

“ENABLING THE SUPPLY-CHAIN AND WORKING WITH A ‘THUMA MINA’- MANTRA...



Views on the emerging role of the Industrial and Organisational Psychologist during the COVID-19 epidemic”

By Louise Coetzee, SIOPSA Chair, Interest Group Professional Practice

On the 11th of March 2020 the World Health Organisation officially declared the spread of Coronavirus a ‘Pandemic’. Apart from the rate of infection reported in South Africa between the 5th and 11th of March 2020, and the preceding health and economic disasters South Africans witnessed within the global community, this may have been the very sentence that enabled our government to activate the Disaster Management Act No 57 of 2002 (http://www.cogta.gov.za/cgta_2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/DISASTER-MANAGEMENT-ACT.pdf). This act has empowered the government to provide an integrated and co-ordinated disaster management policy, reduce the risk of such disaster and enable emergency preparedness and responsiveness through disaster management centres.

When reading the document, one cannot help but visualise the future as it describes our current- and future *reality*. What remained striking is that this Act has allowed for new regulations and directives to come into effect, specifically noting in clause 27 that directions could be designed for: “(a) **the release of any available resources of the national government...** (b) **the release of personnel of a national organ of state for the rendering of emergency services;** (c) **the implementation of all or any of the provisions of a national disaster management plan ...** (d) the

evacuation to temporary shelters ... if such action is necessary for the preservation of life; (e) the regulation of traffic to from or within the disaster-stricken or threatened area; (f) the regulation of the movement of persons and goods ...; the control and occupancy of premises in the disaster-stricken or threatened; (h) the provision, control or use of temporary emergency accommodation: (i) the suspension or limiting of the sale dispensing or transportation of alcoholic beverages in the disaster-stricken or threatened area; (j) the maintenance or installation of temporary lines of communication to, from, or within the disaster area; (k) the dissemination of information required for dealing with the disaster; (l) emergency procurement procedures; (m) the facilitation of response and post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation; (n) other steps that may be necessary to prevent an escalation of the disaster or to alleviate. contain and minimise the effects of the disaster; or (o) steps to facilitate international assistance.”

This very act has been utilised to create new regulations which further limits the rights of South African citizens, in order to ‘*flatten the curve*’. The regulations released on the 18th of March further articulated how government resources will be released, further prevented persons gathering in groups exceeding 50 persons in premises where liquor is sold, noted the process for medical examination, diagnosis, treatment, isolation and quarantine; closure of schools and care facilities; suspension of visits; limitation of sale, dispensing and transportation of liquor; emergency procurement procedures; authority to issue directions, offences and penalties (<https://vineyardswimming.co.za/wp->

<content/uploads/2020/03/Government-Gazette-657-43107-18th-March-2020.pdf>).

A notice released by COIDA indicated that all employees would be able to submit claims when diagnosed with COVID-19, further categorising the risk-profile of occupations in relation to exposure to the virus, and citing that such a submission would allow an employee access to temporary total disablement-benefits (TTD). The TTD benefit would allow payment to an employee from the date of diagnosis, for a period not exceeding 30 days, should an employee be recommended to self-quarantine by a Medical Practitioner. A right to assess for permanent disablement was noted to be treated on a case-by-case basis, whilst it was accepted that all confirmed COVID-19 cases could be covered by Medical Aid for a period of 30 days. The aforementioned claims, including a death-benefit, could be submitted online (www.labour.gov.za, CompEasy) or alternatively manually submitted at the compensation fund (covid19claims@labour.gov.za , 0860 105 350).

It is further noted in the document that once a national state of disaster has been declared, it lapses three months thereafter and can be extended by one month at a time, or further prematurely terminated (see clause 27 (5)). Yet, the reports on the scientific community's timeline for developing a vaccine seems to stretch between 12 to 18 months (<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-vaccine-timeline-what-to-watch-leading-research-2020-3?IR=T>). Given this disparity in timelines, and the subsequent cognitive dissonance that may arise when one compares the timeline of our legally defined disaster to the expected

timeline in which we may receive the relief provided by vaccines – it may not be so unexpected and unprecedented that citizens feel as if they have been dropped into a ball of chaos. However, as Industrial Psychologists, we know that ‘chaos’ can be ‘contained’ within the confines of language as a theory, type of change described as disruptive and further noted as a system that fluctuates unpredictively with features of a substantial structure that is difficult to identify in a pattern (Van Tonder, 2013). Whilst we aim to “*Flatten the curve*”, we are also recognising the need to enable global citizenship in a period where we face a common unknown enemy.

