

Pharma's High-Stakes Leadership in Times of COVID-19: Learnings from the front lines

By Sonny Iqbal and Niveditha Viswanathan

The COVID-19 lockdown has exposed deep dependence of the global economy on various aspects of pharma and healthcare companies. Following the outbreak, alongside its human impact, the sector faces a serious threat of operational challenges. Egon Zehnder India convened a virtual round table, with COOs and Head of Operations of leading pharma companies, including Sanofi, Glenmark, Lupin, Sun Pharma, Dr Reddy's, and Zydus; from India and China. The group collectively highlighted an urgency towards being agile, possibilities to collaborate, and addressing employee operations while continuing to serve national and global demand. We also witnessed introspection on leadership styles, communication, and decision-making. Summarized here key takeaways from our discussion

Reaffirming company's sense of purpose. The current crisis brought pharma companies to the forefront again. Leaders said that at the onset of this crisis they reiterated to the team and communicated the organization's deep sense of moral purpose. Setting up the right communication ensured that the team was clear about the criticality of their roles and the difference every employee was making. Indian leaders also expressed that while there was initial panic, employees soon came back to manufacturing units. Every organization had examples of employees who had gone out of their way to keep things going.

Making employee safety top priority. All of the leaders underscored that their first priority has been to protect their employees. Indian leaders referred to streamlining operations and working with the government to create standard protocols and a playbook, in case an employee is infected. A top MNC pharma company in China explained how the company split its workforce into two groups, rotating across all shifts, with specific protocols during the shift handover to reduce risks. "We created a few simple steps to maintain accountability and safety. There is a temperature check of employees at regular intervals. Also, we have deployed a crisis management team, which also sanitizes the manufacturing plant every few hours," the leader from China explained.

Repurposing supply chains. While most companies have an existing inventory of APIs to offset short-term supply interruptions, the real struggle is with packaging materials. Many companies in India as well as China are innovating and changing their existing work orders and SOPs to ensure that existing infrastructure is operational and disruptions are actively minimized. “After early disruptions, we worked with the government—including state governments—to allow transportation of packaging materials from different states as well as identified alternate small suppliers locally and ensured the supply chain continuity for medicines is maintained as far as possible,” said one leader.

Trust based leadership. The COVID-19 global pandemic is also creating introspective moments for leaders who are guiding their businesses through uncharted territory. This includes collaborating among peers, pooling resources such as logistics and transportation, and making recommendations to public sector leaders. This crisis has been a wake-up call for leaders, with an emphasis now on democratic, quick decision-making. “The biggest realization for us has been that while regular decision making is typically centralized, you have to rely and trust the team handling operations across locations,” one leader shared. “This has been a positive learning process for the leadership team—at organizational and personal levels.”

In conclusion, all participants stressed the importance of having cross-functional taskforces that have three characteristics - agile, responsive and resourceful.

One leader spoke about having a task force that is also communicating transparently about possible outcomes. “We have recently developed a team with different functional leaders across the, ExCo, HR, Manufacturing, Quality and Corporate Communication, which is documenting a detailed emergency response plan across four different scenarios,” a leader explained. “While we cannot be exacting on what will happen, communicating the possible scenarios has helped employees prepare for possibilities and not be in the dark.”

What was evident across the conversation was the pharma industry’s commitment toward keeping operations going, exercising collaboration, and having a sense of purposeful commitment. These leaders represented positive spirit while working under many constraints, acknowledging that their organizations are necessary contributors during the crisis.

For more information, contact:



Sonny Iqbal
New Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai
sonny.iqbal@egonzehnder.com



Niveditha Viswanathan
Bangalore
niveditha.viswanathan@egonzehnder.com

Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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