

# How Healthcare Leaders Are Handling the COVID-19 Crisis APAC

## Perspectives from APAC HR Leaders in Healthcare

March 2020

No doubt COVID-19 has been a shock at multiple levels: to human lives, day-to-day living, businesses, operations, and systems. While many have had business continuity plans (BCPs) in place for a while and in theory spoken about crisis management, this situation has fully called to test crisis readiness and response agility of organizations. Egon Zehnder's Singapore and China offices convened a virtual round table on March 12, 2020, with HR leaders to share learnings. These leaders were from both large global MNCs in pharma, medical technology, and consumer healthcare, and mid-size entities; most leaders oversee all of APAC including China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia. Many of our participants pointed to the “glass half full” version of the learnings – and identified positive insights from how they have seen leaders and themselves operate over the last three months. They also highlighted areas that remain top of mind. The following captures perspectives and some ideas that emerged:

### 1. Stress test the agility of leaders and organizations:

There is broad consensus that we are operating in a VUCA world, and COVID-19 has put to real test the ultimate ability of leaders to navigate in an unknown, fast-evolving situation. While there have been some learnings from SARS and other major crises, no one has truly experienced this at this scale. Empathetic, tuned-in leaders are “sensing and responding” to what’s needed, even some of the more process-oriented ones: from virtual town halls, to caring hand-written notes on WeChat. HR leaders are also being tested on their ability to be flexible in communicating with different groups, adjusting their messages as needed. Boundaries are understandably blurred between human resource business partners (HRBP) and specialist roles, HRBPs often wearing multiple hats given their proximity to the “situation room”.

*“It’s a good test! Of an emergency, as VUCA as we think!”*

**Food for thought:**

- How can organizations learn from this and embrace the notion of looking for potential in leaders who can manage through VUCA more systematically, beyond looking for pure experience (i.e., have they done this job before?):
- How ready do you feel your leaders are to make this an integral part of business as usual once the crisis subsides?
- How to we preserve the ownership spirit of “breaking boundaries” to get things done while ensuring clear accountability?

**2. Test the preparedness of infrastructure and business continuity plans:**

The time to test crisis readiness and BCPs has come upon organizations. Some have decided to be more cautious than what the local governments mandate, and some have not. For example, even when some governments have not mandated split teams, companies have adopted this stance. That being said, operationalizing, testing, refining BCPs and decision flow maps has been helpful in many ways.

Equally, the situation has triggered a global experiment on working from home. Many critical elements around IT infrastructure have been put to test: in particular, supporting IT infrastructure from VPN platforms, access to Zoom/remote tools, quality of phones and access to laptops for all personnel.

*“It’s a real test of readiness - do we have a good BCP, playbook to follow?”*

**Food for thought:**

- What are pockets of opportunities you still see in your company to make the leap and invest for the future (e.g., IT, digital, supply chain)?
- How do you support and sustain the changes in habits and behaviors?
- How can some of these learnings apply to interactions with your customers?

### 3. Back to basics: Communication – open, frequent, honest – still trumps all else:

There is consensus that communicating freely, often, and clearly mattered most in these times. A real challenge has been to get employees to focus on facts, and reduce speculations. Many of the leaders highlighted that quickly turning on the “response and communicate” gear within their organizations and via leaders has helped the most. Equally, acknowledging what you know and what you don’t has helped solidify trust from the troops. Some of the leaders have faced having to deal with a likely case among their teams that further tested the boundaries of what can be shared and what can’t, and what new questions need to be answered (e.g., if you are self-quarantining, do you get paid leave or unpaid? What does self-quarantining really mean? What is business essential travel?).

*“The hardest thing for me was to stand up and face all the questions from the employees, answers to many I didn’t have.”*

#### Food for thought:

- What are ways to preserve the openness and trust you and your leaders have helped forge through these times once it’s all said and done?

### 4. Heightened need for care and empathy:

Like no other time, now is when people are under tremendous stress – not only from the unknowns around COVID-19, but also what it means for them personally, financially, for their families, and for the business. For example, reps wonder what might happen to their targets and if they should be making calls despite the constraints? Working from home for weeks at end leads to its own feeling of isolation. Some might be worried about interacting with any visitor in office. Leaders are needing to make decisions on the fly. When faced with a potential case among them, as an example, it is likely that some employees may not want to go back home in order to prevent any spread in their families. All these are manifestations of deeply rooted fear and stress. Handling human interactions with utmost care now is more critical than ever before.

*“There is a huge sense of isolation...many haven’t seen each other for last 2 months!”*

**Food for thought:**

- Who are your eQ champions that can help create an ecosystem of support for your teams?
- Who are culture champions?
- What are some non-intuitive ways your leaders can show care? Most critically, how are your HR leaders maintaining energy and recharging, given how much they are coping with?

**5. Appreciation of diversity; sparks in creativity:**

Not only have leaders had to adopt and frequently adjust their communication style with individuals, it has also become obvious how different segments (e.g., R&D vs commercial) process information and how much instructions they each need. For example, while the commercial folks are more inclined to make a decision for themselves, the R&D teams might seek much more instruction, with precision. Appreciation of market and regulatory differences (e.g., between provinces in China or between countries like China vs Korea and Japan) has become equally important and nuanced – thereby further testing the ability of leaders to process fast-changing facts, extrapolate learnings, adjust best practices, apply....and learn again.

The situation has also sparked creativity, especially in the more right-brained. Learning to make the most of the situation and ensuring impact through new mediums all require new ideas. For example, some employees are now pausing to reflect: how can you connect virtually and also retain a human touch? Some are sharing care packages, adding a fun element of toilet paper to them for staff working from home. Some are conducting virtual town halls instead of cancelling them altogether.

*“In the end, the best way is to empower employees to make the right call.”*

**Food for thought:**

- Are there ways to further push the boundaries on creativity and empowerment?
- How can diversity of markets and learnings create even greater insights for your organizations as a whole?

### Some interesting ideas that emerged:

- Assign culture champions – to be the connectors, mobilizers in your communities. They can also become feeders of ideas to the situation room – about what’s on the mind of your different groups (e.g., representatives might be wondering how they will be evaluated on targets).
- Create a “rapid response team” to manage on the ground situations– led by an MD/physician who becomes the first port of call in the event of a suspected case or other crisis. The person then takes over giving instructions, directions. The team could comprise: Global Health and Safety, HR, PR/ Comms, Enterprise Facilities.
- Run a drill for every site: what if the worst case scenario pans out? Who will do what, how will you bring the situation under control in 30 minutes?
- Evaluate your blind spots and build plans: for example, on how to manage Japan should a lockdown happen? What will be communications and decision flows?
- Create mini role play videos to build awareness of different scenarios and ways to response. It brings it to life and communicates with employees in a format they are used to (e.g., similar to e-learning on compliance).
- Consider ways to retain the “human touch” and heightened care – for example, hand written notes from the CEO on WeChat, care packages.

In the end, the group agreed that no doubt this crisis has many unknowns and still evolving, it will create new learnings for leaders and organizations, embed new habits, and forge new and different friendships.

Our best,



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