

## Once upon some folks

Mr. Liu, Mr. Mutenga, Madam Tortilini and Miss Anderson are senior citizens living in a retirement estate on a small island. While they cannot be categorized as best friends, they cordially related and had their differences.

Mr. Liu is a business mogul. He committed his lifetime to building a multi-million dollars company from ground up and takes great pride in his business acumen. He always have an investment idea for everyone; what stocks to buy, which sector to invest in. That is Mr. Liu.

Mr. Mutenga is however, the opposite of Mr. Liu. He was neither born into wealth nor grew one. His expenses on the retirement home are paid from the loans and goodwill gifts of his kinsmen. He rarely gets invited to Madam Tortilini's soirées, not necessarily because of his poor status. At least, that was what she said.

Madam Tortilini is the wild one. She is of the opinion that love, music and wine should go hand in hand. She hailed from San Marino, an enclave surrounded by Italy in Southern Europe, on the border between the regions of Emilia Romagna and Marche. Despite pushing Sixty, Madam Tortilini is the island's go-to for drinks and a great time. Sometimes a nuisance to other elderly neighbors like herself, she is however, one adorable woman.

Miss Anderson is a lady's lady. An islander by birth, she took well to the environmental setting of the retirement estate, unlike others. Cultured and a bit enigmatic, she ardently patronized the famous French Cabaret, Moulin Rouge at the dusk of the 19th century. If Madam Tortilini is a party animal, Miss Anderson is the classy hostess; one who can hold her Champagne elegantly while enjoying men's attention. The perfect predecessor to Marilyn Monroe.

These people lived peacefully on their island. Safe, secured, tolerating one another until word got out that a war was brewing.

Mr. Liu was the first to access this information. Apparently, a nephew of his, in charge of one of his conglomerates heard from other business leaders during a closed door meeting that one General Herr Randolph, was planning a major invasion. While none had concise information as to

when and how, they were making plans on managing their businesses in case the rumors turned out to be true. He, the nephew, then sent Mr. Liu a telegram as warning because he needed directions on what to do in respect of the family business.

When the telegram came, Mr. Liu informed his neighbors of the new development. He also saw a business opportunity in the chaos, as usual.

His entrepreneurial experiences told him his competitors will possibly pull out of business in panic, giving him a monopoly. He then would further launch into other sectors vital during warfare such as food and services provision. And while his counterparts are closing up, he would stick it out during the turmoil. After all, tough times never last.

Of course, the dividends would be mind-blowing — crossing the billionaire mark and being hailed as the business and philanthropic genius of the decade, if not the century. He had planned it all out. But he was wrong. They all were.

Mr Mutenga thought of alarming his family of the imminent danger and to close their doors to strangers. Being a colony, the young men were always drafted to war. However, he was unsure of the truth in the information, after all, Mr. Liu once claimed to have danced with Queen Elizabeth and it turned out to be a lie. This “tip” could as well be one of his cock and bull stories. Also, because Mr. Mutenga lives on the goodwill of his villagers, he hated being an alarmist and so, he decided against it informing them. His silence would cost him, eventually.

Now, Madam Tortilini’s partying lifestyle was her Achilles heels. With no children or responsibility asides from herself, she lived recklessly. Few days after the meeting with Mr. Liu, two young men came to the island as tourists. While they were told to stay off strangers, Madam Tortilini would have none of it. Even after Mr. Liu told her that the men could be spies, she went ahead to throw a party and invited them to it. There were food, wine and great music. Those men were not spies, really, but their phones had been tapped at the airport. As they spoke on the phone to their loved ones about how beautiful and perfect the island was, someone was listening on the other side, prepping to use that information for things not so good.

Of all the four neighbors, Miss Anderson was different. When she left the meeting with Mr. Liu, she got a gun for security, phoned her relatives who did the same and even excused herself from Madam Tortilini's party.

Two days after, Mr. Liu's rumor became truth. General Herr Randolph struck and the island was mercilessly ransacked.

### **Much ado about everything**

These characters may be fictional, however, they are a representation of the world powers' disposition to the COVID-19 outbreak in December, 2019.

Mr. Liu was China.

