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Managing a pharma company during three crises: lessons learned for Covid-19

By Mahesh Karande

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Civil unrest gripped Egypt for much of 2013. Here, protesters carry a spare tire and chant slogans against then-president Mohammed Morsi. *AP Photo/Nasser Nasser*

When I started working in the biopharma industry 20 or so years ago, I didn't think I would need to become an expert in crisis management. Yet during the past decade, I have found myself leading the corporate response to three very different existential crises in three different regions.

Despite the unique aspects of each situation, they share important commonalities that shed some light on actions and attitudes that can help guide

and improve corporate leaders' response to the coronavirus pandemic, in the United States and globally.

Upheaval in Egypt

When revolution struck in 2013, I was in charge of Novartis Pharmaceutical's operations in Egypt. As Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood [were overthrown in a military takeover](#)[2] and Morsi was jailed, random violence was exploding everywhere. There was no lockdown because there was no government. As people continued to go to work, the biggest issue for Novartis was accounting for its people.

How can you take care of your team against the backdrop of random violence? When all indicators pointed to the imminence of the crisis, I hired an ex-police colonel to be our corporate security officer. During the upheaval, his leverage helped us set up an emergency infrastructure to send messages to and gather responses from 2,000-plus employees spread across Egypt. After every violent incident, this two-way system, which included voicemail, let us determine within two hours where everyone was and if they were safe. This simple, practical system allowed management to maintain contact with all employees. And perhaps more importantly, this communication in a chaotic time made the staff feel safe and cared for.

The important lesson I learned was the tremendous value of two-way communication driven by genuine empathy and care for people's safety in a time of crisis.

Ebola in Western Africa

A year later, I took charge of Novartis' business throughout Africa. Although I lived in South Africa, the teams I worked with spanned the continent. In February 2014, an [Ebola outbreak](#)[5] began in Western Africa; by August the World Health Organization had declared it a Public Health Emergency of

International Concern, meaning that it had the potential to spread internationally.

The realities of life in Africa — lack of infrastructure, extreme poverty, and lack of access to medical treatment and medicines, to name a few — compounded the challenges of keeping our employees safe and our business afloat. With long distances diminishing our ability to get material help from the outside or from our Swiss headquarters, I realized that the only practical way to manage the situation was to work locally with the leadership team.

Our priority was to keep Novartis employees safe from this deadly scourge. We put in place work-from-home policies and mobilized to ensure that everyone had adequate supplies of safety care kits — face masks, wipes, sanitizer, and the like. In executing our plan, we focused on maintaining simplicity of direction and action, which is essential during a crisis.

We leveraged our IT system's chat capability to maintain consistent and frequent two-way communication to quickly receive any feedback of local incidents, align and account for about 400 people spread across 46 countries. With it we were able to reach and account for everyone within two hours.

There are lessons here for any organization working to maintain operations and some level of normalcy during this current pandemic. Leaders need to care and look out for their most vulnerable members first, have a practical view of things, then align their approach across all their departments. Again, clear purpose and two-way communications allowing feedback from staff about experiences on the ground are of paramount importance, both to ensure the well-being of staff as well as to allow the organization to formulate appropriate policy and decision-making locally and quickly.

Global oil crisis and lesson from Angola

Between 2014 and 2016, the [global oil crisis](#)[7] essentially shut down the economies of many countries in Africa: six of the top eight of Novartis's

largest African businesses were decimated. In cash-strapped Angola, where we were trying to establish a foothold, thousands of people faced an imminent health threat during the rainy season without my company's malaria drug. The country's minister of health asked me to contribute $5 million worth of our anti-malaria medication, with an unspoken likelihood that the company would never be repaid.

After searching for solutions in unconventional places, I was able to leverage a little-known Swiss policy that allowed a large Swiss insurance company to work with the Swiss government to underwrite a $5 million shipment within a week. We were able to take advantage of this as a Swiss company dealing with a critical issue in an emerging market.

The lesson? In an emergency, it's essential to investigate all options: step back from the status quo and consider how to alleviate suffering by thinking out of the box.

Lessons for the coronavirus pandemic

Despite their differences, the three crises Novartis and I faced in the developing world have clear takeaways for the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Empathy is key. Companies must put people first, both to protect their staff members as well as to find creative ways to help others who are affected. Stepping outside the box can reveal unconventional funding sources, whether it is private-government collaborations or something as simple as a GoFundMe campaign for workers displaced by Covid-19.

Institute clear, transparent, and direct two-way communication. Demonstrating transparency from the top through communications that allow — and encourage — feedback from the staff help build trust that the leadership will make good decisions for them and the business. Employees need to know that they are being considered in decisions and are being taken care of.

Aim for simplicity and practicality. Straightforward solutions that go directly to the problems experienced by those most affected by the crisis will do the most to help keep staff safe and maintain business continuity. Practical, simple solutions are most likely to be effective and remembered.

Lead by example. In Egypt, I needed to maintain a visible physical presence to control an otherwise chaotic and dangerous situation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I can set the best example by practicing [prescribed social distancing](#)[10] as a way to protect the staff, as well as myself.

Crises, of course, don't recognize natural or national borders. And as much as economic and political turmoil in one region can have global repercussions, pathogens such as Ebola and Covid-19 have shown us that disease is the ultimate equalizer and unifier.

We need to look out for everyone with equality and fairness because quite literally we are all in this together.

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