McKinsey & Company

Re-energizing through the epidemic: Stories from China

A survey of China-based executives sheds light on the personal impact of working through the COVID-19 crisis.

Haimeng Zhang, Tianwen Yu, Bernie Yang, Lihong Pan

Executives engaged in the fight against COVID-19 face tough challenges, not only in terms of decision making, but also their ability to manage their own energy and outlook. China-based workers were the first to face this challenge, often while juggling the demands of home life as a result of office closures and remote working policies.

Now, the rest of the world is being plunged into a similar predicament, with lockdown conditions forcing frontline staff and executives alike to work out of their home office. With an eye to helping company leaders sustain their effectivqeness in such difficult circumstances, McKinsey surveyed 1,300 China-based executives about the personal impact of working through the crisis.

The survey asked senior management, middle management, and frontline staff in a cross-section of industries more than a dozen questions about the impact of COVID-19 on their working lives and energy levels, and how they dealt with the change in routine. Alongside the questionnaire, which was conducted in March 2020, we also interviewed 10 executives in industries including automotive, real estate, pharmaceutical, and manufacturing to source deeper perspectives on their individual experiences.

This survey offers insights into the stresses and pain points China-based workers faced, as well as tips and solutions for how best to cope.
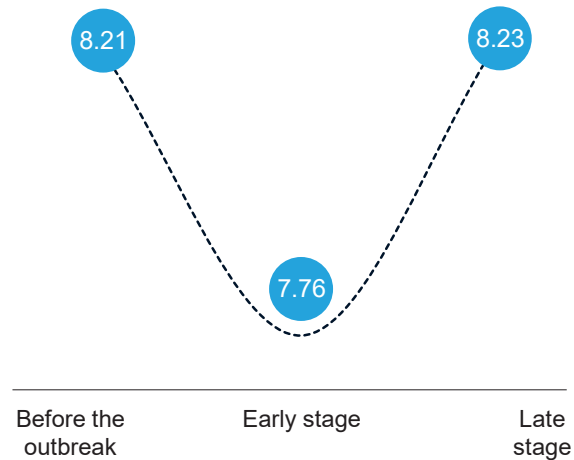
Here are four ways leaders can make better decisions for themselves, their organizations, and

Exhibit 1

Personal energy changes before and during the crisis

Average energy value

Total # of respondents = 1,300

Before the outbreak — 8.21
Early stage — 7.76
Late stage — 8.23

Top 5 reasons for weaker energy

The boundary between work and life blurred	30%
Anxiety deepened as the epidemic unfolded	28%
Telecommuting unsuitable for work flow	25%
Concerned over business prospects as corporate or department performance declined	24%
Distracted by demands and interruptions at home	23%

Source: Survey on Centered Leadership and Agile Work during the Coronavirus Epidemic in China, conducted March 12 - 18, 2020
"Early stage" refers to the period from late January to late February; "Late stage" refers to the period following late February

their families during this unprecedented crisis.

1. Manage your energy

According to our survey, the stress of working through COVID-19 sapped worker energy levels. Respondents said their energy fell steadily from the onset of the crisis, bottomed out in mid-February, but then returned to normal as effective strategies emerged at both corporate and national level. (Exhibit 1)

