

A leadership pledge for Covid-19 managers: Rising to the occasion during tough times

by

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In 2017, top industrial psychologist, Prof Theo Veldsman from the University of Johannesburg facilitated the development of a leadership pledge in implementing the world's first leadership standard developed by the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). The purpose of the leadership standard was to guide South African leaders in terms of their behaviour as leaders when leading their teams and companies. When reviewing the South African leadership pledge, it is evident that it provides a clear guideline for leaders in rising to the occasion as managers of the Covid-19 crisis at an organisational and societal level.

The reality is that most managers experience increased levels of stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only do they need to deal with the stress experienced by their employees, they are also faced with their only levels of uncertainty, yet they are expected to provide leadership during these difficult times. Overnight all leaders have become Covid-19 managers, given the fact that they are now expected to manage the epidemic in their workplaces. Apart from obtaining the necessary knowledge of the Covid-19 virus, and its implications for the work environment, managers now need to provide leadership in terms of health, safety and wellness in the workplace. Most managers are not trained in these three areas, in particular not from a hygiene perspective. This is a tall order, because we are expecting almost the impossible from managers, and that is to prevent the spread of the virus in the workplace. Not even scientists agree on how this could be done, and conflicting statements by Ministers and a range of other leaders, exacerbate the problem of uncertainty and increased levels of stress and anxiety.

In view of the above, in addition to obtaining all the necessary available knowledge of Covid-19 health and safety regulations and interventions, leaders should focus on what they should do best, and that is to provide leadership during these tough times. Hence, the need to revisit the leadership pledge of the South African leadership standard. The leadership pledge provides clear affirmations of what leaders can and should commit to in their everyday leadership, but also during this period of turmoil.

The South African leadership pledge is as follows:

“In my calling as a leader, and in my aspiration to be an outstanding leader, I commit myself to the leadership standard with the following actions:

1. to challenge the status quo with courage, perseverance and resilience in the relentless search of a better future for all, including addressing socio-economic challenges
2. to create and pursue an inspiring, inclusive, and shared vision/dream that will leave a worthy, lasting legacy for current and future generations

3. to serve others and the common good unselfishly through a 'we' agenda, even if personal sacrifices are required of me
4. to live our values with unwavering integrity at all times, and to be ethical in all I do by being good, doing good, and ensuring good
5. in demonstrating genuine authenticity, to lead by example, my talking and walking being the same under all circumstances
6. to take personal accountability for all of my decisions, actions and their consequences, and also of those I am leading
7. to treat those I lead with respect, dignity, fairness and care, and create deep trusting relationships with them around a shared destiny
8. to enable and empower those I am leading to be courageous, challenging followers, filled with passion, hope, confidence, and faith
9. to be visible and present where it truly matters and to ensure that real value is being added
10. to reflect on my leadership and to continuously develop myself as a leader, and to support other leaders and people in their development and performance"

Each of these 10 statements can be customised in guiding leadership behaviour when it comes to responding to the Covid-19 crisis. These 10 affirmations of the leadership pledge is not only relevant during times of stability, but even more so during times of instability. Leaders need to be authentic and rise to the occasion in providing exemplary leadership during these tough times. Although it is imperative for leaders to focus on their short-term contingency plans, what will make these plans work, is the quality of leadership. Leaders must bear in mind that employees are uncertain and confused about some of the illogical and irrational regulations faced by them, and despite the relaxation from level 4 to 3, employees are likely to experience a culture shock when they return to the workplace with unprecedented, uncomfortable and strict protocols of safety. Many of these protocols will result in extreme levels of inconvenience, so much so, that some returning employees would rather like to go back home than complying with the protocols and facing their fear of infection at the workplace. We are now also entering a phase where many people will have family members and friends being infected, hence Covid-19 has now become a reality that is getting closer to people. No longer is Covid-19 a virus infecting other people, it is likely to infect millions of people over the next six months, hence the need for leaders to be decisive, yet caring when leading their teams.

While the leadership pledge is a document for everyday leadership irrespective of the organisation and its circumstances, it is evident that it can guide leaders to achieve some form of stability, hope and even excellence during this time of crisis. Some leaders rise to the occasion during crisis, but it remains a challenge for most leaders to excel when there is so much uncertainty, fear, anxiety and trauma around us. Making difficult decisions, and leading people forward during these tough times, requires a special kind of leader – a person who can be in touch with people, but also able to guide people in protecting them from harm. It is a reality that disciplined behaviour will be required from all leaders and employees. Use the South African leadership pledge as a guideline in refocusing and affirming your leadership commitment to your people, your organisation and society at large.

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