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The Coronavirus: A Personal View from the Eternal City

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Saint Angelo Bridge over the Tiber River with the St. Peter's Basilica in the background, Courtesy, Jebulon

ITALY The Coronavirus: A Personal View from the Eternal City

— Emilio Iodice

March 25, 2020

At 6 pm each evening, I take two flights of steps to the top of my building, turn a key, open a metal door and walk out into the sun, setting over Rome. St. Peter's Dome is in the distance, glowing from rays slowly slipping into the horizon.

From my apartment complex, I see scores of balconies and people on rooftops. Guitars and violins accompany voices that echo across the buildings and streets. Neighbors are singing and music pouring from the heart of Italians coping with self-imposed house arrest. The quarantine is to protect the public, especially the elderly from contagion.

On March 9, 2020, the government locked down the nation into a silent, paralyzed fortress to keep the virus from spreading. It worked. Cases and deaths are growing at a decreasing rate, at this writing.

Italy has been, for ages, among the most attractive destinations. Its climate, cuisine, scenery, history, and culture and remarkably creative and lively people make it a natural magnet for those who want to enjoy the best of what life offers.

The coronavirus changed that. It is as if the country underwent a collective stroke that demanded measures to save the patient from death.

It started in Lombardy and specifically in towns with connections to China, where factories work to produce all sorts of products for Italian companies. Business leaders and travelers carried the virus, which spread like wildfire.

The Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, acted as quickly as reasonably possible, realizing that shutting the cafes, restaurants, cinemas, stadiums, theatres, factories, and schools and blocking transportation to and from and within the country would disemploy millions overnight and overtax the hospitals. It was a courageous and inevitable decision to save society from hundreds of thousands of elderly and infirm, falling victim to the coronavirus.

Incomes suddenly evaporated, particularly for workers who lived from paycheck to paycheck. The situation became critical, disastrous, and in many cases, tragic for millions of Italians.

Each family had to cope with a new reality: isolation, in order to survive and prevent contagion.

Most huddled together where young people, without homes and little means, resided with parents and grandparents. Personal protocols were created to deal with living together to maintain order, sanity and avoid excessive contact, while eating, working, and sleeping under the same roof.

My daughter is a doctor. She is in the front line fighting to save lives. She no longer comes home.

Her sanctuary and inferno are the hospital. She comes by, at times, to receive a “care package” of food, wave to her children from a distance, converse briefly with her husband from 6 to 8 feet away, and return to work.

In our home we wrote “house rules,” to keep sanity and order for the weeks and, perhaps, months, of living together.

My son-in-law and two granddaughters are with us.

First rule was to “stay out of the kitchen.” My wife prepares three meals a day for us and sometimes for the families of caregivers in our area. She needs space and time to concentrate, cook, and clean up.

Second directive is “do not make a mess.” The children study, play, and exercise in the house. They continue music and gymnastic lessons. The space is small. Order is mandatory.

Third rule is no one from the outside can come in. Our cleaning lady is off limits. This makes it harder to maintain strict hygiene and puts more pressure on my wife.

Fourth regulation is all packages and goods are to stay outside for a day. The virus can be picked up on anything touched by an infected person. Today, our next-door neighbor went to the market to buy us fruit and vegetables. We had to empty the contents and put the bags in quarantine, in the hallway.

Fifth is to wash hands regularly and any time there is a concern about contact or contagion.

Two dozen calls come into our home each day. Internet lines are hopelessly overloaded with students and adults working online. Social media crashes constantly. Communication, the lifeline and mental safety net, is fraying.

We receive regular calls from my daughter in London. She and her husband imposed a quarantine on their family long before the Prime Minister woke up to the fact that this virus is deadly and dangerous to society, the economy, and way of life. My daughter and her husband and friends organized food offerings to the elderly in the neighborhood who are too weak to move. The situation in the UK will get worse before it gets better, which, of course is the same as elsewhere.

The news, all day long, is about the virus. We search for numbers. How many died today? How many were infected? How many survived and went home?

The other quest is to know when this will end.

An interview with a noted Italian virologist says viruses of this sort last 90 days. If so, it should end in Italy by the end of May. Another expert claims we will continue to be in quarantine until October, when the regular flu season begins.

Remedies go “viral” by the hour. This morning reports came in from Brazil about a “cocktail” of malaria drugs mixed with anti-inflammatories were working miracles. The Japanese claimed the same. Social media shows the Japanese treating this as any other flu, which is baffling and surprising while scrambling to find a vaccine or a cure seems to be occurring around the globe.

Italy chased after the virus vs being ready for it. Leaders were in denial at the early stages as the virus spread rapidly and beyond control. A lack of adequate communication and organizing of experts exacerbated the situation.

Finally, action was taken after hospitals and caregivers were nearly overwhelmed.

Eventually, this crisis will end.

What leadership lessons do we learn from the Italian experience for our leaders around the world, businesses and we common mortals?

What do we do the next time?

1. **Act to fit the Crisis:** The next calamity will be different, requiring improvised responses. A mindset must be created by first responders and top leaders to prepare for that which cannot normally be prepared for. Predefined responses will not work. Looking ahead while navigating in perilous waters will. Essential to this is getting the facts, quickly and making decisions on truth and not conjecture.
2. **Bring in the Experts:** Teams from different fields will be needed to organize parts of the firm or sections of society led by specialists to deal with each group. They collect information, create solutions, and implement them and determine what works and does not. The teams form a network of leaders who report to the top. Authority and responsibility should rest with them. Leaders will need to empower others who are calm, have character, and self-control to handle with the crisis. Such a multidisciplinary approach deals with complex organizations and companies. Information must be shared and transparent and not controlled on a “need to know” basis. No room should be allowed for bureaucratic responses. Leaders should promote “psychological safety nets” to allow the free and open expressions of concerns, ideas, and solutions.
3. **Be Calm before you Decide:** Constant assessments of the situation require looking at various vantage points, watching what is ahead, what may happen next, and maintaining a deliberate sense of calmness to avoid overreacting as new data arises. Obviously, some instances will demand immediate decisions but a time to pause, think, and reflect is mandatory to gauge further moves.
4. **Show Sincere Compassion:** Employees and people in general need empathy, concern, and sincerity from leaders. Survival for them and their loved ones is on their minds. Lock downs, school closings, and the inability to help family and friends create a sense of impotence and fear for the future as they deal with economic and social challenges. Leaders must project a feeling of security and “we are in this together.”
5. **Reassure with Frequent Communication:** Stakeholders at all levels need information, facts, and honesty. Initial reactions to a crisis, like the Coronavirus, of overconfidence,

matched with upbeat tones creates cynicism, suspicion, and doubts as to the ability of leaders to understand the state of affairs and realistically respond. There is no shame on the part of leaders to admit they do not know all the facts but are searching for them before they make critical decisions and will respond as they learn more. Each audience will have concerns and needs to be addressed, which is where the experts come in.

The Coronavirus crisis imposed extraordinary challenges on public and private sector managers, employees, and stakeholders from owners to customers to suppliers to taxpayers and revenue collectors.

The outbreak came with lightning speed. It was filled with unpredictability resulting in disorientation and a feeling of losing control. Emotionally and physically, firms, individuals, and governments felt weak. A top-down approach to leading will not be enough. We need to work from the bottom and listen, learn, collect facts, and prepare for the next emergency.

The economy and society will never be the same. We will look back and recall and remember these days of lockdowns, fear, panic, and uncertainty and hope that we are prepared for the next one.

About the Author

Emilio Iodice is a former American diplomat, business executive, university administrator, professor of leadership, and best-selling writer and public speaker.

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