The blurring of work and home life was the leading cause of lower energy levels (30 percent), followed by pandemic-related anxiety (28 percent).
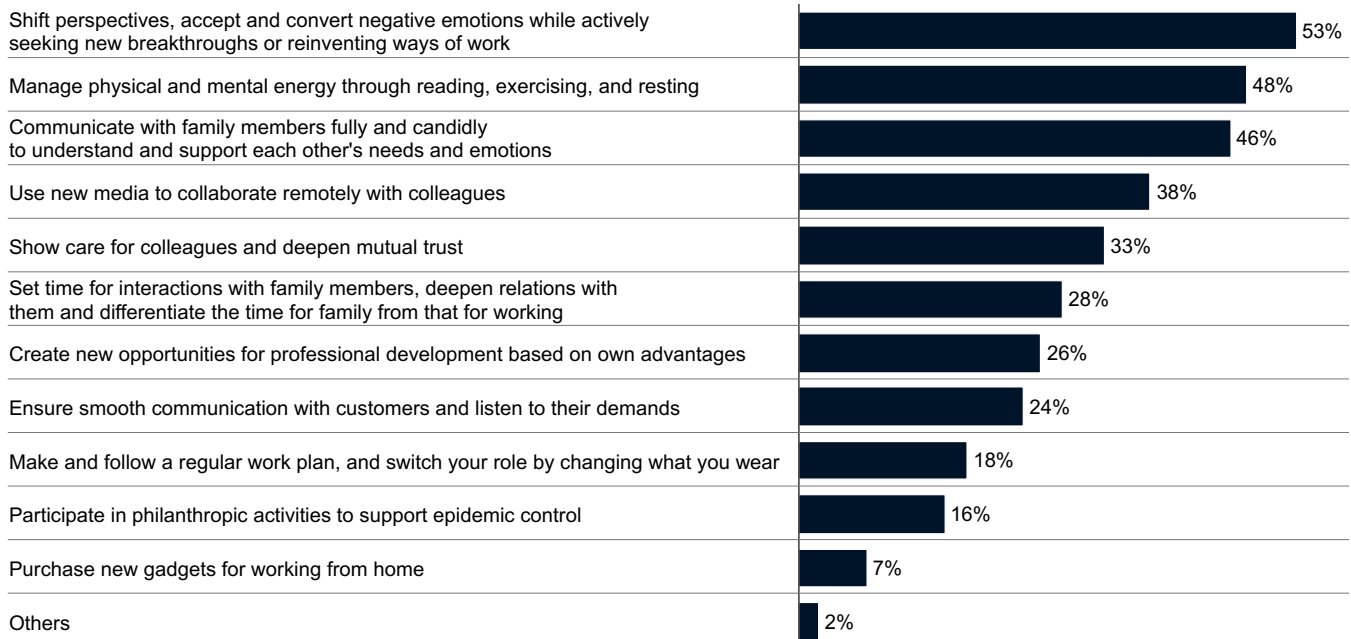
Business leaders outside China are likely suffering similar stresses, and are potentially in danger of experiencing fatigue, having difficulty concentrating, or suffering from burnout. Fortunately, it is possible to maintain energy levels and reduce the negative impacts of working from home by applying the following principles, beginning with techniques to manage your energy and maintain a positive outlook: (Exhibit 2)

Exhibit 2

Effective approaches to energy management

Total # of respondents = 1,300

Approaches to energy management

Approach	%
Shift perspectives, accept and convert negative emotions while actively seeking new breakthroughs or reinventing ways of work	53%
Manage physical and mental energy through reading, exercising, and resting	48%
Communicate with family members fully and candidly to understand and support each other's needs and emotions	46%
Use new media to collaborate remotely with colleagues	38%
Show care for colleagues and deepen mutual trust	33%
Set time for interactions with family members, deepen relations with them and differentiate the time for family from that for working	28%
Create new opportunities for professional development based on own advantages	26%
Ensure smooth communication with customers and listen to their demands	24%
Make and follow a regular work plan, and switch your role by changing what you wear	18%
Participate in philanthropic activities to support epidemic control	16%
Purchase new gadgets for working from home	7%
Others	2%

Source: Survey on Centered Leadership and Agile Work during the Coronavirus Epidemic in China, conducted March 12 -18, 2020

Stories from the frontlines: Finding value in remote work

While working from home, the sales vice president of a large real estate company gained a unique opportunity to communicate more deeply with her husband, children, and parents. Sharing views on the news while keeping each other going during the outbreak deepened their family bonds. Moreover, she believes that while business suffered during the lockdown period, her company will take positives from the experience: "We've established a habit of working online and communicating remotely, which will save us a lot of time and travel-related expense in future," she said. "Even frontline sales teams forced to deal with clients online achieved impressive results, instilling the confidence to continue with the remote model after the epidemic."

Energize the body

Almost half of respondents said they sustained energy levels by taking small breaks to exercise, read, or rest. Other "micro recovery" techniques include 10-minute meditation sessions in the mornings and evenings. These aim to identify physical discomfort by mentally scanning the body, allowing breathing to deepen and relax, as you check each part of yourself in sequence. Whatever technique you use, it is essential to have a means of breaking from the working routine while keeping yourself active.

Communicate with family

Aside from keeping yourself in shape, open and honest communication with family helps sustain emotional energy, according to 46 percent of our sample. Almost all respondents said that the quality of communication and intimacy with their family

(spouse, parents, and children) greatly improved in the mid- and late-stages of the epidemic.

