

Are you stuck at level 4 or moving to level 3?

by

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On 13 May President Ramaphosa announced that South Africa will in general move to level 3 of the lockdown by the end of May, while hotspots will stay on level 4 in accordance with the government's risk adjusted strategy. On the one hand, it gave many South Africans hope that they will move to more relaxed regulations. But the first question on most peoples' mind was whether you will remain on level 4 or move one level down. Of greater concern to the more critical commentators was on what basis a relaxation can be justified, especially if you look at the rapid increase of infections during level 4. Not long ago we were warned that we could go back to level 5 soon. In addition, while government was fully trusted by most stakeholders during week 1, it is now evident that the same stakeholders are now turning against government in week 7. The growing number of voices asking for government to open up the economy can no longer be ignored, especially given the devastating impact of the lockdown on the economy and the lives of people.

Let us first review the President's latest address in terms of his style and messages by summarising it in the following 6 A's as key features of his speech:

- *Approach:* Again, the President was serious, measured and focused as he continued on his previous approach of doing a prepared speech without allowing any questions. He also appeared tired and tense, and it was clear that he was exhausted given the extensive consultations, engagements and meetings with the National Command Council.
- *Analysis:* He immediately used an analytical approach in reminding the nation where we are coming from by summarising the past and the seriousness of the coronavirus epidemic. He then provided us with the facts pertaining to the situation and compared South Africa's numbers with that of four other countries, i.e. the USA, Italy, UK and South Korea in terms of the number of reported cases on the 48th day after the 100th case. At the same period, USA was on 758 809 cases, Italy on 147 577, UK on 129 044, South Korea on 10 331, while South Africa was on 7220. The President then claimed that decisions were based on scientific research presented as empirical evidence. It now appears as if these and other scientists also have different opinions, and while a lot is still unknown about the Covid-19 virus, government's refusal to disclose this empirical evidence is of great concern for the public and media to continue trusting the quality of decision-making about the epidemic in South Africa.
- *Alert levels:* The President then reminded us of the risk-adjusted strategy and the five alert levels. On the one hand he provided hope that we may move down to level 3 in most areas of the country, but warned that hot spot areas will remain at level 4. Given the inconsistency and irrationality of some of the regulations at levels 5 and 4, the lesson we have all learned from recent times is that one should not get too excited about a so-called relaxation too soon. Additionally, while the President always maintained a calm, serious, measured and professional disposition during all the different levels of the lockdown, the same cannot be

said of his Ministers, while the low profile of the Deputy President raises more questions than answers. In essence, as trust is eroding on a daily basis, the question needs to be posed: Was the different alert levels introduced to really manage the risk, or to simply fool the public in not announcing another extension of the lockdown beyond the first 21 days and the next extension of another 14 days? If it was indeed an honest attempt at risk management, then we need to know whether risk management experts were part of the process. The biggest risk management error committed was the alert level description to label only level 5 as “saving lives,” because this implies that the other four levels are not about saving lives, and means that the whole risk-adjusted strategy can be questioned. Furthermore, are we going to “reward” the citizens of the provinces that have the lowest number of tests conducted to move to level 3, and if so, how do we justify this relaxation? Does it really help to open the economy of Kuruman and not Johannesburg? And how will we explain a sudden increase in infections in the low population density provinces if we shift our attention and interventions to level 4 districts?

- *Admissions:* I wish I could say that the President’s admissions can be interpreted as an honest apology, but unfortunately the admission fell short of an apology. Although the President admitted to mistakes, it does not constitute an apology given the absence of all the elements of an apology. An apology starts with firstly admitting exactly what you have done wrong, secondly followed by an explicit acknowledgement of how it hurt the other party or parties, and thirdly by clear actions on how the wrongs will be corrected. And fourthly, the upset party must accept the apology. If the first three elements fail, the fourth one can’t work and we need to go back to the previous three elements. Be that as it may, he admitted to mistakes, and that is a good start indeed. The problem, however, is that you can only be forgiven if it is a full apology meeting the four criteria of an apology. Therefore, whether the public will forgive government, remains to be seen. Already, several stakeholders have given up using the normal channels for inputs, and have resorted to legal action. Given the biggest failure of some of the lockdown regulations in terms of meeting the principle of rationality, the chances are good that government will lose most of these court cases. While this will be good for justice, government will lose credibility in the process which will further weaken the national Covid-19 programme, with further devastating results such as civil disobedience, and a spike in infections and deaths, thus reversing all the gains of the lockdown. Moreover, while the initial four speeches by President Ramaphosa were inspirational and well supported by most stakeholders and the public, his last speech received the most criticism, and this signifies an eroding of trust in government and his leadership. Also, he continues with his style of making the speech and then leave it to the Ministers for follow-up on the actions by promulgating absurd and irrational regulations. This is exactly where the cracks appeared in the government’s strategy. Some of these regulations were ridiculous. Perhaps more concerning is that it appears as if the National Command Council has approved these regulations and that means that the collective leadership of this council should take responsibility for these mistakes and implement the necessary corrections.
- *Actions:* The fifth element of his speech was actions. This is the only part giving the public hope again and that is that action will be taken. Previously, there was a good response to the relief funding package. This time, there was less clear action and the President merely reminded us again about the basic rules of the lockdown in terms of our behaviour: Social distancing, safe coughing, washing of hands, sanitising, and the wearing of masks. Furthermore, he indicated that with the relaxation of the regulations at level 4, as well as the transition to level 3 in certain areas, that amendments will be made and new approaches

followed during the next phase of our response. He then promised extensive consultation about the level 3 regulations.

