

From social distancing to physical distancing:

10 lessons during the first 10 days of lockdown

by

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It is now 10 days of the national lockdown caused by the Covid-19 virus in South Africa. It has been a terrible experience for so many people. Firstly, the 9 families losing their loved ones from succumbing to the virus. Secondly, to the more than 1500 people being infected. Thirdly, to health and essential workers risking their lives every day due to their high exposure to infected people. Fourthly, to the authorities trying to cope with the pandemic. Fifthly, to all those in lockdown working from home and their families. Sixthly, to all other people being directly or indirectly affected such as business owners and non-profit organisation staff. The reality is that all of us are either directly or indirectly affected by the virus and the lockdown.

Amidst the challenge of coping with the virus, there are still many unanswered questions, or questions that have been answered in uncertain, new or contradictory ways by several stakeholders:

- Is it really necessary for the general public to wear masks?
- Is the virus airborne?
- Is it possible to be infected again after you have recovered?
- What will happen if the health system can no longer cope?
- Will testing really make a difference?
- How long will it still take for a vaccine and treatment to be found?
- What happens after the 21 day lockdown?
- How many people will lose their jobs?
- Will the economy ever recover from the lockdown?

(The latest official answers to some of these questions are available on www.sacoronavirus.co.za and www.who.int)

In the absence of clear and consistent answers to these questions and indeed other questions you may have, it is not surprising that there is a much higher level of uncertainty, anxiety, fear and panic over the last two weeks. Yet, we are urged to keep on trusting the World Health Organisation and the Department of Health to lead and guide us forward, and we don't have much of a choice, we need to follow them, create more awareness and practice safe, hygienic

and healthy behaviour. We must also realise that none of us have all the answers. We are all uncertain and vulnerable. Even highly qualified doctors and other medical staff have died. But there are a few basic guidelines we all know we have to follow:

- Staying at home and keep our physical distance from other people;
- Washing our hands for at least 20 seconds;
- Using sanitizers to clean our hands and surfaces;
- Covering a cough and sneeze.

In essence, it is all about practicing good hygiene. And before we criticize government and other people, let us be honest with ourselves: We have not practiced good hygiene at our workplaces, public places, shops and our homes long before the lockdown. Sadly, some people continued with poor hygiene during the lockdown. We all have individual and collective responsibility to prevent the spread of the virus and to do all we can to turn the situation around. That is indeed a tall order, especially if it appears as if the situation is not improving and only getting worse all over the world and here in South Africa.

After 10 days of lockdown, we have learned a lot about the Covid-19 virus and pandemic from our leaders, other people and society at large. If I have to summarise what I have learned, it will be the following top 10 lessons:

1. *Leadership:* While leadership during a crisis has some unique challenges and nuances, the authenticity and quality of leadership is key, and trust in leadership is of paramount importance. In South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa, and the Health Minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize has been exemplary in their leadership and ability to deal with the crisis in a professional, calm and measured way. They affirmed the sense of urgency and focus required during and after the lockdown. However, some of the other ministers displayed poor leadership with their confusing and contradictory messages in undermining the President and the Health Minister by implementing regulations and practices not conducive to physical distancing. While some billionaires have come to the table in offering financial relief, many private sector leaders have been quiet and invisible. The major reason for this is that these CEOs are at home, and only a few of them are active on social media. Michael Jordaan from Rain has been excellent as always, and Busi Mavuso from Business Leadership South Africa has been good with their social presence, as well as some others. However, overall most government departments and Cosatu have been excellent with their social media posts on a daily basis. The private sector can learn from government on how to communicate on social media during a national crisis.
2. *People first:* For the first time ever the whole world, with the exception of a few countries, is united in its realisation that people come first. Family is important. Friends are special. People and their health are more important than anything else, even more important than profits, hence the lockdown of non-essential business. We need to realise that we will need people to turn our economies around, and to help our businesses to recover and become effective, efficient and sustainable after the lockdown. The physical and mental health of people is at the centre of the coronavirus pandemic. And people need to learn, and learn fast on how to change their behaviour

and be disciplined throughout the lockdown, and thereafter. People need to be trained and codes of conduct must be visible and followed.

