

Getting through and beyond the Covid-19 crisis

By Wilhelm Crous, issued by SAICA

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For the last few years, a growing number of executives, managers, employees and even the self-employed have been on the receiving end of low or zero economic growth, continuous downsizing, retrenchments and budget cuts. Add to that rampant corruption and state capture, and it's easy to understand why, across the board, we're seeing an increase in mental issues in the workplace, such as depression, anxiety and burnout. Employees and their leaders are overwhelmed. And then... Covid-19 struck. The coronavirus and the fallout couldn't have come at a worse time.

In my working life, I've experienced the political turmoil of the '80s, the political uncertainty of the early '90s, the Asian meltdown in the late '90s, 9/11, SARS and the fallout of the 2007/08 financial market crash. However, the impact that Covid-19 will have on our economy and society hasn't been experienced for *over the last 100 years*. We haven't seen this movie before.

As an entrepreneur who feels responsible for his employees' physical and financial well-being, I have felt overwhelmed, confused and at times anxious in this chaotic, rapidly-evolving crisis. My first reaction, in order to be able to plan ahead, was to try and make sense of what was going on. I spoke to various executives and it immediately became clear that they were trying to do the same thing as me. As a publisher, I realised that I was in a powerful position to help the business community find clarity amidst the chaos of the crisis. Which is why, in a race against time, we wrote and produced [*Managing Organisations During The Covid-19 Vortex*](#).

One of the key chapters in the book focuses on helping executives to build and retain resilience in times of crises. It was Professor Robert Quinn of Michigan State Business School who said in situations of deep and volatile change you "build the bridge as you walk on it".

That calls for courage, faith and deep resilience. In *Managing Organisations During The Covid-19 Vortex*, Dr Jopie de Beer, psychologist and CEO of the JvR Africa Group, discusses how to build your physical and emotional resilience during this crisis. Here are some of her guidelines...

Start with absolute honesty and acceptance

Within all the emotional turbulence, anger and shock you may be experiencing, it's important to start on the road to sustained resilience by accepting the following:

Accept that:

- the Covid-19 crisis is a reality and will create chaos for some months. To resist, deny, rationalise, feel guilty or blame yourself will not help;



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- blaming others will make no difference to the outcome of the virus or the trauma at hand;
- you will now have to create a new rhythm and structure in your life and accept that life will never feel, or be, the same again; and
- you'll have to be kind to yourself in this process, and it won't be easy

Accepting these principles can help you to use this chaotic and traumatic time to learn more about your personality, your ways of coping and your resilience, as well as to help and understand the resources and needs of others. Your learnings can include giving attention to the multi-faceted nature of being and remaining physically, mentally, emotionally, interpersonally and spiritually resilient.

Building physical resilience

As human beings, our physical, emotional and mental states are intimately connected. Your physical condition has an impact on your thinking and emotions, as much as your emotional state and thoughts can affect our physical well-being.

- **Basic physical needs:** Accept that the Covid-19 pandemic will create anxiety and a fear that your basic needs may not be met. The higher your stress levels, the more you may be tempted to act impulsively in how much and, what, you purchase, say and do. Manage this impulsivity by making lists of what you reasonably will need. This will also safeguard other additional sources of stress such as feeling guilty because others are going without or having to manage your overdraft or credit card at a later stage. Learn how to counter the risk of emotional irrationality with rationality and logic.
- **Other physical needs:** To remain physically healthy, it's essential that you eat healthily, sleep enough, breathe deeply, and exercise. Learn how to be 'physically intelligent' by listening to the feedback from your body, whether it relates to pain, discomfort or tension. Structure your day to include waking up at the right time, dressing and putting on your make-up as though you were going to work. Make sure that you allow for activities that ensure that you do remain physically active and busy. Also use meditation or prayer to calm you down mentally, emotionally and physically. Seek online examples of exercise and relaxation techniques that you can practice at home regularly.
- **And more:** For those who miss interaction and competition, make your exercise regime a social one by participating in streaming activities. Formulate goals and outcomes that you would like to reach and identify ways in which you can show achievement, whether it includes being able to do more push-ups or achieve a slower heart rate. Please get medical advice and make sure that you aren't doing so whilst ill. If safe to do so, exercise may also involve activities like learning to dance or gardening – particularly if you start cultivating a vegetable patch. Physical activity, being outside and achieving goals can all have a positive impact on your mood, and therefore on your resilience.

