

Work sites during lockdown level 4: The need for rapid organisation culture change

by

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On 25 April Minister of Co-operative Governance, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma explained the new regulations pertaining to the transition from the level 5 lockdown to level 4 on 1 May. She made one profound statement: “We need to change the culture of the workplace.” She then announced a number of far reaching regulations that are available on the government website, as well as the dedicated national coronavirus website www.sacoronavirus.co.za

Some of these changes mean that we will have to drastically change our behaviour and actions in the workplace. Safety is now priority number one with Covid-19 as the biggest risk facing employees. As a friendly nation, most South Africans would in the past greet you in a very friendly way, i.e. with a handshake or a hug, especially when meeting a person you have not seen for some time, or when a birthday or achievement is celebrated at work. Minister Dlamini-Zuma summed it up in this way: “Touching is a thing of the past.” She then warned that companies will open under strict safety conditions from May, but if people are infected by the Covid-19 virus at work, the company will be closed. Moreover, she suggested that if our behaviour does not change, we will simply move back to level 5 at a national level, i.e. the highest level of strict measures.

According to traditional organisation behaviour theory, it takes a long time to change the culture of an organisation. Let us first consider the essence of organisation culture, before suggesting ways of creating a culture of hygiene and prevention. But what exactly is organisation culture? It is the way in which things are done in an organisation. Organisation culture is the heart and soul of an organisation. It is the heart and soul because it is inside the organisation, but it is intangible because you can't see it, although you can feel it. Organisation culture is what you don't see, but you know it is there. In that way it is very similar to the Covid-19 virus – you know it is there, but you can't see it. It includes the intangible aspects of the business – often the unwritten rules of an organisation. Under the new Covid-19 workplace dispensation all these rules must be written up and strictly enforced.

Fortunately we do have a few good examples of top companies in South Africa that have managed to change their organisation cultures. In addition to the typical average, underperforming or toxic organisation cultures, there are two main types of positive organisation cultures that have emerged over the past twenty years in South Africa:

1. *High performance cultures* – these are companies that have managed to change from traditional or mediocre ways of doing things to become high performing world-class companies;
2. *Compliance cultures* – these are companies and sometimes a whole sector such as mining or banking that have managed to create a strong risk, governance and compliance culture with the aim of following acceptable levels of compliance to laws, rules, codes and standards as regulated by the Companies Act and recommended by the King IV Code of Corporate Governance.

With the lockdown, we are now in a situation requiring a rapid compliance culture first, followed by a performance culture when normal business activity can resume when we reach level 1 of the risk-adjusted strategy of government hopefully in the second half of the year. In other words, we need to comply with all the new safety and hygiene regulations in the workplace, and we need to put strict measures in place in a very short period of time.

We can draw on our past performance of good compliance, and the banking and mining sectors can guide us in other economic sectors on how to achieve compliance in a short period of time. For example, for more than twenty years, very strong safety cultures have been created and maintained in the mining industry, while robust compliance systems and cultures are in place in financial firms such as banking and insurance companies. The difference now is that we need to change our organisation cultures in a very short period of time.

Top performing companies have managed to excel in their business performance by creating high performance cultures in explicit ways, and specifically mobilising their employees towards superior performance. However, these efforts did not happen automatically, they were carefully and purposefully orchestrated by management teams with clear goals of creating and maintaining high performance cultures. In the past, extensive consultation took place to make this happen. Companies now do not have the luxury of long periods of consultation. In a disaster management dispensation, things change on a regular basis and not all rules make sense to all people, and may require more buy-in and change management. The model has to be fast and robust. The basic methodology is to form groups of people and expert groups, develop plans, and execute as quickly as possible.

The following guidelines can be used by management teams to change organisation culture for the new fast action orientated compliance-driven disaster management regime:

- Dynamic and innovative leaders play a positive leadership role to drive a disaster management and safety plan, with hygiene and prevention at the top of the agenda.
- Assemble a team of high-level experts to accelerate the rate of decision-making and change, and build a group of change agents who will execute quickly and inspire others to follow.
- Management visibility is key in regular organisation-wide conversations about the Covid-19 virus and the rapid response of the organisation.
- Set clear Covid-19 goals for the business.
- Cascade overall organisational goals on Covid-19 to divisions and departments affecting all sites.
- Ensure consistent compliance at all sites.
- Mobilise teams and individuals to drive and achieve safety goals and targets.
- Identify and remove all obstacles to compliance.
- Arrange regular conversations in the business about the Covid-19 virus.
- Create an environment in which employees support one another in driving Covid-19 compliance.
- Reward and celebrate exceptional performance in inspiring ways with formal and informal appreciation and recognition programmes and interventions linked to Covid-19 milestones.
- Do not tolerate any form of non-compliance.
- Guide, coach and train managers as leaders and people managers so that they are able to fulfil the role of organisation culture change champions.
- Have regular and visible results and compliance feedback sessions, e.g. by using and sharing Covid-19 scorecards or dashboards.
- Develop a comprehensive communication campaign and communicate important information on a daily basis.
- Invest in people development, learning, training and coaching around compliance improvement initiatives. Replicate or adapt the Minister of Health's daily scorecard, i.e. number of infections, number of recoveries, number of deaths at your company.

- Use change management approaches and methodologies to embed a Covid-19 prevention and risk management culture in the organisation.
- Transform virtual meetings into compliance planning sessions in which all participants contribute optimally to planning and compliance. Make Covid-19 the first agenda item of all meetings.
- Continuously remind staff of the change in behaviour expected.
- Encourage working from home where possible and communicate the need for flexible work practice and alternative work arrangements.
- Prevent stigmatisation of Covid-19 infected staff members by communicating the correct facts and information.
- Acquire the necessary protective equipment and resources and make them visible in the business.
- Invest significantly in employee health and wellness in positioning the company as a caring and compliant employer.

The creation of a new compliance culture focusing on hygiene and safety will be of utmost importance during this period of change. Leadership will have to be more visible and online than before. Regular podcasts and videos should be shared by the top leaders of the company. Create quick wins and momentum in terms of 100% commitment to compliance, but then use these first successes to build a people-driven health and hygiene culture in the organisation.

Covid-19 in the level 4 period will not be business as usual. It is also important to guard against an unbalanced organisation culture, i.e. if performance is driven at all cost to make up for lost production during the lockdown, including threatening the lives of employees and customers, it is likely to backfire with major backlashes and reputational damage to the business. Hence, the need for an explicit organisation culture people strategy focusing on creating a compliance and risk culture will be of paramount importance. Ultimately, an organisation culture and Covid-19 strategy and management plan is needed to ensure that a compliance organisation culture is infused to create an environment conducive to ensuring that the company is allowed to continue doing business. This will depend on leadership and compliance by all leaders, followed by the co-operation of all employees in changing the culture of the organisation.

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