

#DAY19LOCKDOWNSA

The Covid-19 Crisis:

The need for leadership at all spheres of society

by

Marius Meyer

The Covid-19 crisis came at a time when leaders were not ready for a major crisis on top of difficult economic times all over the world. Different government leaders responded differently, but it is clear that the capability of leaders in dealing with the crisis is challenged all over the world. The crisis is exacerbated by high levels of uncertainty in particular given the absence of proper solutions such as vaccines or medicine. This ambiguity has forced leaders to be in a perpetual mode of reactivity, while many of them would have preferred more proactive approaches in a more stable environment. In addition to people being tested for the infection of the virus, it is evident that leadership skills are tested every day.

Leadership skills are tested in the following spheres affected by the virus:

- World Health Organisation leaders leading the whole world with advice and planning;
- Country presidents and ministers;
- Other government leaders and agencies;
- High level advisors and scientists to governments;
- Leaders at hospitals and other healthcare centres;
- Leaders of companies, and non-profit organisations;
- All other people in leadership positions.

Many of these leaders have risen to the occasion, while others are overwhelmed by the situation, or simply continue with their poor leadership before the pandemic. When the health of people is at risk and the sustainability of institutions is at threat because of poor leadership, it is evident that something must be done to improve leadership. Even when organisations were led by great leaders, often when these leaders resign or retire, it may be difficult to sustain the performance of the organisation, especially if these leaders are succeeded by leaders who are less competent. The credibility and reputation of organisations will then be adversely affected. Conversely, good leaders may turn things around in organisations that are struggling because of the damage done by their leaders in the past. What complicates matters further is that leaders now face the Covid-19 virus as an external threat to the sustainability of their organisations. The ability to inspire your people to go the extra mile despite the lockdown and uncertain future is even more difficult during and after this difficult period. But during the lockdown in cases of extreme discomfort, it may not even be realistic to expect people to do the minimum if they are not physically or mentally able to perform their work.

The South African government has provided exceptional leadership during the lockdown. President Ramaphosa and Minister Mkhize have been at the forefront of government's response to the crisis. They have managed to create a very high sense of urgency and trust in their leadership during these difficult times when we don't have answers about the way forward. Being advised by top scientists, and in particular the infectious diseases expert Prof Salim Abdool Karim has created confidence that

we are in good hands, despite the uncertainty and chaos around us. Unfortunately, poor leadership is evident in some spheres of government, business and other areas of society. The behaviour of some leaders such as local government leaders and even religious leaders not conforming to the regulations has been disappointing. These leaders should realise that they have hundreds and thousands of followers who will follow their example of non-compliance and thereby putting their own and others' health and lives at risk. The brutal behaviour by police and defence force officers is a good example of the consequences of poor leadership, and a lack of ethics and values displayed by followers.

Leading by example is key during these times of changed behaviour, disaster management planning and united action. Being united and working together towards curbing the spread of the virus, while attempting to sustain organisations provides leaders with a dual focus during the lockdown.

During times of stability, and times of crises, the reality is that organisational success depends on the quality of its leaders. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true, and that is that poor leaders cause the demise and/or destruction of their organisations. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, poor leadership will destroy health systems and ultimately their countries. Leaders are faced with the difficult tasks of implementing emergency plans, while still providing hope that the situation can be improved. Thus, countries and organisations need highly competent leaders. However, there are too many examples of poor leadership around us in different types of organisations. These leaders not only frustrate employees who are worried about their future, they also frustrate their customers, suppliers and other stakeholders of the organisation.

The leadership crisis is amplified during the Covid-19 crisis in organisations and manifests at two levels, i.e. horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, different leaders behave inconsistently. For example, you may have an excellent Production Manager, but an ineffective Supply Chain Manager, or vice versa. Employees are observing inconsistent leadership behaviour, and it affects the quality of products and services produced by the company. At a vertical level, leaders as top managers, middle managers and front-end supervisors also follow different leadership styles, approaches and models, with the result that inconsistent leadership behaviour is prevalent throughout the organisation, so much so that even when the CEO has a good vision and strategy in place for the company, the different levels of management and staff fail to execute the vision. In other words, it does not help us too much to have good blueprints and disaster plans, but not enough footprints of people executing the strategy correctly on a daily basis.

So, if the leadership crisis is the problem, what is the solution? A 'hands-off' or too aggressive approach to leadership issues is no longer an option. Leaders need to have a clear understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, in particular during times of crisis. The South African Leadership standard provides clear guidelines on what good leadership practice is all about. The right leadership behaviour will enable the right staff and stakeholder behaviour, thereby leading organisations towards success. The short term priority for leaders now is to first lead their people through the lockdown, and while doing that, plan for the post-lockdown period. It will not be business as usual, therefore companies should now already start planning for workplaces in which hygiene will be a top priority. Leaders must prepare themselves to drive extensive employee wellness interventions in their companies, thus caring for people will be an essential part of the job of leaders - an area many leaders have neglected in the past.

A unique and difficult opportunity for leaders is to provide hope and positive energy in turning things around – in positioning leadership at all levels of society as the solution to the current Covid-19 crisis and all other problems faced by the organisation. Last night Dr Mkhize and Prof Karim provided that hope that we can be successful in curbing the spread of the virus if we make the right evidence-based decisions in dealing with the crisis. Leaders now realise that multi-disciplinary approaches are needed and the traditional silos within organisations have to be broken down. Leaders also need to admit to

their own vulnerability, and look after their own wellness too. You cannot champion the wellness of your people if you neglect your own wellness.

With sound leadership we will be able to deal with the emergency and even handle new crises as they emerge, but turning these hardships into opportunities of improving ourselves, our organisations and our country will be the ultimate test of our strength as leaders. We now need exceptional leadership at all spheres of society. The Covid-19 crisis presents our leaders with an opportunity to step up and show their true colours as leaders of nations, organisations, people and society.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za

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