China, a global economic power, positioned to give the United States of America a run for her "most powerful nation of the world" title, discovered a cluster of acute pneumonia cases with unknown origin<sup>1</sup>. On 8 January 2020, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC) reported the identification of a novel Coronavirus and by 29 January 2020, the virus had spread to all provinces of mainland China. Everything happened so fast. Too fast even.

Mr. Mutenga or the African continent, unlike others, had the longest span of time to prepare for the invasion but failed to. Egypt discovered the continent's first COVID-19 case in February while West Africa saw her first in March, 2020 in Lagos, one of Nigeria's biggest cities. There had been a propaganda that the virus could not survive in Africa's hot climate<sup>2</sup>. So, they

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Prevention and Control. (2020, July 1). Identifying the Outbreak Source, retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/about-epidemiology/identifying-source-outbreak.html?](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/about-epidemiology/identifying-source-outbreak.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcases-updates%2Fabout-epidemiology%2Fidentifying-source-outbreak.html)

[CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcases-updates%2Fabout-epidemiology%2Fidentifying-source-outbreak.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/about-epidemiology/identifying-source-outbreak.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcases-updates%2Fabout-epidemiology%2Fidentifying-source-outbreak.html)

<sup>2</sup> Gray, R. (2020, March 24). BBC. *COVID-19: Will warm weather really kill off Covid-19?*

Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200323-coronavirus-will-hot-weather-kill-covid-19>

disregarded the alarm and felt safe in their false sense of security. Their leaders waited till the end of March before announcing a lockdown but then, it was already too late.

Madam Tortilini or Italy left her borders open to tourists despite warnings from the World Health Organizations (WHO) as to the discovery of a new strain of virus and Miss Anderson, the depiction of Pacific nations like New Zealand properly handled the COVID-19 pandemic and recorded the smallest impact rates. She had her guns loaded, ready for war.

### **Decisions, decisions**

One of the important skills of leadership is the ability to make tough decisions for, and on behalf of the people. While they may not be in support at times, the deed must be done. Just like Peter Drucker had said on making decisions, “An effective executive does not need to be a leader in the sense that the term is now most commonly used. Instead, they asked the right questions— "What needs to be done?" "What is right for the enterprise?"

Most leaders of the world failed this important test and it showed on the long run.

As a student social entrepreneur, I run an Enactus team on my campus. Enactus (*Entrepreneurial Action Through Us*) is a global community of students leveraging on entrepreneurship for impacting lives while working to achieve the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs).

The subsequent pandemic lockdown in Nigeria affected my team. Schools were closed down disrupting activities. We could no longer run community based projects as planned to comply with the social distancing rules<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Mbah, F. (2020, March 30). Aljazeera. *Nigeria announces lockdown of major cities to curb coronavirus*, retrieved from <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.aljazeera.com/amp/economy/2020/3/30/nigeria-announces-lockdown-of-major-cities-to-curb-coronavirus>

New problems were also emerging with the change. For instance, education inequality gap widened for students in rural communities who had no access to internet, electricity and mobile devices. They could not sign up for virtual learning that became the new normal after the closure of physical schools.

I had to find loopholes, not to break the rules but to secure workable solutions; occupational hazard of studying law, I guess and launched a social impact project to create physical schools in clusters to help the kids study.

Keeping the number at a maximum of twenty at a go, my team trained volunteers who served as teachers taking classes on English, Mathematics, STEM, Arts and Music for students in five Nigerian states until the final reopening of schools in November, 2020<sup>4</sup>.

### **What does crisis demands of a manager?**

COVID-19 pandemic taught the world the essence of that Boy's Scout motto "*always be prepared.*"

The last time a pandemic of such magnitude occurred was the Spanish Flu just after the First World War in 1918-1919. Coincidentally, COVID-19 with similar symptoms with the Spanish flu happened exactly a century after.

The bone of contention is what could have been done to mitigate the harsh effects of the pandemic. Harvard Business Review gave four crisis management leadership skills and they are: Speedy decision over precision, bold adaptation, reliably delivery and engagement for impact<sup>5</sup>.

Crisis are unprecedented events often out of human control. No one goes to bed expecting imminent danger or the breakout of a global pandemic. So, for managers in a crisis, one important skill is firmness in adversity.