Building emotional resilience

People's experiences of the current pandemic are deeply emotional. The ability to identify emotions accurately, understand them, use them effectively and manage them appropriately is a core component of resilience. In this regard, particular attention should be given to the below:

- **Self-awareness and self-management:** Everyone is unique. Self-knowledge about your personality type will indicate whether you will find social isolation difficult or not. Some will find it easy to follow Covid-19 instructions, whereas others will rebel. You may feel devastated about the impact of the pandemic because of your empathetic nature or you may be more cynical about the intention of those in leadership positions. Some may find it easy to deal with the ambiguity of not knowing what lies ahead with the pandemic, whereas the lack of clarity may drive others up the wall. It's important to understand your nature and your stress trigger points when we are talking about your resilience. Self-knowledge can be regarded as an essential skill for understanding and managing your resilience. Use self-reflection and previous assessment results, and ask colleagues and friends for feedback, to establish a clear sense of your own hardwiring. This will not only guide you in understanding your strengths, but will also guide your understanding of why and how you derail at times. For resilience, this self-knowledge is essential as it allows you to anticipate the situations that will cause you the most stress, and helps you to understand how to best respond.
- **Cultivate measured positivity:** When your focus is on catastrophe, it tends to become your reality. Those who see

chaos as a temporary and passing phase manage their emotions better and tend to be more resilient. Pessimists tend to feel helpless and hopeless more easily – as if they were a victim of the Covid-19 pandemic or any other misfortune. They will generally expect plans to not work out and can become immobilised in difficult circumstances. Given how contagious emotions, and specifically moods, can be, such a stance may impact on, and affect those around them. For resilience, it is possible to develop a more optimistic way of interpreting events. By researching all the previous pandemics, for example, it is possible to see the current situation as temporary (more optimistic) rather than permanent (pessimistic.) It is also possible to regard Covid-19 as affecting only specific aspects of our lives, rather than being catastrophic in all aspects of our lives going forward. Positive emotions such as optimism, hope, happiness, joy and gratitude are essential for resilience; these emotions build personal resources and are directly related to health and coping. Negative emotions tend to trigger fear, anxiety and survival instincts in you and those around you.

- **Stress tolerance:** The stress responses of flight, fight and freeze are a human survival mechanism. Fear and anxiety create an immediate physical reaction in reaction to a threat, with the benefit being that it has ensured human survival since the origin of humankind. Prolonged anxiety and fear created by stressful circumstances tend to affect us mentally, emotionally and physically, however. We must therefore do our best to understand what causes us the most stress, as well as how to manage that stress in such a manner that its impact is less severe. Causes of stress may be found in real circumstances such as the coronavirus or financial constraints. Other sources of stress may be found in negative thinking and feeling habits, poor relationships or even an addiction to social media. To ensure resilience it is essential to identify and constructively manage sources of stress. This may include reassessing boundaries between home and work life, taking up hobbies that provide joy or making time for relaxation and other exercises. Optimal resilience will not be maintained if self-care work is not done on managing the sources of stress and finding constructive ways to manage its impact.

All in all, the Covid-19 virus is an important reminder of how fragile humanity actually is. It could ‘cleanse’ societies and humankind of all the materialistic peripherals, highlight how precious life is and also bring out the best in people by encouraging empathy, solidarity and collaboration on a massive scale to make life easier for those who suffer the most.

Justice Malala, the well-known political commentator, leaves us with the following message of hope: “Out of chaos and devastation there is a chance to remake ourselves into a country that is more focused, more agile, more industrious and more prosperous. If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that we should never again allow ourselves to be caught unprepared financially and systemically. We need a country that works. Even if these are hard and painful times, this is an opportunity to build that country of our dreams.”

Get your hands on a copy of ***Managing Organisations During The Covid-19 Vortex*** from the publisher’s website at www.kr.co.za at the special launch price of R329.

About Wilhelm Crous

Wilhelm Crous has a passion for business knowledge. This passion is realised, through Knowledge Resources (which he established in 1991), by publishing business and management books; developing and presenting world-class conferences and training; conducting surveys in the HR/Talent Management field; and publishing Human Capital and Labour Country Reports. Wilhelm is also the founder of the HR Think Tank, in collaboration with the Institute for Future Research. Previously, Wilhelm served as the Executive Director of the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM), and is also one of the co-founders of the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) where he served on the first board. Throughout his career he has served on various commissions, advisory boards and working groups, all related to professional human resources management specifically, and labour and human capital on a macro-national level. Wilhelm has also been a guest lecturer at various universities and business schools in the areas listed above, and has received numerous special awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the SABPP for his outstanding contribution to the human resources management profession, and the Chancellor’s Medal from the University of Pretoria for contributions made to human resources management. In 2017, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the University of Johannesburg for his contribution to Entrepreneurship in South Africa.

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