

#DAY58LOCKDOWNSA

The value of values: An anchor during the Covid-19 crisis

by

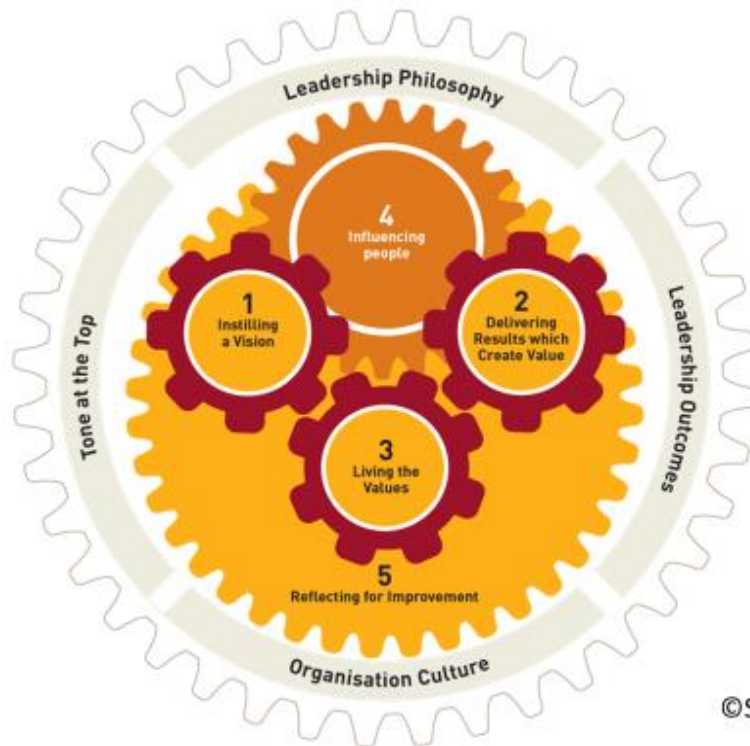
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Today we look at values as an anchor during the Covid-19 crisis. We will first review the importance of values in times of stability and then reinforce the essence of values during these times of lockdown. The premise of today's article is that values are an important anchor during a crisis. The Chambers Concise Usage Dictionary defines an anchor as "something that holds someone or something steady." That is exactly why values are so important, both during times of stability and instability.

For too long companies and politicians would get away with a lack of focus on values. For instance, politicians keep on violating their own regulations and ethics codes, including the Constitutions of their countries and political parties. Likewise, business leaders have generated beautiful and impressive lists of values such as integrity, honesty, passion for people, innovation, caring, compassion, accountability, responsibility and respect. At some companies these values are visibly displayed at corporate head offices, boardrooms and the integrated reports of companies. However, recent examples of corporate scandals can be traced back to a failure in the application of corporate values. Very few companies do not have clearly articulated values guiding the behaviour of their leaders and staff. Says Arisha Archary, HR Executive at Old Mutual: "The corporate culture is shaped by shared values, and good employers take steps to ensure their values and their employees' values are aligned."

That is the reason why the South African leadership standard includes values as one of the five key elements of sound leadership. The leadership standard makes it clear that it is not only about stating values, but living the values that is so important for organisational success. Hence, leaders should mirror the values and behaviour they expect from employees. This is why the success of the massive workplace hygiene campaign over the next three months will depend to a great extent on leadership. We can learn from our leaders in mining who have over decades displayed exemplary leadership in living the value of safety. All meetings in mining companies start with a reminder of the value of safety, and mining managers lead by example in putting safety on the agenda of all these meetings. Now an intensified safety regime is being developed, and leaders will lead by example and employees will then follow in their footsteps in applying safe and hygienic behaviour in the workplace, at home and in other public places. It may require companies to reframe their current values, or to link safety to other existing values, such as compassion or caring. This collective effort will require significant organisation culture change. People returning to work will experience this the moment they are screened before entering a building.

South African #LeadershipStandard



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The reality is that people come to the workplace with different values. Even good values like integrity and honesty mean different things to different people. Thus, the role of leaders is to ensure that there is a common understanding of values for the organisation and then ensure that these values are clearly communicated in the organisation, and embedded into its culture. Certain individuals may also feel that their own personal or religious values are more relevant than the empty stated values of the company. For example, some people feel uncomfortable if they value honesty and integrity while they often experience discomfort when management and colleagues lie to customers about what is really happening in the company.

Furthermore, values guide decision-making. Just imagine what could have happened in the recent corporate scandals, if one person stood up and said: “I don’t think we should continue with this deal in this manner, it is against our values.” Unfortunately, this did not happen (or if it happened, the person was side-lined). Or, it was business as usual until a whistle-blower decided to spill the beans, or when investigators or the media did their own homework to expose the truth. Additionally, the working group developing the leadership standard for South Africa, also insisted that leaders must take action against those not living the values, referred to as “toxic leaders” in the standard. The same should apply to “toxic employees” who behave against the values of the company.