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<sup>4</sup> Project Safe School. <https://projectsafeschool.disha.page/>

<sup>5</sup> Harvard Business Review. (2020). *Behaviors that help leaders manage a crisis*, retrieved from <https://hbr.org/amp/2020/04/4-behaviors-that-help-leaders-manage-a-crisis>

New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Arden's decision at the earliest record of the COVID-19 pandemic exemplified this trait. She introduced flight ban and restrictions on anyone who was showing symptoms. As of midnight on 16 March, 2020, everybody - including New Zealanders - had to go into self-isolation on arrival in the country, unless they were coming from the largely unaffected Pacific island nations. Then, a few days later, she took the unprecedented step of closing the borders entirely to almost all non-citizens or residents<sup>6</sup>.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at that time notably said these were the strictest regulations in the world, for which she would “make no apologies.”

When in position of making decisions capable of affecting lives and changing the course of history, it is important to do it, as we say in Nigeria, “*with your full chest,*” expressing the need to take responsibility for every action.. However for female leaders, there are additional scrutiny on the basis of gender and firmness is often deemed as authoritarian. It eventually played well for Jacinda Ardern as her pandemic response was categorized as a “*master class in crisis leadership*” by Bloomberg Australia<sup>7</sup> and several other notable platforms.

Team spirit is also expected of managers in mitigating effects of crisis. With the ever changing events, situations and a major dwindle in the morale of members, a manager should know how and when to switch from being a boss giving instructions to subordinates, to a comedian lightening the mood for productivity, and a friend providing warm hugs when the going gets tough. Handling a crisis is like fighting a war; it is not over until it is over as one small crack can bring the wall crashing.

Furthermore, at the core of every decision and choice must be empathy. Jim Keane, CEO of Steelcase in his keynote at the 10th Global Peter Drucker Forum on the human dimension of

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, A. (2020, July 10). BBC News. *How did New Zealand become Covid-19 free?* Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53274085.amp>

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, E. (2020, October 16). Bloomberg. Jacinda Arden’s Master class in crisis management, retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2020-10-16/jacinda-arden-s-masterclass-in-crisis-management>

management said that ***“empathy needs to become a routine cornerstone of management so that we can ensure that people excel at being people, and aren’t stifled into acting like machines.”***

Decisions made by managers at every time but especially during crisis must be people centric, creating an enabling environment where everyone feels and know they matter to the system in place. As Peter Drucker points out, *“management is the specific and distinguishing organ of any and all organizations. Its central task is to make people capable of joint performance, to make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant.”*

### **To they that stand**

Unlike the glowing example of New Zealand and other pacific nations who adequately handled the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a question of why others fail to do just as well.

***“We thought we were dealing with a kitchen fire and could knock it down with a hand extinguisher.”***

These words by the Mayor of New Rochelle in New York, Mr. Noam Bramson, expressed the outcome of the pandemic in New York City. Alas! The city buried 24,000 of its citizens, almost ten times the number who died at the World Trade Center in 2001<sup>8</sup>.

His utterance had similarities with the infamous words of Captain Edward John Smith when he said *“Not even God himself could sink this ship”* about the RMS Titanic and we all know how that ended.

Both sentences screamed confidence, with extra cherry at the top. However, dealing with crisis goes beyond being confident, after all, all the countries badly hit by the pandemic were confident and well equipped. What was needed is susceptibility to change and adaptability.

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<sup>8</sup> Kuchler, H. & Edgecliffe-Johnson, A. (2020, October 22). Financial Times. *How New York’s missteps let Covid-19 overwhelm the US*, retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/a52198f6-0d20-4607-b12a-05110bc48723>

Being thick skinned and able to adapt to ever changing situations is very vital. The lack of this is one of the reasons several leaders failed in protecting their constituencies against the pandemic. New York was worried about citizen's displeasure at placing a lockdown on their bustling city, Nigeria had confusions on handling closure of schools. None was ready for the possibilities of a change in the routine. At the end, the people paid for the inactions their leaders, heavily.

I once lost a debating competition. I was very sure that I articulated my points with such tenacity and confidence but the judges were of the opinion that I sounded proud, instead of knowledgeable and it costs me.

