

Sharing China experience on dealing with COVID-19 Outbreak

This document is a systematic account of the BCCC's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in China. We hope it may serve as reference and provide context for other Chambers/ organisations that are now experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic.

* We don't present this to you as the only or the most complete response, I encourage you to read other advice so you can mitigate the risk of the virus and understand exactly what is happening and how best to react.

Objective:

BCCC adopted a holistic approach based on Human-Centered Actions. It was not a case of 'keep calm and carry on' – but '**keep calm and react based on evidence and data**'.

1. How did we keep safe during the outbreak
2. How did the Chamber shift our model to become responsive and proactive to the COVID-19 outbreak?
3. What was the role of Internal / External Communications?
4. Long term planning as next steps as a chamber in China

The BCCC contingency plan was updated and adapted for the COVID-19 response. We continue to review our contingency plan on a bi-weekly basis and update staff and members.

1) How did we keep staff safe during the outbreak?

Take rapid and concrete action based on government advice and pro-actively and regularly engage with employees and our members. Making sure everyone was aware of office and HR policies:

Team welfare - WHO produced daily updates, which we deemed the most reliable source for understanding the outbreak from a health perspective (not socio-economic impacts), so adopted their advice/ policies. We strongly encouraged all staff to adhere to social distancing regulations.

Implement remote working and engage regularly - It was decided a remote working policy would be implemented until further notice and all meetings would be conducted via zoom. Business continuity plans were put in place, we set up a daily 10am check in call, team members submitted their daily and weekly work plan to keep them motivated and on task. Throughout the outbreak, we have implemented maximum flexibility for staff, this was important for those with children not in school and those personnel not in Beijing.

Set clear/ realistic expectations & goals – Working remotely can add distractions and complications especially for those struggling with childcare, so our agreed approach was that the Chamber would be goal not activity orientated. Each person created a weekly tasks/ assignments/ 'to do list' to keep everyone motivated and on track, for certain members with children flexibility was factored into their work plan. We reviewed during work calls and discussed any challenges the team were facing.

Welfare of employees vs. productivity – The situation has evolved daily therefore, we constantly managed the mental welfare of employees, making sure they had a support network to deliver on work but also stay resilient during this time.

Legal / HR policies – This was dictated by the Chinese government so the team followed and adapted to adhere to government regulations. We checked new HR policies on a weekly basis and continued to update staff.

How did the situation for staffing evolve?

Phase one (week 1-2 of the outbreak):

We implemented new workplace procedures (during this time everyone was still working at the office)

****This should immediately be implemented to reduce risk****

- Stay home if they have respiratory symptoms (coughing, sneezing, shortness of breath) and/or a temperature above 37 degrees. Leave work if they develop these symptoms while at the workplace.
- Shield coughs and sneezes with a tissue, elbow, or shoulder (not the bare hands).
- Wash hands often with antibacterial soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid shaking hands entirely to reduce the risk of spreading infection. (Though that might be awkward at times, it's an increasingly common practice in hospitals and clinics.)
- Cancel meetings or events in the short term.

Phase two (week 2 onwards): We implemented a work from home policy, all staff to use zoom for meetings and coordination.

Phase three (week 8 onwards): Gradual return to the office for staff based on a rota system (50% capacity each day, remaining staff work from home). Strict guidance on environmental cleaning was implemented at the office. Staff are encouraged to monitor temperature and not use public transport to come to the office.

2) How did the Chamber shift our model to become responsive and proactive during the COVID-19 outbreak?

BCCC's work has a large focus on offline activities (events/ meetings/ roundtables) so we pivoted our approach to support membership through online activities.

Surveys – Conducted a survey to measure the impact of the virus on business operation, this allowed us to fully understand the situation and the issues being faced by businesses, we adapted our support service to business needs and inform authorities what businesses needed support on. These surveys positioned the Chamber as the go to organisation to understand business as well as positive engagement from membership that we reacted to their needs.