It is evident that government struggled to make decisions about regulations pertaining to the lockdown. Clearly, there was a clash of values and priorities, for instance safety versus economic rights of doing business. Unfortunately, while one was hoping for the highest standard of ethics and integrity when almost the whole world is in lockdown, during this time of suffering, it is sad to see so many

business owners, managers, employees and government officials violating their organisation's values and ethics codes. Here are ten examples:

- Managers keeping shops open while they know that staff members have been infected with the Covid-19 virus;
- Managers and employees not complying with the hygiene and other regulations of government;
- Employees who have tested Covid-19 positive still using taxis, going to work and interacting with other people without physical distancing;
- Managers and employees being non-compliant to the lockdown regulations;
- Employees receiving full salaries while they have done little or no work;
- Managers using the lockdown as an excuse for business under-performance;
- Businesses inflating the prices of products;
- Brutality and human rights abuses by the police and military officers;
- Funding earmarked for people who have lost their income not reaching the beneficiaries;
- Theft of food parcels.

However, to be fair to honest business leaders and government decision-makers: The coronavirus epidemic created an uncertain environment for decision-making. Making decisions without facts or hard scientific data complicates matters, especially when decisions have to be made that appear to be a clash of values, such as deciding to close the economy to protect lives while you know that this very decision will eventually also destroy lives. It also became apparent that not all scientists agree on all the regulations and interventions, and it was unclear whether government decision-makers listened to the scientists when making new regulations, especially when the relevance and rationality of the regulations could not be linked directly to curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

Although the President admitted to mistakes with some of the regulations, whether these mistakes will be corrected, remains to be seen. It is also a reality that in certain cases such as the ban on the sale of alcohol and tobacco that there are strong arguments on both sides of the debate, and that there will be people who will be upset irrespective of the final outcome. It was also difficult to make decisions with devastating consequences for people, in particular the socio-economic impact of the lockdown, such as the hardships experienced by tobacco and wine farm workers.

Let us refocus on a positive note by providing ten guidelines on how to make values work during the lockdown within an organisation:

1. Make your organisation's values visible in the organisation (e.g. on notice boards, on your website, social media, documents, meeting rooms);
2. Arrange informal and formal conversations about the values of the company and how it relates to the lockdown;
3. Ask employees to generate examples of conformance and non-conformance to the values;
4. Make it clear to employees what typical behaviours are expected when living the values of the organisation;
5. Integrate values in your performance appraisal process and allocate a high weight for values;
6. Create a recognition system to formally show appreciation when employees conform to the values;

7. Include and contextualise the organisation's values as part of communication about the lockdown contingency planning and actions;
8. Do regular assessments on conformance to the values;
9. Develop clear action plans on how the values can be lived by all managers and employees;
10. Use change management and organisation development methodology to leverage your values in building your organisation culture.

When looking at these guidelines, you may think that it would not be different in times of stability and instability as we experience during the lockdown and the broader reality of an economy in recession moving towards a depression. You are right, but that is exactly why values are so important. If your values were clearly articulated during the period of stability, it would have been a good yardstick for behaviour when employees were working from home during the lockdown. Moreover, in times of despair, people need to hold on to values or principles. Values would have been very helpful to keep managers and employees focused during this difficult time. Also, the lockdown was a good opportunity for employers with people-driven values such as caring, compassion, and people-orientation to anchor their decisions in the application of these values. Conversely, it also would have backfired if employers claimed to be a "caring employer" and then not show any or little care for their employees and customers when practising poor hygiene. Some employers continued with inadequate protection for employees and poor sanitising, or even worse, not caring for employees who have been infected with the Covid-19 virus.

In conclusion, the third element of the South African leadership standard is values. The key question leaders should ask is what values they would like to instil in the organisation before, during and after the lockdown to ensure that management and staff are united around the same values. In fact, while people are working from home in different cities, towns or suburbs, values are one of the most important factors uniting managers and employees, but only if there is a common understanding and individual and collective commitment to the values of the organisation. In addition, leading by example in living these values is a key responsibility of all leaders. Taking responsibility and ensuring accountability means that action must be taken against leaders and staff when the values are violated. For instance, now that "safety" has become a common value for all of us, compliance will be key when employees return to work, and disciplinary action must be taken in the event of non-compliance, given the fact that non-compliance would constitute behaviours and omissions spreading the virus to other people. In worse case scenarios, this could lead to the death of fellow employees or customers. Values should be visible and be lived on a daily basis to ensure that it becomes part of the culture of the organisation. Leaders should lead these efforts by displaying authentic leadership behaviour anchored in explicit values. Values are important every day, but even more so as an anchor of stability and focus during these times of uncertainty, instability and confusion. Let us make values one of the critical success factors in refocusing our Covid-19 planning at our companies, and society at large, especially as we move to level 3 of lockdown in the coming week.

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