

Leading when things get real – What getting COVID-19 taught me about leadership



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I have really been careful, but despite the small friendship group and limited, carefully chosen social interaction, I got COVID-19. Let me tell you that even mild COVID is scary. I am fortunate to have had a “horrendous” but light experience of this virus, but it was still the sickest I have ever been. There was a moment when everything could have gone belly-up.

While there are many views on COVID and how it is limiting our lives and our freedoms, I want to “call” that! I assure you that when you have looked death in the eye, protecting yourself and your loved ones from this virus is the only sensible discussion.

As leadership is my Game I reflected on my experience and have gained three important insights.



The **first** insight, I gained, I suppose should not be a surprise. The Idea is **“The more intense your challenge, the less you see.”**

In the midst of my struggle to survive I discovered that I was only seeing the world around me through the mist of my own experience. I in fact stopped seeing the world around me altogether. At one point I took a drive around the Marine drive in Port Elizabeth or Gqeberha as it is now known – this is a beautiful 15km stretch of wild natural coastline, and a privilege the locals love. I arrived at Schoenmarkerskop, the end of the drive and suddenly discovered that I had driven the entire distance without ever once looking at the sea. All I had seen was the widow in front of me, and all that I had thought about was how I was feeling at that moment.

My ability to read the big picture reduced altogether. I quickly became totally self-focused and blind to even the most basic things happening around me. This was not so much caused by the virus itself, but the stress of the moment.

Because of the intense stress I experienced in isolation I became very primitive in my ability to function intellectually.

The scary thing is that all of us in leadership positions have the risk of imploding like this. Especially after the long and protracted stress of surviving. The more stress you experience, the less you can see. The narrower your thinking. Regulating your stress levels is critical. If you think that you have stress completely resolved, you are at even greater risk.



Second – this is as obvious as the first insight but even more scary. **“our attitudes influence others.”**

We have all have reached a COVID fatigue level. We are just tired of this thing, but as the second and potential third wave has taught us, we need to stay vigilant.

People need to make their own, Adult decisions, about how to manage the risk vs isolation equation. As a leader, particularly if you are a trusted leader, you have influence and influence means People will follow your example. With influence comes responsibility. Responsibility because with influence comes real power over people.

You are not responsible for decisions adults take, but you are responsible for the example you set.

This is how you protect your people and protect their environments. They need you to be unambiguous. What you say will influence their thinking and their response to this pandemic. Your example will guide their behaviour. If you have people in your care, take responsibility to help them understand and see through all the, “I’m over COVID” noise. There are basic rules, and these rules will keep people alive. You need to be a fan of these rules, and while being the “fun police” is dull, it is what your people need from you at the moment.



The **third** insight I gained while in isolation was **“The importance of those who really care”**.

Those who kept pushing and popping in on me, even when I was not “communicative”. Isolation can be very lonely but the people in my life who count, kept talking to me, kept sending WhatsApp’s, they stepped up when I needed food. They fetched medicine and had my back.

There were others who just went quiet.

When your people are isolated, or struggling with the virus, you can choose the “give them space” BS. The result is that you may be their manager, but you will quickly become irrelevant.



On the other hand, you could choose to get involved. You can check in with your person, look for needs, food, medication, whatever. In this context you move from being boss, to being an empathetic leader”. *If you meet your people in their time of need, you will build lasting trust.”*

COVID is testing us all. It is draining and leaves us often with a sense of despondency and loss for the life passing us by. On the other hand, I meet positive people every day. People who are discovering a new perspective on their purpose and their lives. People who are showing incredible resilience and courage. I don't know about you, but I am really inspired by such people.

So, when it comes to leadership, How I pitch up, and what I choose to focus on will influence others. How I connect with the people I am privileged to lead, and how I build authentic relationships, will leave lasting impact. My courage in this moment will inspire courage. My wisdom will inspire others to think clearly. My empathy will inspire others to pull alongside those who are struggling.

Leaders are coping with some overwhelming challenges at the moment, there are so many unknowns, so many questions, but I am convinced that leadership is a deliberate choice. that the most important question for leaders to ask themselves at the moment is *“how did I lead my people today.”*



