

Lockdown 2.0:

It is all about employee wellness

by

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The first 21 days of the national lockdown as initially planned for is now a thing of the past, as we enter the next phase of the lockdown, i.e. another 14 days until the end of April. While government is making some plans around the amended regulations pertaining to the lockdown, and a gradual return to work in certain industries, time is running out for employers to get ready for the return of their workforce and customers. Already hundreds of employees have been infected by the virus in essential services such as hospitals, the defence force and police services, food manufacturers and retailers. While South Africa has been praised by the World Health Organization for flattening the curve, more focused work is needed in ensuring that the early gains of these efforts of the lockdown are not lost.

Viewing Covid-19 as a national crisis and pandemic only to be dealt with in isolation, will not resolve the short-term problem of rising cases and deaths. While short-term crisis and disaster management is imperative, South Africa is faced with a multi-faceted health crisis that accelerates the spread of the coronavirus. Our main long-term problem is not the virus, but a bigger health crisis that is likely to overwhelm the health system when we can no longer cope with the growth in cases. Certain organisations and government departments and state-owned enterprises are overstaffed, and when these employees return to work, we are likely to see a dramatic increase in the number of Covid-19 cases.

With only 14 days to go for the lockdown to be lifted, it is clear that employee wellness should be the top priority of all South African organisations. Essential services should already have employee wellness strategies and plans in place to look after their staff and to protect their employees against infection, and as we have seen over the last three weeks, some organisations failed to ensure that their employees are protected. Imagine masses of non-essential employees also returning to work. It is inevitable that this mass migration of employees back to work, is likely to result in mass infections and the closure of several branches and buildings. Thus, prioritising employee wellness, including their health and safety should be a top priority for all organisations.

The South African national HR standards developed by the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP) define employee wellness as “a strategy to ensure that a safe and healthy work and social environment is created and maintained, together with individual wellness commitment that enables employees to perform optimally while meeting all health and safety legislative requirements and other relevant wellness good practices in support of the achievement of organisational objectives”. This definition of employee wellness provides the focus needed of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis in a more concerted, holistic and integrated way. Consistent with occupational health and safety legislation, the employee wellness standard implies that employers have the responsibility to promote safety and wellness of their employees, but it also states that employees need to commit to wellness themselves. In terms of the prevention of the spread of the Covid-19 virus, employers should take all reasonable steps to

prevent the spread of the virus and to protect their staff in the process, while employees are expected to play their part in practising the highest standard of hygiene and preventative safety behaviour.

There are, however, two missing links in the employee wellness equation that we can currently see and that is that Covid-19 cannot be seen in isolation. Firstly, health experts have warned that other underlying health risks, such as diabetes, hypertension, asthma, cancer, HIV/AIDS, obesity and tuberculosis will exacerbate the crisis of the spread and impact of Covid-19. Secondly, employee wellness deals with five aspects of wellness, i.e. physical health, mental health, financial wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing and social wellbeing. All these aspects of wellness need to be attended to in an integrated manner. For instance, Covid-19 directly impacts on the financial wellbeing of employees, and they will therefore need guidance and support in addition to the government's relief schemes. Moreover, while the current focus on dealing with Covid-19 is dominated by the physical side of wellness, it is a reality that the mental health of employees is being neglected. Employee counselling services must be provided in supporting employees during these stressful and uncertain period – a time in which fear, anxiety and panic will increase.

While the first phase of employers' responses to the Covid-19 virus dealt with the emergency arrangements in terms of the disaster management regulations such as working from home for non-essential staff, the next phase should be to scale up significantly on employee wellness. This will require a comprehensive and integrated employee wellness strategy covering various employee care programmes ranging from stress management, to financial planning to counselling. A complete wellness risk identification process is needed in analysing all employee wellness risks. For example, high risk employee groups such as employees with asthma and cancer need to be identified and clear mitigation plans put in place such as the continuation of working from home over extended periods of time, even long after the lockdown has been lifted.