Webinars - As we can no longer host offline events, we are using a cooperate Zoom account to host webinars on a range of topic (not just on COVID-19) and respond to the needs of members. These webinars are well received and attended. (So far speakers include, Ambassador to China, UK trade Commissioner, Chinese Ambassdor to the UK etc.).

Use the Chamber to amplify not replicate – We created a dedicated Webpage, which attempts to cut through the clutter to deliver the most up to date and relevant information for British business in market (Healthcare information and business continuity support)

<https://www.britishchamber.cn/en/about-us/novel-coronavirus-outbreak-information-page/>

Weekly coordination with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China) and the Department of International Trade (HMG) to understand the situation and adapt accordingly - The Chamber took a leading role in coordinating with relevant government ministries to understand the evolving government regulations and how this applied to our staff/ members. This information would be shared on a regular basis through our communication channels.

SME support - It became very clear SME's were the most vulnerable and would be severely impacted. We worked with members to understand the key issues, and then coordinated with the local authorities and the UK government on relief measures specifically; fiscal, tax, financing and HR.

Community mobilization – We promoted members to think local and buy British. The major issues for SME's (especially F&B, retail, leisure, hospitality) is cash flow so we wanted to practically support business through much needed tangible sales or simply brand awareness.

Annual Planning – As some of our day to day activities have been halted, we used this period to work on longer term projects, tasks that need time, e.g. Website updates.

3) What was the role of Internal / External Communications?

Internal communication - This has already been touched upon but timely internal communication played a significant role in coordinating our crisis response and also keeping staff regularly informed on COVID-19 updates.

External communication – All Chamber communication channels (newsletter, WeChat, LinkedIn and Twitter) were used to regularly inform (every 1-2 days) members of new chamber policies, new membership services and relevant information to support business during the outbreak. We also engaged in increased media interviews to amplify the challenges British businesses are facing in China and advocate for support.

4) Long term planning and next steps as a chamber in China - Return staff to the office

- Avoid travelling during peak hours
- Stagger work rotas
- Take all precautions (masks, gloves, hand wash)
- 1 meter distance between staff
- Continue to host meetings and events online until further notice.

Positive lessons (it's not all doom and gloom!)

- **Ability to think creatively about events**, increasing our scope and reach. Using zoom for webinars has allowed the Chamber to interact with a wider audience and further advocate for British business, allowing us to host webinars with individuals/ organisations to which we couldn't previously interact as we just hosted offline events.
- **Build resilience in the team**. As a team we have discovered we are very adaptable and resilient! The outbreak has opened our eyes to remote working and the flexibility this can offer. As a Chamber we've seen remote working is possible and staff can still be very productive. Going forward we will introduce more remote working for staff.
- **We've created even stronger bonds with our members**. Working with our membership in support and solidarity through this difficult time has helped us grow together and build even strong relationships meaning members are even keener to work with us!

- Finally, we have **strengthened relationship with government**, through our proactive actions during the outbreak, the Chamber has strengthened our position as the conduit between business and government.

Strong end to the year

Financial Implications – For the last 3 months (Chinese New Year Included) the Chamber has been running at a deficit due to ordinary overheads (wages/ rent) outweighing our income. We haven't had event/ sponsorship revenue and membership renewals/ sign ups has paused as companies scrambled to respond and implement their own contingency plans.

However, during this time we have together with our members methodically planned for a condensed 2020 schedule with even more exciting events/ programmes, that will help generate higher earnings (through agreed sponsorship) and mitigate the impacts from the outbreak.

Any advice you would give to help leaders here that will help them?

Three key principles be reactive, proactive and creative, at the outset be very clear with policies/ procedures, organisational goals and mentality. The situation changes on a daily basis so be compassionate and implement maximum flexibility for staff, this is critical for those with children not in school and those personnel not in Beijing. Create a routine, its vital you look after yourself and have internal calm so you can look after others, keep everyone motivated (push people when they need direction and give people slack when they need it), from my experience everyone will be panicked so channel this nervous energy into productivity.