Conserve mental energy

Focusing intensely on the epidemic, whether it's monitoring the latest news or government measures, or even discussing the impact of the crisis with friends, can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. Over time, your ability to concentrate on epidemic-related work will weaken as your mind seeks respite. When this happens, take 10-12 minutes to exercise, listen to music, or watch an entertaining or relaxing video. Doing this periodically can help declutter your mind and allow you to concentrate for longer stretches of time.

2. Find meaning

Aside from replenishing your physical, mental, and emotional energies, it's also helpful to tap into the meaning you derive from your work. McKinsey research identifies five sources of meaning in work: societal, organizational/corporate, client/target, team, and personal. Usually, company leaders focus on society and the organization, while their employees identify more closely with the latter three elements.

However, our research suggests the COVID-19 pandemic is galvanizing entire organizations as their work becomes essential to keeping society and the economy afloat. The sense of purpose and drive many are finding as a result of the outbreak, whether it be working on the frontlines of the healthcare response, or around the clock to keep companies in business and staff employed, instills the motivation to rise to crisis-related challenges.

For example, the CEO of a leading pharmaceutical company said that when the Hubei province capital of Wuhan was locked down, she organized a cross-divisional emergency team to fight the epidemic. The team helped fast-track approval of a drug that improves immune systems, and mobilized supply

chain resources to ensure patients in Wuhan could receive essential drugs. They also cooperated with digital companies to build free, online virtual clinics, enabling remote diagnosis and treatment. "The outbreak highlighted our value to the public, making me proud to be part of the healthcare industry," she said, adding that the sense of meaning inspired by the battle against the epidemic also made her team more passionate, and brought them closer together.

Pursue meaningful work

The CEO found a sense of meaning and spiritual energy from epidemic-fighting and charity work. If you want to identify the meaning of your work, try posing this question: "Where does my sense of meaning/value come from?" Look back on your career and recall the moments that you are most proud of, or that made you feel most accomplished or content. Try recalling the details: What did you do? What did others say to you? How did you feel? Deep dive into the key factors that make you proud or fulfilled: Is it being recognized, deploying your capabilities and strengths, building sincere relationships, or contributing to the welfare and development of others?

Once the source of meaning is identified, consider whether you have devoted enough time and energy into work that delivers this sense of meaning. If not, formulate a plan to adjust your way of working to make sure you feel fulfilled.

Create meaning

This example illustrates a larger truth: that employees can derive a sense of meaning in their work once they realize the contribution their company makes to society. The epidemic consequently represents an opportunity to lift company morale and motivation. In the late- and post-epidemic stages, it is worth considering how to position your organization so that it continues to contribute to society and community, in the process offering a source of spiritual energy for you and your team.

Our survey indicates that a majority of China-based employees are aware of or have participated in corporate social responsibility activities related to the COVID-19 outbreak, including giving donations or providing volunteer services. Senior executives tend to engage most deeply in such activities. (Exhibit 3) The challenge is to disseminate the sense of meaning and value derived from that participation as deeply as possible through the company.

Exhibit 3

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives during the COVID-19 outbreak in China

Most respondents said their companies engaged in CSR actions related to the outbreak; senior executives engaged most deeply

Total # of respondents = 1,300

Q: Has your company taken actions to perform its social responsibilities during the outbreak, such as giving donations and providing volunteer services? What about yourself?
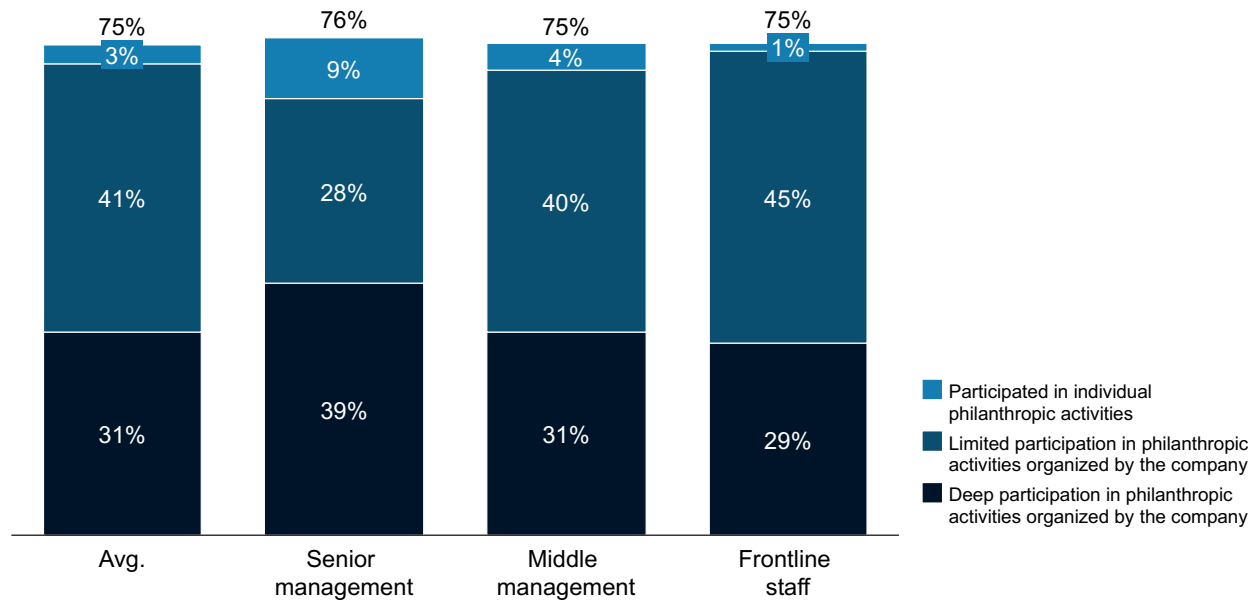
Source: Survey on Centered Leadership and Agile Work during the Coronavirus Epidemic in China conducted on March 12 - 18, 2020

