

# Leading with Care, Purpose, and Resolve During a Pandemic

How HR Leaders Can Help Employees and Companies Weather the Coronavirus Crisis

By Gizem Weggemans, Xuemei Bennink-Bai, and Chris Huang



The threat of the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to grow, and the guardians for employee safety and welfare—senior Human Resources executives—play a key role in leading companies through the crisis. From ensuring employees are safe, to communicating with employees on an ongoing basis, to implementing health safeguards in the offices to designing remote work policies, HR leaders are navigating some unprecedented waters. To find out how leading HR executives have been responding to the coronavirus crisis as it unfolds and how they are preparing for the coming weeks and months, Egon Zehnder virtually convened senior HR leaders across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to find out how they are taking care of their most important asset—their people. In addition to sharing in the camaraderie, several leading practices emerged:

### **Make employee safety the top priority.**

HR directors underscored that their first priority has been to protect their thousands of employees around the world as well as the communities in which they exist. One company utilized the power of its global procurement function to amass two million facemasks to have at their employees' disposal. "We have contracted an international SOS line, which provides professional help to answer phone calls from employees," explained one HR leader. "The procurement team was very proactive at sourcing globally and relied on worldwide procurement colleagues." Other companies have extended their generosity to local communities as well. "We had support from our global CEO to skip internal processes and source globally for hygiene products to donate to hospitals and to the government," one HR executive explained.

### **Communicate simply, authentically, and frequently.**

HR directors shared how important it is to communicate clearly with employees, as well as to provide them with an opportunity to share their own concerns. "Communication is very important in this moment to let them feel that we are there," one HR leader said.

Companies are also using different platforms for communication than they normally would to ensure all employees are receiving messages, such as WeChat or Ding Ding. "We fully leveraged chat programs on our phones, including messages from the CEO to all 50,000 employees," one HR executive said. "We announce daily and weekly work plans immediately through our chat, and we set up a platform about how to relieve stress, explaining how we can support and help employees."

### **Leverage technology to protect employees, and keep the business running.**

While not every employer has embraced remote working, the last few weeks have forced many executives to allow new ways of working or face the reality of a business shutdown. At one leading company in China, 8,000 employees got access to online services and communication channels after the company employed a new tool that allowed them to move from simply broadcasting information to interactive engagement. This type of system also allows for HR to receive employee health updates on a regular basis.

“One thing we did brilliantly well—which was not planned—was that we could track all employees, including third- and fourth-party providers from day one,” an HR director explained. “From the first day of Chinese New Year, we had over 10,000 employees reporting their daily health conditions.” While this approach may not work in every country, the key is to use technologies to keep in touch with employees in the form that is most comfortable for them. This quick adaptation to a new way of working could be one positive outcome of the crisis, enabling companies to use technologies in different ways post-virus.

Technology also has been taking center stage in recruitment and talent acquisition processes, especially when it comes recruiting talent from shuttered universities. One company held a live broadcast for recruitment with 89,000 attendees—a higher number than the company engages with when they visit campus in person, leading the company to consider using this approach going forward.

### **Enable more agile decision-making and break down silos for a common goal.**

Leading companies immediately set up cross-functional crisis response teams sponsored at the C-suite level. The ongoing focus is on the interdependencies of the challenges as well as the pursuit of solutions across the entire business, as opposed to specific verticals, has been key.

Organizations that are primarily composed of white-collar workers can easily use technology to continue working, but companies with a predominantly blue-collar workforce need to think creatively about responding to employee needs. “When you cannot go and work from home, you take the best possible measures to anticipate and provide a backup situation,” an HR leader of an energy company explained. “The best thing we can do is to provide hygiene guidance and provide the basic equipment for our workers to use, as well as try to reduce the number of blue-collar workers in the field, and have a team of reserves ready to take over.”

At the same time, HR executives note that it is important that the parts of the business that have been earmarked to think about the longer-term strategy are able to do that without being pulled into the day-to-day, crisis response process. “If a team is worrying about our long-term sustainability policy, we need to let them get on with it without all of us getting dragged into crisis mode, as that is not productive either,” offered a participant. “We still need parts of the organization to think about the longer term.” Part of this long-term thinking involves crisis succession planning. “What happens if CEOs or the top team becomes ill? Should we be keeping them apart?” asked one of the HR executives.

## Use innovation to reinvent the business in a time of crisis.

Companies that have taken the necessary steps to protect their employees can consider taking this time to rethink their business models and consumer perspectives. Six weeks into the crisis, in the midst of the worst disruption to their supply chain and customer service, one organization decided to take a fresh approach to the digitalization of their customer and employee experience. They focused on investing in their internal and external digital platforms to enhance engagement to compensate for the touchpoints that would otherwise happen in the offices and stores.

Other organizations are also using this time to ensure they are prepared for the future, where it is certain other crises will emerge. “We are getting our company to identify futurologists across the business to think about what the future might look like,” one HR director said. “We are also trying to bring science into the core of what we are doing and the decisions we are making.”

## Partner with HR leaders across the world to solve the challenges together.

During these times of uncertainty, business leaders across industries have been eager to share their experiences and learn from each other in both the HR function and in other roles. “I think it is crucial as Head of HR to have a solid external network of colleagues who are living the same experience,” one experienced HR director said.

The private sector is also keen to collaborate with the public sector, particularly for small businesses that will be impacted significantly. “We are looking for governments to provide support for lower paid workers in the private or public sector who either won’t be paid, or not able to go to work and be paid,” one HR leader said.

These connections and shared crisis preparations may prove to be one of the best possible solutions for keeping employees safe and allow businesses to continue to operate. “If I had my time over again, I would remind all other countries to do some preparation for all scenarios,” an HR Director in China said. “We need to share what we want to do and what we have done in order to be comforted that we are doing the right thing and always exchanging and elaborating.”

In times like these organizations need authentic leaders who can empathize yet make tough decisions. Engaging the whole of the business and asking employees for ideas not only can help them respond to the crisis in more innovative and effective ways, but can also deliver a positive cultural shift along the way—an unintended consequence of the tough days the world is going through.





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