

## Design thinking:

# An opportunity for survival and renewal during lockdown

by

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Over the past six weeks, first with the declaration of the national disaster in accordance with the Disaster Management Act, and then followed by different sets of regulations, including the lockdown, we have moved into an uncharted phase of a global pandemic, despair, crisis management, disaster management, and more recently a risk-adjusted strategy. Essentially, all these efforts are focused on curbing the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus. Whether these measures will be successful over the medium- and long-term remains to be seen.

Given the speed of decision-making over this period, it is evident that not all regulations make sense to all people, hence widespread non-compliance in certain areas over and above the practical realities making social distancing difficult or almost impossible in many parts of the country. Having said that, there are some lessons we can learn from this experience. In this article I am recommending that we turn to design thinking as an opportunity for finding solutions to the crisis, and also to use its powerful methodology as an opportunity for survival and renewal in business and government during the lockdown.

Brainstorming techniques have been popular methods of generating new ideas to implement in the business world. For instance, automated teller machines (ATMs) were created after a participant in a brainstorming session suggested that the solution to the long queues at banks is to make a hole in the wall. Building on this idea, creating a “mini-bank” in the form of an ATM was brainstormed and today we have ATMs all over the world. But now we have queues at ATMs. After that e-banking emerged and today we have banking Apps putting the bank into your hand when using your mobile phone at any time convenient to you.

These days, and evolving from traditional brainstorming, a new more dynamic type of business innovation intervention has emerged in recent times. It is called design thinking. Naiman (2016) defines design thinking as “a methodology used by designers to solve complex problems, and find desirable solutions for clients”.

Design thinking differs from traditional learning and business design in that it is not problem-focused like most organisation development work, but solution focused and action oriented towards creating a preferred future. Design thinking is not about making incremental changes to existing products, services or processes, but to think more innovatively from the expressed need of the customer and then to design the solution by including the customer in the process. Put differently, the customer is the real design thinker, while the business builds on this thinking when producing and testing the design, before refining and launching it into the market.

In essence, design thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition and systematic reasoning to explore possible actions that could create outcomes to the benefit of the end user. Hence, the focus is very similar to production or service design in developing a solutions-based end-state that will address a real need. But the difference is that the people using design thinking think like artists, engineers or designers to generate a solution that is almost guaranteed to meet the needs of the client.

Typically design thinking goes through six steps:

1. Show empathy with the end-user by putting yourself in their shoes when thinking about what they really need.
2. Define the issue or possible solution.
3. Ideate by generating ideas in a creative manner.
4. Develop a prototype of the solution.
5. Test the prototype with the user.
6. Implement the final refined solution.

Most of the lockdown regulations failed in addressing or applying the first step and jumped to step 2. Interestingly, and for the first time it appeared as if government learned this lesson, and then attempted to show some empathy with the end-user, i.e. the public and requested inputs regarding the level 4 regulations as it affect the opening of business activities, albeit with new, continuous or adapted restrictions. Naturally, with so many different opinions and interests, government cannot accommodate all these divergent and in many ways irreconcilable different perspectives, with the result that it appears as if the health cluster in the National Command Council makes the final call.

Traditional problem-solving methodology uses only two of the above steps, i.e. define the problem and find a solution. This was typically used in allowing joggers to run from the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. The problem was that government wanted to relax the regulation of permitting people to exercise, but by still maintaining social distancing and using masks to prevent the spread of the virus. Government used traditional problem-solving methodology and guess what? The joggers can't breathe! Let alone the masses of people over-crowding the same spaces during a short period of three hours and excluding many essential workers who are not able to exercise at that time.

Admittedly, during times of emergency or disaster there is little time for consultation, but imagine the different outcome if design thinking was used in finding a solution. There are so many similar examples during this time, such as long queues when food parcels are distributed or when social grants are paid out. Time and time again we are failing in the main objective of the lockdown: Social distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Rather, it could be argued that good intentions, i.e. giving people food backfires and defeats the object by providing them with food together with spreading the virus, exactly what we wanted to prevent in the first instance. When it comes to restaurants still not being allowed to receive customers on site, we have done a little better by using some elements of design thinking. The problem was people wanted restaurant food, but we were still required to promote social distancing. Therefore, if they can't come to the restaurant to buy food, we can take the food to them, hence the delivery of food to their houses.

Whatever the issue or the need for improvement, design thinking presents a good opportunity during the lockdown to create a better future in business and society at large. But then we need more design thinkers, i.e. people who are able to drive the application of the six typical steps in design thinking to create new solutions. Too often, managers who have been trained in traditional problem-solving techniques will jump to the conventional and simplistic problem-idea-decision-solution paradigm. The end-result is a superficial and short-term solution not really meeting the needs of clients and other stakeholders.

After more than a month of an economy in lockdown we are faced with a triple challenge:

- The demise and destruction of businesses not allowed to operate or with limited activity within a junk status economy;
- Increased levels of poverty, unemployment and more incidents of social unrest;
- Increasing numbers of Covid-19 infections and deaths.

Government and business now require leaders to step up in becoming design thinkers, but then we need people who really think like designers. If ever there was a time to promote e-commerce and online business, or to generate new ideas and innovation, that time is now. This opportunity also

means that we need to break down silos between departments by inviting multi-disciplinary teams, and most importantly involving customers in design thinking work to find solutions to old problems or old ideas and to address the new problem of the coronavirus destroying our companies and threatening the lives of our people. However, to leverage the power of design thinking requires that we become design thinkers between and during our virtual meetings – people who are open to follow the design thinking process and methodology in designing better futures for our customers and other stakeholders.

Like the massive successes of crowd-sourcing and crowd-funding during these times, there are masses of people at home who would be more than willing contributors to design thinking. Let us unlock the power of design thinking to find better solutions to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus and to grow e-commerce and digital transformation of government and business. Up until now curbing the spreading of the virus and allowing economic activity were treated as mutually exclusive, and this approach is not sustainable if more people die from hunger than from the virus. Design thinking is an opportunity for renewal during the lockdown. In fact, given the current rapid spread of the virus in South Africa, it may be very difficult or impossible to move from level 4 to level 3 of the lockdown without design thinking.

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