
- Did you learn to work from home and balancing your priorities?
- Did you learn more about computers and connectivity?
- Did you learn from online meetings and conversations?
- Did you learn from the behaviour of other people?
- Did you learn about hygiene at home and shops?
- Did you learn anything about yourself?

My proposition is that most of us will pass the above test with flying colours. All of us have learned at least something during the lockdown without necessarily being on a formal course. Learning happens on-the-job and in our own home, work and social environments. And none of us have been in a traditional class-room.

In addition to the extended lockdown period, the future world of work and business requires a new approach to people development. It means that we need to position learning at the centre of people development. In fact, people development can be a powerful mechanism for innovation, business and socio-economic transformation. Conversely, a lack of people development, or incorrect learning can be a major obstacle to innovation. Given skills gaps in many sectors, and the South African economy at large, companies cannot afford to continue with outdated approaches to learning. Furthermore, even if companies fail to use learning effectively to drive business recovery, business performance may not be sustainable if the profit motive is the sole reason for learning. People development should become a national priority. Thus, companies should consider the impact of people development beyond their own self-interest, and focus on their whole industry and society at large. Hence, people development can play a major role in socio-economic transformation.

Notwithstanding the lack of national approaches to people development, pockets of excellence have emerged in several sectors of our economy. Despite our recent scandals and involvement in state

capture, our financial and auditing sectors are world leaders. They have managed to excel despite our dismal track record in mathematics as the foundation of these professions. Adult learning and proper people development are key imperatives for driving innovation.

The reality is that people development takes place against the backdrop of the current socio-economic realities:

- The need for new ways of thinking and doing in recovering our locked down business and economic sectors.
- Increased levels of poverty, inequality, unemployment and under-employment.
- High levels of corruption, fraud, unethical behaviour and poor governance.
- Education and skills crisis impeding economic recovery.
- The disadvantage of the informal economy.

The need for change is intensified on a daily basis, so much so that many SETAs, business managers and people management professionals are lagging behind. The workplace is different, technological development has accelerated, and even high level university programmes such as engineering become obsolete within a year or two after students have graduated. Hence, the need for a stronger focus on people development and innovation. Whilst production and R&D departments are leaders in innovation, the question is to what extent does business managers support innovation, or are we simply adapting after innovation has occurred. People development also needs to be more proactive in fostering creativity and innovation in organisations. Moreover, managers need to play a pivotal role in institutionalising renewal, imagination and innovation as corporate competencies.

However, sometimes good intentions are eroded by new shortened strategic planning life cycles. In the past, business could plan for 10 years, then it came down to 5 years, and now it is almost impossible to plan beyond 6 months. This shortened planning cycle requires a different mind-set, and different management professionals who can enable their business to become more resilient and quicker implementers of innovation. The problem with disaster management is that we enter into a locked down period of short-term crisis management and we remain stuck in a space of reactivity. As Fast Company Magazine asserts: "How can you strategise for the future, when you can't see beyond 18 months?" The alternative to strategising is to take change as it comes and only deal with contingencies. We are now in that perpetual phase of contingency management while neglecting business renewal and growth.

The skills development system should continue to support people development during the lockdown. We cannot continue operating in an environment in which there are too many obstacles to learning in the workplace and home environment. Bureaucracy and ineffective accreditation and other learning systems should be streamlined to keep pace with the needs and speed of business. In fact, the major obstacle in our skills development system is that we don't have a national human capital system. Successful transformed economies such as South Korea and Singapore have achieved competitiveness when they based their skills development systems on explicit national human capital strategies.

An organisation's strategic framework sets the scene for people development. The business and people development strategy should be clear and aligned. Next, all processes should be visible. A learning culture is needed to optimise people development, and you need good systems to drive and support learning. Lastly, all your people development interventions should directly support the learning strategy.

Let me outline some practical guidelines for innovative people development:

- Start with an explicit human capital strategy
- Unlearn or reconsider past theories and models
- Focus on innovation as new ways of thinking about learning and development
- Empower employees to learn from home
- Build online learning capability and resources
- Create flexibility in dealing with change
- Reconsider criteria for people achievement
- Build a new learning culture based on people empowerment, growth and innovation
- Involve employees in business innovation
- Use proper systems of monitoring and evaluation focusing on business impact measurement

To conclude, we need to change our approach to learning if we want to position people development as a catalyst for change and innovation during and after the lockdown. Getting the alignment and integration right between strategy, process, systems, culture and interventions remains a key challenge for many companies. People development must be aligned to business strategy and make a contribution to socio-economic transformation. This imperative is of utmost importance in developing nations such as South Africa, but also in other emerging markets. Ultimately, we need to commit to people development as a top priority for employees working from home. Imagine how we can unlock the potential of people by unleashing their creativity when developing and applying their skills during the lockdown. While companies should continue to drive people development during this time, the lockdown provides employees with a unique opportunity to become experts in self-development and empowerment from home. Some employees were dreaming of being in control of their own lives. The lockdown opens the door for you to prioritise your own learning and development as part of your new reality when working and learning from home.

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