

Are you stronger or weaker after Day 50 of lockdown?

by

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If you read this article you have survived 50 days of lockdown in South Africa. It was not an easy time for most of us. Having to balance work and life demands, has been a challenge for most people. Being in back-to-back Microsoft Teams and Zoom meetings were stressful, at times funny, other times really interesting and let us be honest with ourselves, sometimes really boring. Most people hate meetings, whether face-to-face or virtual. The only difference is when your video and voice is muted, your boss can't see your lack of makeup, your frowns, pulling faces or your 10th cup of coffee for the day (or something stronger). Some people also "arrived" late for these meetings, and quietly slipped in via the "join" button, knowing very well that this time they could not use traffic as an excuse. But interestingly, the same people who arrived late for face-to-face meetings in the pre-lockdown era, are also those joining the Zoom meetings at agenda item six.

In the middle of the lockdown we were told by IT governance experts not to use Zoom given its security risks. At that time we were a bit confused, but as good loyal citizens conforming to all absurd and contradicting regulations changing from level to level depending on the latest decision of the National Command Council, the new streamlined cabinet of South Africa. When pornography entered a parliamentary Zoom meeting, we knew that the IT specialists were indeed right.

The National Command Council ruled our lives for 50 days (and counting) with their regulations. They controlled our lives – from deciding what you can eat or drink, to where you can go to, to at what times you can travel and under what conditions, to whether you can buy or not buy certain items like cigarettes and underwear. They have proved beyond any doubt that we can indeed have a smaller government and the invisible and silent deputy ministers have demonstrated that we don't need them. Perhaps they were really scared of the Covid-19 virus and decided to go into permanent lockdown where the virus will not be able to find them. On the positive side, if any of the Ministers would succumb to the virus, they will be ready to step up as emergency successors. Given the performance of some of the Ministers, many of the Deputy Ministers will do even better than their bosses, although a low bar has been set and will not be that difficult to rise above it. In fact, in certain cases, it will be very easy by simply doing the exact opposite of your Minister. If your predecessor banned something, just unban it.

You may think that I am also losing it on Day 50, but I just want to acknowledge the reality of how good South African humour helped us to cope and survive during these crazy times. Think about it: A Minister reminding us how to smoke a zol on national television, another Minister telling us that we need more vibrators (sic) in hospitals, a Minister warning us that the police will come for us if we don't "behave" and "change our behaviour," people being arrested at their wedding, and as former President Thabo Mbeki would say, and so on and so on. The reality is that we had more arrests during the lockdown than the entire period of state capture. You simply can't make these things up.

We need to be thankful that we don't have former President Jacob Zuma as our current president. It is simply unimaginable how he would have responded. The only thing we know is that there would have been more corruption, the odd "he-he-he corona" laughs, more regular cabinet reshuffles late at night during the curfew, resulting in people like Hlaudi Motsoeneng as Minister of Health and of course, the National Command Council consisting of the Gupta brothers and meeting daily at Saxonwold while all their friends would be repatriated from Waterkloof.

At least President Ramaphosa behaves more like a statesman, but unfortunately the "new dawn" is gone now, and as President Zuma will be remembered as President State Capture, Ramaphosa will be remembered as President Lockdown. While President Ramaphosa was praised for his leadership during the first week, it is clear that trust in him and his government is busy eroding at a rapid rate, given the irrationality of some of the regulations, and the massive job losses in a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. Sadly, locking down the economy and protecting citizens against the virus were treated as mutually exclusive options, and we are paying a heavy price for this error. If government was really serious about preventing the spread of the virus, and really cared for its people, they would have done everything in their power to protect our healthcare workers, our police officers, our defence force staff and retail workers – people at the frontline of exposure to the Covid-19 virus. Managing this risk at the frontline would have curbed the spread of the virus. And then, arranging for all people to have bank accountants would have prevented people from standing in queues to collect SASSA payments.

Fortunately, it is never too late to fix errors and to strengthen the Covid-19 campaign in curbing the spread of the virus. It is my hope and wish that a new listening government will emerge over the next two weeks in fighting both the virus and opening up the economy. If I was in government, I would start a massive e-commerce innovation campaign to set up these businesses and to help them to grow by appointing many staff members, not only to turn job losses and unemployment around, but also to kick-start the economy. If the government was really serious about preventing the spread of the virus within hospitals, they would drive a massive campaign of e-health throughout the country, thereby preventing masses of people arriving at hospitals for medical care. If government was really serious about the informal economy, here is the opportunity to formalise the informal economy and make them part of the mainstream formal economy. The losses incurred by informal traders will never be recovered. Imagine how many masks these informal traders could have produced by now.

On a different and more personal level, the most important question I want to pose today is whether you are stronger or weaker because of the lockdown. Here are some questions for you to reflect on after 50 days of lockdown:

- Which lockdown regulation was the most absurd for you?
- Which lockdown regulation was the easiest and most difficult to adapt to?
- How well did you cope with the lockdown?
- Could you continue with most of your tasks, and how successful were you in these efforts?
- How well did you cope with your family, friends and other house mates at home?
- Which family member managed to really rise to the occasion during the lockdown?
- How did you cope with the things you really miss, such as hobbies or things you were not permitted to do?
- What was your biggest frustration during the lockdown?
- Did you practise safe hygiene and did you apply all the other guidelines provided?
- How compliant were you? Did you take some chances and how do you justify it?
- What was your level of productivity in terms of outputs achieved?

- How well did you manage your bad moments and bad days?
- How did you celebrate your good moments and good days?
- Did you learn to cope with less?
- How well did you manage your household?
- How well did you manage your relationships?
- Did you grow in terms of your own personal development?
- Who are your real friends?
- Could you link up with some old friends, contacts or family members you may have neglected in the past?
- How did you manage your personal finances?
- What are your values and what do you value in life?
- What did you miss most from your normal life, i.e. the pre-lockdown period?
- Did you leverage any new opportunities in your life?
- Do you have any regrets and how will you overcome it?
- Were there any surprises for you during the lockdown?
- Were there any unintended consequences of the lockdown in your life?
- Could you reflect on your life and reprioritise some of your key focus areas?
- Is there anything that you are really proud of about yourself during the lockdown?
- What was the funniest moment for you in the lockdown, e.g. an incident or video?
- How many more days do you think you will survive in lockdown?
- What do you hope will change in the post-lockdown period and what role can you play to make that happen?

In essence, my overarching question to you is: Are you a stronger or weaker person because of the lockdown? Most of us will have mixed reactions, because we all had our ups and downs. If you really feel stronger, build on these moments of strength and reinforce them continuously in your life. If you feel weaker, it is important that you get help so that you can rediscover your purpose and focus in life. Obtaining the help of a professional counsellor such as a social worker or psychologist is essential if you feel weaker or depressed.

One of the biggest lessons of the lockdown is that physical health and mental health cannot be separated. We all need to prioritise all aspects of our wellbeing, i.e. physical, financial, spiritual, mental and social. A good support system is one of the most important things in life. You have survived 50 days, and you can survive much longer, with some good news around the corner that some of us will go to level 3 soon. Unfortunately, it appears as if it will be a small minority of people. Let us keep going and support one another in overcoming the coronavirus crisis. I want to conclude with my personal motto: Life is hard, but I am harder!

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