3. *Awareness and communication:* There were many misconceptions about the virus from day 1 and it was important to intensify all efforts to raise awareness with a proper communication campaign. We need to continue all these efforts and ensure that we improve in our communication campaigns throughout the public and private sectors. The transparency of government in their daily communication must be commended.
4. *Collaboration and co-operation:* We are learning that different government departments need to work together to achieve success. The same applies to the private sector. The pandemic provides us with an opportunity for mass collaboration and multi-disciplinary approaches like never before. No single specialist can work in isolation any more. The greater good is now priority number 1 for all of us.
5. *Rules must make sense to be followed:* While drastic regulations were needed to curb the spread of the virus, rules must make sense to people. People don't change their behaviour if they don't understand and believe in the rules and regulations. Compliance is of utmost importance, but when rules are illogical and applied inconsistently to different people, you will have non-compliance and other similar problems. Moreover, changing the rules every second day is a recipe for non-compliance, confusion and disaster. Rules must be enforced consistently.
6. *Different strokes for different folks:* Notwithstanding the need for consistent messages, a one-size fits all strategy does not work. The same strategy used in Sandton does not work in Alexandra. Learning from marketing specialists, planners must consider the different types of market segments and plan their strategies and campaigns accordingly. The structural inequality caused by apartheid is still with us and was amplified during the first 10 days of the lockdown. Moreover, we need special protection for health workers and other essential employees. Their ability to do their work without being infected will make or break the health and disaster management system.
7. *Contingency planning:* It is evident that proper contingency plans are needed to deal with the crisis. These plans must be specific and include all the necessary actions needed to deal with the crisis. Use proper experts such as risk managers, business continuity managers, health and safety officers, disaster managers and specialists to drive your contingency planning.
8. *Close the strategy-execution gap:* Unfortunately this is one of South Africa's biggest weaknesses and therefore requires special attention. Policies, strategies, governance, rules, processes, practices, procedures, actions and behaviour all need to be aligned and integrated to ensure that we are dealing effectively with the crisis.
9. *Technology:* If there is one winner in the crisis, it is technology. For people who resisted the use of technology for so many years, now is the time to catch up. If it was not for technology, most of us would have lost our sanity by now. We need to be informed and connected and continue with our work and lives using technology. Thus, social media is key in spreading information about Covid-19, but we also need to be

careful of not following spreading fake news or unprofessional and inappropriate content.

10. Monitoring and evaluation: We have learned over the last 10 days how important monitoring and evaluation is. Every day we are updated with the latest statistics pertaining to infections and deaths. The Department of Health also responded positively by including recoveries as part of the daily updates to provide us with hope and a more balanced perspective. It is essential to continue monitoring and evaluating the situation and to make changes and improvements to plans when needed. Some of these changes will require new or different interventions or regulations.

The above 10 lessons were hard lessons. How effective the lockdown measures has been, remains to be seen. The reality of the situation overwhelmed many of us and made us extremely vulnerable and anxious during this crisis. Yet, we are expected to continue with our daily lives, whether we are working, resting, recovering, studying or just hanging around at our homes. Perhaps the biggest lesson is that we are all in this together, not only in South Africa, but throughout the whole world. Covid-19 is a global pandemic and the virus has now spread locally to almost every country in the world. No person and no island is exempt from the virus.

We will learn more lessons over the next 11 days. We may even learn that the 21 days are not enough and that we need to extend the lockdown period like several countries have done already, but that is for government to decide. But we will keep on learning lessons and rediscover the essence of being human and our instinct for survival. Let us learn from the last 10 days, and refocus and improve on our efforts of saving lives and protecting our fellow human beings against the virus.

Ironically, in one week we have even learned that social distancing is not the right term as suggested by several psychologists and other thought leaders, and as recently conceded by the World Health Organisation, it should rather be called physical distancing. Despite being isolated in our homes from the rest of society, we cannot be distanced socially from one another. Let us keep our physical distance from one another. We are socially connected and need one another like never before. It is all about fighting the virus and promoting hygiene on a daily basis. Our commitment to this global effort is what binds us together as a people in more than 200 countries across the globe.

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