

Ethics in a time of crisis

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As part of Saica's *Leadership in a Time of Crisis* webinar series, Professor Deon Rossouw, CEO of The Ethics Institute, spoke about the importance of sticking to your values during a crisis.



Professor Deon Rossouw

If there's any situation that's going to show your true colours, it's a crisis. At Saica we are passionate about helping our members, and we want to arm you with all the information you need to navigate your way through the Covid-19 crisis, successfully and with integrity.

As part of our new *Leadership in a Time of Crisis* series, we have called on the best possible expert to talk us through the importance of leading ethically during these difficult times. Professor Deon Rossouw is CEO of The Ethics Institute and Extraordinary Professor in Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch.

Ethics and dilemmas

As the CEO of The Ethics Institute and Extraordinary Professor in Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, Professor Deon Rossouw is often asked to define ethics, and for him it is simple: "Ethics is about the triangle of the self, the good and the other. That means you are ethical when you don't only think

about what is good for yourself, but also for others." Another way of thinking about this is the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

While Rossouw says the definition of ethics is simple, he is quick to point out that in reality ethics are never simple. "When it comes to ethics, there are always three distinct categories," he says. "Good, bad and dilemmas."

He goes on to explain that every now and again we face dilemmas; situations where we don't have the luxury of choosing between right and wrong. During the Covid-19 crisis, we've already seen many ethical dilemmas playing out on a daily basis. "How do you decide what to do when you have more patients than ventilators, or if you don't have enough cash flow to pay both employees and suppliers," he asks. "Rule-following behaviour won't get us out of these dilemmas," he says. "We need to dig deep into our values and convictions and come up with what we can morally justify as the best possible response."

Personal ethics

For Rossouw, there's nothing wrong with leaders looking after their own interests, as long as they balance those with the interests of others. "Being selfish is unethical, being self-interested is not necessarily unethical," he says.

He reminds us that if we want to be ethical leaders, it starts with us. "Remember the famous saying, 'if it is to be, it is up to me,'" he says.

In light of this, Rossouw has three recommendations for leaders on a personal ethical level:

- 1. Look after yourself.** Sanitise, make sure you are in good health, don't do things that can sacrifice your own health and safety. He quoted Alisdair MacIntyre who said that self-sacrifice is as much a vice as selfishness.

2. Be an example to others. Walk the talk and treat others how you would like to be treated. Never, ever make an exception of yourself. If you ask others to maintain social distancing, be sure to do it yourself.

3. Show care and compassion. There are so many people who won't be able to survive this, so give to others where you can.

Ethics and leadership during lockdown

What does ethical organisation leadership mean during lockdown? Rossouw offers the following guidelines:

1. Restore a sense of community. Being alone at home can cause anxiety and loneliness, so it's important to create regular and honest communication. Establish a network within your organisation where you make sure every person is being checked in on every day. It's our moral duty to maintain a sense of unity during isolation.

2. Avoid survival morality. Now is a good time to go back and consolidate your foundational values. Those same values will carry you through the crisis and help you to recover afterwards. If ever there was a time for values and ethics, that time is now.

3. Special care for the most vulnerable. Identify and help the people, both inside and outside your organisation, that don't have pockets deep enough to see them through this pandemic. Your staff, especially your lower levels of staff, may need additional help. Look out for your suppliers, especially those that are SMEs. Don't use this opportunity to squeeze them – now is the time to support them.

4. Create a vision of life beyond pandemic. As leaders we have a very special obligation to cultivate hope and meaning for people. No matter how much anxiety and grief we are feeling, there is meaning to be found in this pandemic. To keep that vision alive is absolutely essential.

Organisational leadership post-lockdown

We will need a very special effort to recover after the pandemic. We will need to be exceptionally good at what we do, to rebuild our organisations to what it was before the crisis. Rossouw offers the following advice:

1. Invest in staff morale. Security and respect are the most important factors when it comes to performance and productivity. Staff that feel safe and 'seen' will be more willing, loyal, and ready to walk the extra mile for you. We know there is a big link between morality and morale – morale is boosted when people are treated in a respectful and fair manner, and if we are honest with them. Nothing breaks morale like unethical behaviour, which is why it is especially important to move through this crisis with dignity and respect.

2. Grow your trust capital. Typically, in times of crisis, trust is under a lot of pressure. People tend to lose trust in their colleagues, organisations and their leadership. It is crucial you work on rebuilding that trust. Remember that you can't force someone to trust you. You have to act in ways that make it easy for them to trust you.

3. Broaden and build. Avoid getting stuck in a survival mentality, where you think that nice guys come second, all that matters is the bottom line, and so on. It is very important to protect ourselves against that, as this kind of thinking narrows our possibilities. Rather start to create a vision beyond survival and look at new possibilities. This is the kind of thinking that energises people and evokes positive emotions, and that will help you grow back into your old space, and hopefully beyond that.

4. Resilience for future shocks. It's important to realise that we were caught on the wrong foot with this

crisis, and that there might be more crises ahead. We have a moral obligation as leaders to be ready for the next crisis. When an organisation goes out of business it has such a detrimental knock-on effect on so many people. We therefore need to protect our organisations and ensure that they have the necessary reserves to be resilient.

Rossouw concludes that in times of crisis, we need to deepen our commitment to doing the right thing, rather than abandoning ethics. “There is never a wrong time to do right,” he reminds us. “Crises have the potential to bring out both the worst and the best in human beings. It is our obligation to ensure the latter.”

To help address the challenges faced by many, Saica hosted a complimentary virtual leadership series called Leadership in a time of crisis. This series focused on various elements affecting individuals, businesses and the profession as a whole during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sessions in this series have been recorded and can be viewed on [Saica’s events page](#).

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