It remains clear, as with every change, that its unique features to the South African environment will most likely become visible over the coming weeks as stricter regulations emerge further challenging an already strained economy. We could possibly expect to integrate reactive behaviours observed when coping with this particular pandemic world-wide (i.e. panic-buying; attempts by citizens to negotiate with the government’s protocols; re-organisation of work-practices; significant interruption in the global supply-chain; increased demand for essential products geared towards survival; overall economic disruption) to be further compromised by our unique features (i.e. load-shedding and intermittent water shortages; unemployment rate with increased youth-bulge; difficult employer-and -union relationships; socio-cultural differences; organisation and industry life-stages; overly saturated semi-skilled and unskilled sector; exceptional wealth disparities) may bring forth reactions that may be difficult to prepare for (<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/where-nehawu-plan-march-when-covid-19-ignore-rules-gatherings/>).

It therefore becomes clear that as IO-psychologists' interests are aligned to enable businesses (large, medium, small) to provide stability in these very trying times, we need to adopt the 'Thuma Mina'/ 'Send me'-approach.

It is important to remain mindful that Industrial Psychologists are classified as Healthcare Practitioners by the HPCSA, but will adhere to the ethical guidelines of appropriately referring and engaging with various healthcare professions when designing organisational interventions that regulate the work environment (i.e. Occupational Therapists/ Medical Doctors/ Clinical and Counselling Psychologists) to ensure that the medical and psychological reactions are appropriately managed in the work setting. Within the business context, Industrial Psychologists could offer our expertise in the aspects of managing change on an organisational-, team- and individual level across levels of management and business expertise.

Reeves, Lang and Carlsson-Szlezak (2020) and Rice (2020) reflect the following lessons have been learned when dealing with '*rapidly unfolding events*' which may provide further insight as to how Industrial Psychologists can meet their clients:

1. ***Update intelligence on a daily basis; don't assume that information creates 'informedness'***: Industrial Psychologists practice obtaining informed consent and maintaining and designing interventions based on their scientific knowledge, which inform the scope of practice and the code of ethics. As such, ensuring that information translates into informed decision-making processes has become the cornerstone of psychological practice and could effectively serve communication channels to facilitate effective understanding of

designed protocols, business change and the impact thereof in their daily duties. As Industrial Psychologists who could be an internal or external consultant, would assume both the role of leading the self and the other through equally providing the same level of support to business leaders who would be at this point in time, focussing on keeping 'the doors open'.

- 2. *Beware of hype cycles/news cycles, maintain a healthy scepticism and constantly reframe your understanding of what's happening:*** Industrial Psychologists focus on facts and scientific findings rather than speculative and sensationalist trends, as it is part of their investigative nature. This inclination creates scope for allowing a leader/manager/employee to soundboard their interpretation of information when feeling overwhelmed by news cycles, whilst also providing the opportunity to address the effects of importing findings from sources categorised as 'fake news' and further addressing stereotyping-behaviours which may dislodge as a possible distancing defence mechanism (i.e. blaming-behaviours which increase procrastination/denial of the issue at hand). A critical role would be to facilitate the emergence of the 'voice of reason', whilst effectively dealing with the legitimate waves of anxiety that would emerge when being confronted with a disaster. It is reasonable to assume that once individuals (i.e. Leaders in business, managers and employees) receive the information of a particular 'drastic change', the change itself will be absorbed but with the internal need to revert back to the previous state of comfort. The aforementioned could be further exacerbated by Change fatigue, which occurs during large-scale organisational change. The likelihood exists that experimental

strategies to absorb such a change (even though calculated), may not be successful at their first attempt, and as such, the process of 'failing forward' could be adopted in order to combine business performance and quality assurance in these trying times. The acceptance of this likelihood combined with the necessary motivation to 'consistently try again' breeds innovation and resilience, both constructs which are of keen interest to Industrial Psychologists.