So, while confidence is very important — you must have faith in your abilities as a leader, there is a thin line between overconfidence and pride. Overconfidence renders one blind to objectives and antagonistic to contrary submissions. No one is an island of knowledge, a leader must readily give listening ears to the opinions of others and learn.

Named as "the new normal", the world agreed to a new style of doing things to accommodate the changes that were enhanced by the pandemic. For instance, class 2020 graduated via Zoom, I underwent two global fellowship programs online. We had to let go of resentment at the present situation and forward towards the future – the dawn of a new era.

### **Salvaging the ruins**

Young people are more susceptible to the downsides of the lockdown. For a generation that recorded a larger advancement in technology and fast paced life, the pandemic brought an abrupt pause with highs and lows. For example, a whole year of lockdown saw the need to reconnect with oneself, humanity, divinity or whatever makes each and every one tick. On the other end of the spectrum is an increase in mental health issues as isolation and fear of infection contributed to a rise in anxiety and depression amid the pandemic<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Abbott, A. (2021, February 03). Nature Magazine. *COVID's mental-health toll: how scientists are tracking a surge in depression*, retrieved from <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00175-z>

A University of Glasgow study examined the effects of COVID-19 during the height of the pandemic and stated that certain groups are to be particularly at risk, including young people and women<sup>10</sup>.

Mental health effects of the pandemic are also more likely to have a significant impact on teenagers. For teenagers, the restrictions meant months of virtual learning, more time isolated from friends, and the canceling of important social activities like sports, school performances, graduations, and proms<sup>11</sup>.

The young people of this generation are fighting a double battle, knowing when to take a deep breathe is needed now more than ever.

In *Living in More Than One World*, Peter Drucker personified the value of creating and living a “total life” with diverse interests, relationships, and pursuits. This technique can help one with concentrating during a crisis as a manager especially in this world where everything screams distraction. I picked up learning French during the lockdown, my younger sister learnt fashion creativity. It helped me with focusing on tasks at hand and measuring my productivity. For young people, physical and mental fitness are of utmost importance because the future we desire to create belongs to us and we must be ready for it.

### **Lessons from the ants**

While the world was in turmoil, Elsa Majimbo, a 19 years old Kenyan Comedienne became a global icon. Within a year, she has been featured on Forbes, Hollywood life, bagged brand deals with Valentino and boasts of being best friends with Rihanna.

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<sup>10</sup> Collinson, A. (2020, October 21). BBC. *COVID: Lockdown had 'major impact' on mental health*, Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.bbc.com/news/health-54616688.amp>

<sup>11</sup> Drillinger, M. (2021, March 15). Health line Magazine. *Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Teens' Mental Health* Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/impact-of-covid-19-lockdown-on-teens-mental-health>

There is a lesson to be learnt from this record breaking teenager – laughter makes everything better.

According to Drucker, “it is only managers — not nature or laws of economics or governments — that make resources productive.”

While seriousness is needed when handling crisis, managers must aspire to be in the best state of mind to adequately function. Like Elsa, Gen Z generation grew up in tumultuous times amid several crisis like school shootings, climate change, and political unrest. Yet, this generation constantly prioritizes mental health care. Burnout is real and even the best of professionals break down under stress. Managers must learn care for their mental health, take breaks and laugh. Laughter is good for a body, mind and soul<sup>12</sup>.

***“The need to manage oneself is creating a revolution in human affairs.” – Peter F. Drucker.***

Also, continuing innovation is part of the work. Despite the available technological advancements, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for continuous innovation even in the field of leadership. Solutions to 2000s problems are not necessarily applicable in the 2020s. Managers must therefore subscribe to open-mindedness and acquire the habit of learning in crisis and out of it.

In conclusion, what crisis demands of a manager are numerous; speedy decisions, empathy, learning but most importantly, willingness. Leadership cannot be forced and to adequately

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<sup>12</sup> Robinson, L., Smith, M. (M.A.), & Segal, J. (Ph.D). (2020, October). Help Guide. *Laughter is the Best Medicine*, retrieved from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm#:~:text=Laughter%20triggers%20the%20release%20of,Laughter%20protects%20the%20heart>

function, a manager must be willing to put in the work because the smallest show of crisis has the capability of bringing managers to their knees. We saw it happen with COVID-19.