RISK ALERT:

WE SOLVE — WEBER SHANDWICK

COMMUNICATING WITH GLOBAL WORKFORCES
ABOUT CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

THE GLOBAL HEALTH AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK REQUIRES THAT COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS URGENTLY PLAN AND UPDATE SCENARIOS THAT MAY IMPACT THEIR BUSINESS OPERATIONS

including how to communicate with governments, customers, shareholders, suppliers and employees. The epidemic is evolving into a more serious disruption of global business every day, as additional countries report cases, governments impose new travel mandates, restrictions and quarantines are enforced, business events are cancelled, and supply chains and commerce are interrupted. Even companies that have not yet felt an impact on their business should be preparing now for different scenarios so that communications protocols and strategies are in place and can be rapidly deployed at the first impact on operations.

Every company's focus should begin with their people. This is a human health crisis, first and foremost, and a company's most valuable asset is the safety and wellbeing of its workforce. This starts with providing trusted information, policies and guidelines to employees across the enterprise on a regular basis. But as the epidemic worsens and widens, this will not be enough.

GLOBAL COMPANIES SHOULD CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING
RECOMMENDATIONS IN NAVIGATING COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS THEIR ENTERPRISE:

+ **Build trust through transparency and empathy.** Create a safe environment that puts your people's wellbeing ahead of business interests. Equip leaders and managers with key talking points for reducing stigma and addressing employee questions and concerns, as well as best practices for limiting risk (ensuring good personal hygiene, staying home when unwell, etc.). Encourage transparent discussions among leaders and their teams by role modelling open dialogue on the topic from the top at existing Town Halls or All Hands meetings. By creating a trusting and caring space, employees will be more comfortable to come forward if they're not well, take time off when they need it, and help find solutions for team members who may be impacted.

+ **Provide accessible, timely, reliable information.** Understandably, there is a lot of speculation and sharing of information about this coronavirus outbreak. Employees will naturally be talking about this within their working relationships so ensure they are armed with reliable, accurate information. Establish a resource page on your intranet or group messaging app that provides links to trusted sources of news and information, lists of contacts and support services, FAQs, and updates on any travel restrictions or company guidance if there is impact to your organization. For employees who aren't at desks, set up information stations in high visibility areas and offer a clear point of contact for people can go to with questions or concerns.

+ **Establish and/or update protocols for connecting employees with the support they need.**
Review and update protocols for handling any potential business disruptions, policies for flexible work arrangements, and approaches to protecting the health of others. You may need to allow for greater flexibility and additional modes of support if multiple members of your team become affected. Remember that hourly workers will be significantly impacted if they need to stop working, so be mindful of this and support them where you can in finding ways to cope with the unexpected loss of income. Identify and address gaps in remote working technology, mobile access and any other channels you use to reach employees. You may need to offer quick refreshers or new training for employees who don't regularly use virtual collaboration tools.

+ **Create a proactive communications plan and review internal communications channels.**
Prepare basic key messages and a plan to cascade them in response to various scenarios so that you have a pre-approved process ready to go along with ready-to-update materials should you need to communicate updates quickly to your employees. Remember to consider employees across all locations – from offices to factories, and those in the field. Now is the time to consider if you need to conduct an internal communications audit to make sure you can deliver information consistently and accurately throughout your entire organization in a timely way.

+ **Give employees a way to help.** Whether or not someone is personally impacted, they may be feeling helpless and want to get involved. Creating space for them to contribute and connecting them to your own company's CSR programs or to trusted partners will help offer purpose and can positively impact engagement.

Above all, the potential impact of COVID-19 should not be minimized. Instead, providing clear and timely communications about possible risks to employees and your operations and associated mitigation strategies will be critical to limiting disruption – and ensuring the wellbeing of your people. Several resources are available to help support ongoing communication, many of which can found through the following trusted sources of news and information:

+ World Health Organization [who.int/]
+ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [cdc.gov/]
+ National Institutes of Health [nih.gov/]
+ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control [ecdc.europa.eu/en/home]
+ Singapore's Ministry of Health [moh.gov.sg/]

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