- *Acknowledgement:* The President acknowledged that many people have made huge sacrifices during the lockdown and he thanked South Africans for these sacrifices. Again this part of the speech showed insight and empathy. However, there is a big difference between the inconvenience and discomfort of the lockdown by doing the easy part, that is staying at home, and being completely socially isolated. The more difficult part is the isolation from friends and family, in particular if some of those family members are sick. Essentially, the sacrifices made by hungry people, the total demise of mental health, and people losing their jobs, and business owners closing down is irreparable despite relief efforts and funds. South Africa has a very poor track record of throwing money at a problem. If people stand in queues to receive food, while being infected by the virus, it defeats the object of the lockdown regulations and it simply exacerbates the extent of both the health and human crisis. Additionally, when food parcels are stolen by corrupt officials and when the human rights of citizens are abused by the armed forces, trust is broken down completely. Non-compliance to the Constitution and the laws of the country by government makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to continue on this path of blind loyalty to government and all its regulations, in particular if the rationality of the regulations is questioned when it has no relevance to curbing the spread of the virus.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is always easier to criticise government from outside, perhaps the only way to keep your sanity is to be honest with yourself and to reflect on your own position during the lockdown and how you managed it at your organisation and in your own life. Despite the uncertainties and general increase in dissent, here are six questions for reflection:

1. How good was your own approach of dealing with the coronavirus crisis?
2. How much analysis did you do at your organisation, your home and your life?
3. How did you respond to the different alert levels in terms of managing your organisation's risks, the lives of other people, and your own life?
4. Is there anything you need to admit and do proper apologies to the parties you have hurt during this time, or even before the lockdown?
5. What actions did you take with the available information and are those actions working for you and your organisation?
6. Did you acknowledge the sacrifices you and your loved ones, as well as your stakeholders such as staff, customers and suppliers have made during the lockdown?

As human beings, all of us as managers, employees, specialists, the media and other stakeholders, including government, make mistakes. The key question is whether we are really trying hard enough to prevent further mistakes, and once these errors are committed, how much effort do we put in to correct these mistakes. Moreover, there are too many silent voices on the coronavirus epidemic in South Africa. I am calling on the following people to put up their hands and to air their views:

- Medical doctors;
- Nurses;
- People who have been infected with Covid-19;
- People who have recovered after being on ventilators;
- The families of people who have died;
- Psychologists;
- Executive coaches;

- Social workers;
- Mayors of cities, and councillors;
- Hospital managers;
- Hygiene experts;
- HR and Wellness Managers;
- Health and Safety Managers;
- Managers and staff at old age homes;
- Risk management specialists.

There is some hope of a transition to level 3, but many of us in the large metropolitan areas where most of the infections are, will remain at level 4, albeit with relaxed regulations. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are locked down given a global pandemic. What Presidents and governments don't always realise is that the media and public are comparing their responses, and ultimately the numbers do matter. Hence, looking at the bigger picture in terms of global numbers, South Africa is doing better than the USA, Brazil, UK, Italy, Spain and many other countries. But what complicates matters is that it is extremely difficult to make decisions under these circumstances. The most important lesson is that arrogance and denial does not work. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson learned that lesson and he is on the journey towards corrective action of all the wrongs he and his government committed in recent times. Sadly, though, is that he only gained this insight after being infected and hospitalised himself. He is a Covid-19 survivor and knows more than other politicians what Covid-19 is really all about.

The most difficult task for any leader is to make decisions about the lives of other people, and you cannot afford to make a mistake when risking the lives of people. Perhaps it is also not as simple as balancing the economy and health, because this is the greatest catch 22 decision you can face. We need to think much deeper if we want to find an amicable and sustainable solution, despite all the uncertainty. The continuous shifting of the goal posts has made it difficult for people to adapt to the regulations and to have trust in the politicians making decisions about serious health matters they may not fully understand. A very important question that needs to be answered in this regard is whether they consider the consequences of those decisions, and whether they accept responsibility and accountability for those decisions. Previously they ignored the inputs of Finance Minister Tito Mboweni, and only listened this week after Former Finance Minister Trevor Manuel added his voice to the masses of critics. I think it is also time for President Ramaphosa to address the nation more frequently, and to involve Professor Karim in these sessions, and to allow questions from the floor. That is perhaps the only thing he can learn from President Trump, and we know he will answer the questions better and treat the media with much greater respect and dignity than his counterpart.

The biggest lesson from the lockdown is that we need multi-disciplinary solutions. We should have used that from the first week when we only listened to the health experts. After the first 21 days of lockdown passed, we tolerated another 15 days of lockdown, and when people started to see the frustration, pain, suffering and hunger on the streets, we then ignored the economists. We are now at the point when we need to embrace a full multi-disciplinary approach to decision-making, as it is clear that none of these experts have all the answers in their own domain of expertise. Let us make the transition towards a good level 3 and a more rational level 4 within the next two weeks.

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