The challenge and opportunity is to ensure that employee wellness is internalised at the workplace. Organisations should now start to plan for an integrated employee wellness strategy for the post-lockdown period. The following guidelines will be useful in this regard:

- Do a detailed analysis of the broader wellness factors affecting your organisation and its employees, and identify trends and gaps. Add the Covid-19 disaster management plan health regulations to this analysis, together with other risks such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, diabetes and cancer. Separate focused plans are needed for these areas of wellness risks, but all these plans should form part of an overarching employee wellness strategy.
- Convert the temporary working from home arrangements during the Covid-19 lockdown period into a permanent policy for the organisation.
- Track and analyse all your employee wellness issues by looking at historical, present and future data and trends, and address possible problem areas proactively.
- Identify high risk employee segments and target interventions for them, but focus on holistic employee wellness for all staff.
- Develop an explicit employee wellness strategy for your organisation.
- Add employee wellness to the agenda of management meetings with a short-term focus on Covid-19 as part of the overall employee wellness strategy.
- Create employee awareness so that all staff will understand what Covid-19 is, and do the same for all the other wellness risks facing employees.
- Provide protective equipment for relevant staff and hygiene awareness training for all staff and specialised hygiene training for all safety representatives, safety officers and cleaning staff.
- Ensure that the employee wellness and/or HR Manager in smaller organisations are visible and that this professional gets ample opportunities of communicating with management and staff.

- Invite a person who tested positive for Covid-19 and recovered to speak to staff to promote understanding, sensitivity and to proactively prevent stigmatisation.
- Create posters and other attractive infographics to raise awareness and to proactively prevent stigmatisation of Covid-19 positive staff members and customers.
- Embark on visible and proactive wellness programmes at work, fitness programmes, health talks, blood testing, and visits by doctors, psychologists, dieticians and other health specialists.
- Train staff on health and nutrition and replace all unhealthy catering with healthy food.
- Share your organisation's employee wellness plan with all HR professionals, line managers and staff.
- Discuss the Employee Wellness Strategy in staff meetings and ensure that a culture of open conversations is created and maintained. A different illness could be discussed and featured on a monthly basis to ensure that all health risks are covered.
- Ensure that all senior managers are seen as champions of the employee wellness strategy and that they are visible and leading by example – open channels for communication.
- Build and nurture a culture conducive to proactive employee wellness and health.
- Create interesting and “fun” ways of promoting wellness, e.g. competitions and awards.
- Conduct regular reviews of your wellness strategy, and adapt it according to changing needs in your organisation, industry, nationally or internationally where relevant.

The South African Employee Wellness standard positions the HR function in an organisation at the interface between the organisation's overall strategy and the healthcare of its employees. Balancing the needs of employees with the needs of the organisation is of paramount importance. However, given poor habits and unhealthy lifestyles, employees may not know what is good or bad for them, hence the need for an explicit, but disciplined employee wellness strategy. Furthermore, a much stronger focus on mental health as part of overall employee wellness is needed during times of increased levels of uncertainty, fear, anxiety and stress.

President Ramaphosa and the cabinet decided on a *People First* strategy when the coronavirus outbreak started in South Africa. CEOs are now challenged to implement employee wellness as their own customised *People First* strategies. Getting employee wellness right provides management with a fantastic opportunity of ensuring that the organisation shows visibly how it cares for its employees, while simultaneously improving their productivity in implementing business strategy. The reactive crisis management response of dealing with Covid-19 is likely to last at least another three or four months into the post-lockdown phase, but it is now time to embark on a proactive and integrated employee wellness strategy in dealing with all facets of employee wellness, health, safety and hygiene.

Lockdown 1.0 was indeed about emergency, disaster and contingency planning, and now Lockdown 2.0 enters the era of proactive wellness strategy while continuing with the reactive responses and isolation approaches needed when Covid-19 cases are identified. In essence, Lockdown 2.0 is not only a proactive wellness strategy, it is an all-encompassing approach to the lockout of all viruses, bacteria, diseases and wellness risks from the organisation in creating a healthy organisation with healthy employees in which employee wellness has become a top priority.

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