- 3. *Use experts and forecasts for scenario-mapping and unforeseen impacts - carefully.*** Experts within their scope of practice remain highly valued in interpreting complex information. It would be prudent to ensure that changes to the work environment is reviewed by Industrial Psychologists in order to ensure that not only legal requirements are maintained, but that the psychological and social impact of such changes are considered in order to maintain a productive work-setting that are aligned to their engagement-levels and current managerial capability. Such an engagement would typically be informed by an empirically-tested approach in a setting where planned change can occur. However, in our current setting where time is not on the business's side, a seasoned expert in managing chaotic change within business and amongst employees could provide valuable insights and facilitate creative and innovative interventions within the organisation to allow for appropriate and calculated adjustments to work flow.

- 4. *Beware of bureaucracy – create an Emergency Operations Center.*** It would be advised to assemble a trusted, competent task-team who

would be able to manage critical business issues and be 'allowed to cut through the red tape'. The role of an Industrial Psychologist in this regard would be in profiling the roles required (as they would most likely emerge due to necessity) and further assist in the compilation and support of such a team tasked when dealing effectively and decisively with complexity, in the form of workplace counselling, coaching to team-members and further facilitate effective decision-making capability when leaders find themselves at a deadlock.

5. ***Planned responses communicated within the organisation should be balanced across the following dimensions:*** Should one act as an internal/external consultant, the rising complexity of limited resources and imposed restrictions would result in the following aspects that need to be addressed

- a) ***Communications*** – Decide on the clear and balanced course of action and ensure that all communication-channels relays this effectively. Ensure that the context and reasoning behind actions have been communicated and provide room for employees to integrate the course of action into their daily lives to promote engagement and commitment. Ensure that modes of communication (most likely remote technology) support these aims.
- b) ***Employee health and safety needs*** – Consider the impact that restrictions may place on the employee's access to education based on the emerging issues arising from the pandemic (i.e. personal financial management in light of possible remuneration-restrictions), access to testing-and healthcare facilities, access to daily provisions required in order for them to perform their duties (i.e. ensure that the health and safety concerns/interventions that will keep employees

safe are communicated on the platforms at work and technologically available to the remote-workforce).

- c) **Travel** – Travel associated with the business processes should be flexible and adjust as travel restrictions are imposed. This would require multiple iterations of business process adjustment (depending on the nature of the business), which should be balanced with the clear and balanced course of actions to be taken.
- d) **Align the solutions derived from business tracking and forecasting to the remote work-strategy** – Yost (2020) suggests to engage in (1) job mapping; (2) IT-systems audit and capacity determination; (3) align to communications protocols; (4) design/align to the performance management systems. Needly (2020) elaborates that the implementation of an appropriate remote work policy would require managing not only the practical aspects of change, but further consider the psychological and social aspects that will fundamentally change the work processes. Needly (2020) further provides considerations for maintaining employee's psychological wellness when introducing this change, thus implying that managerial capability and competence will be tested more rigorously by this approach to work.
- e) **Supply-chain stabilisation & being part of the broader solution** – South Africa has already experienced constraints in imports noting that after the announcement of the state of disaster, panic buying ensued. Promote critical conversations within the organisation which aids solution-focussed thinking in areas such as investigating how the organisation can provide services or products that align to the greater cause of alleviating this disaster. Rice (2020) further advises that mapping the supplier-stream would likely be able to assist in designing effective and 'partner-orientated' contingencies

which support the business continuity plans. Whilst the aforementioned would be crafted by the Emergency Operations Center, it would remain imperative to filter the changes and intentions to partner with suppliers in this setting into the remote-working plans in order to include employees in change-implementation and further reward them with the ability to contribute to the business continuity plan in a visible manner. As organisations may take advantage of optimising and automising the value chain within the organisation, it is important to realise that employees will most likely need to naturally acquire new skillsets. The anticipated and emerging areas of competence could be mapped by Industrial Psychologists in partnership with Human Resource Management and may very well offer the organisation to leapfrog into the fourth industrial revolution.

It is important to note, that now more than ever, Industrial Psychologists should heed the call to provide their experience and expertise to businesses of all sizes and shapes, in order to support our economy through this 'unveiled threat'.

SIOPSA therefor heeds the President's call:

"Having taken the oath of office, I am saying yes, South Africa Thuma Mina ['Send Me']. I pledge here today that I will serve you, I will work with you, side by side, to build the South Africa that we all want and deserve. A new era has dawned in our country."

<https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/7-quotes-from-ramaphosas-sainauguration19-speech-i-am-saying-yes-sa-thuma-mina-20190525>)

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