

From 5 levels of lockdown to 5 stages of grief

by

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As loyal citizens we were asked to prepare ourselves for the 5 levels of lockdown. We were told that we were at level 5 (without knowing it), and that we would move to level 4 on 1 May. This led to a major outcry from all sectors, so much so that government has since the last week in April moved to a more “consultative” mode of decision-making around the Covid-19 crisis. However, the approach to consultation currently is to promulgate a range of regulations affecting different sectors and all individuals as citizens of society. This is quite a unique approach, given the fact that disaster management (a euphemism for a state of emergency) is normally not negotiated and simply enforced. This creates even more confusion when some of the regulations are challenged for its rationality regarding its relevance in preventing the spread of the virus. When the socio-economic hardship is seen as worse than the risk of infection, a high level of non-compliance occurs, followed by increased infections as a result of certain sectors being allowed to operate with little physical distancing such as the taxi industry where masses of people are at risk of being infected.

People experience grief because of the coronavirus epidemic, and the lockdown regulations in particular. In a brilliant article by David Kessler and Scott Berinator published in the Harvard Business Review, they remind us that we are all going through the five stages of Covid-19 grief. It goes like this:

Stage 1 - Denial: “This virus won’t affect us.”

Stage 2 - Anger: “You’re making me stay home and taking away my activities.”

Stage 3 - Bargaining: “Okay, if I social distance for 2 weeks everything will be better, right?”

Stage 4 - Sadness: “I don’t know when this will end.”

Stage 5 - Acceptance: “This is happening, I have to figure out how to proceed.”

It is a reality that people are at different stages of grief, and you move from one stage to the next as you decide on how you will respond to the situation. People also change their views based on how they think it through, the information they receive, and how they are influenced by other people and the media. Unfortunately, it is a reality that if you are stuck at a lower level, in particular stage 1, you will be the most non-compliant and therefore at the biggest risk of being infected, and for infecting other people with your reckless and/or non-compliant behaviour. Sadly, many pastors and other church and funeral goers contributed to mass infections by continuing with church and other religious services, and therefore recklessly spread the virus. Some of these pastors also passed away of Covid-19 soon after these acts of non-compliance.

People at Stage 2 may be grumpy and stay at home, while some of them will take the odd chance of being non-compliant by venting their anger at government or the police. Both the stage 1 and stage 2 groups are also the most likely to fall for conspiracy theories. Many South Africans initially accepted stage 3 when they were first told to be in lockdown for 21 days, and while moving back to stage 2 for a few days after the next extension of 14 days, and then managed to stay calm under stage 3.

When the risk-adjusted strategy was launched from 1 May, a lot of people moved to stage 4 when they were filled with sadness in realising that this will not end soon. Fortunately, though, people who have accepted the situation have moved to stage 5 and are managing to work out ways of coping with the reality, while occasionally reverting back to stages 3 and 4. However, since the devastating socio-economic impact, hunger and indeed the collapse of businesses have become a daily reality all over the country, some people slipped back to stage 2.

Now many people have gained new hope that with the relaxation to level 3 they will be able to move to a better situation, but unfortunately while from a geographic perspective this will be most of the country, from a population perspective, it will mostly be the metropolitan areas where high population density is the norm and the spread of the virus is almost impossible to control. In essence, it means that relaxation will happen in rural areas, while strict regulations will still be in place in the major cities. Thus, the so-called “opening” of the economy will not really happen if it opened in Witsand, but not in Cape Town. All major cities and districts where most of the economic activity takes place will still be at level 4 lockdown, and over time some of these districts may even move back to level 5. Some people at level 4 will move to grief stage 2. In addition, if a person at stage 5 of grief is behaving very well and then abused by a police officer, the individual could revert back to anger (stage 2), and a loyal good law-abiding citizen is then lost in the process.

Government decision-makers and managers of companies responsible for the occupational health and safety of employees returning to work, should keep the 5 stages of grief in consideration when welcoming their employees back to work. They even need to consider it now while employees are still staying or working from home. Employees at grief stages 1 and 2 are the people most likely to transmit the virus from their homes to the workplace. It is therefore of utmost importance that companies obtain the services of psychologists who can assist management teams in creating sufficient awareness of the Covid-19 virus, while supporting them to move to stage 5 of grief. Treating people with respect and dignity is key, and professional change management and organisation development work will be needed to prepare people for working and living in a Covid-19 society at work sites and at home. Although the 5 risk-adjusted levels of government can be challenged, they are here to stay and we need to adapt to whatever level we are on. Likewise, the 5 levels of grief is a reality and present an opportunity for careful planning and change management in ensuring that your workforce is adequately prepared and united in addressing Covid-19 in an appropriate way.

In times of high levels of uncertainty, inconvenience, complexity and turmoil, especially when there is a continuous shift in goal posts, the importance of assisting people in dealing with grief cannot be over-emphasised. This level of awareness may be useful in guiding decision-makers in government and business to improve their awareness strategies, in addition to providing more rational and sensible regulations and interventions in curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

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