3. Get creative

Accepting negative emotions and channeling them into new ways of thinking was the primary means by which China-based workers maintained their energy amid the epidemic, according to our survey. However, processing the torrent of epidemic-related information limits our capability to change perspective. Follow these tips to maintain a positive outlook:

Focus on solutions

Seeking the reasons for why something happened, who was to blame, or which procedures failed, only serves to limit our thinking and generate negative energy. Instead, ask solution-based questions to help change perspective. These might include, "What can I do to improve epidemic-prevention measures, prepare the company to resume work, or marshal resources to address the problem?" Assessing what you can do as an individual, and

what support you might need to hit your target—not to mention what you might learn from the experience of accomplishing the task at hand—all help develop a positive attitude.

4. Engage and connect

The daily deluge of COVID-19 news is distracting, making it easy to lose track of your priorities. However, the following process can help you define meaningful work targets, and stay on track to achieving them.

Set positive aspirations

We often respond to our environments instead of taking active control of our lives because we are unable or unwilling to identify our aspirations for life and work. Try to understand your aspirations more clearly by asking yourself the question, "What do I want today?" or "What do I want from tomorrow?"

Stay focused

Frequently review what you are focusing on, and whether this aligns with your aspirations. For example, did you spend a lot of time on menial work instead of addressing a harder but more rewarding task? If you stray off course, ask what can you do to rectify the problem. Over time, this process should become a habit that keeps you safe from distraction.

Build relationships

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, employees will inevitably feel anxious and insecure about their job prospects. Such circumstances provide a perfect opportunity for leaders to reframe a potentially difficult time as an opportunity to build deeper trust with staff, customers, and family.

With the widespread imposition of remote working policies, 53 percent said they had spent more time with their families than they usually would, with the tendency most pronounced among senior

Stories from the frontlines: Coordinating an epidemic response from home

At 5 p.m. on Monday, February 17, the head of the passenger vehicle department of a large auto group was under pressure to keep his staff safe, and arrest a significant slide in performance related to the COVID-19 outbreak. "We had six colleagues in Hubei whose work was severely impacted, and we were very concerned about their health and safety, as well as that of their families," the department head said. "I had a call with the company president the night before the meeting, but we failed to pin down a recovery strategy. Colleagues were also anxious about the prospects for the company and our department." Meanwhile, as he prepared to lead a video conference call on epidemic response and management with his team, the remote working model imposed as a result of China's nationwide lockdown posed challenges of a different nature. "My son, who is in first grade, would interrupt me; my wife was also occupied with remote work; and my parents, who had come to Shanghai for the Lunar New Year, were unhappy that I had locked myself in the study, and did not have time to do house work or communicate with them."

management (73 percent). Twenty percent said they had spent less time with family.

The impact on family relationships was primarily positive, with 35 percent of respondents suggesting they have become closer to their families than before the outbreak. They said the experience deepened mutual understanding of working roles and difficulties, while providing more scope to care for and play with loved ones. The threat to health posed by the outbreak also reinforced the importance of family. (Exhibit 4)

However, working from home is not without its challenges. "My son, who is in first grade, would interrupt me; my wife was also occupied with remote work; and my parents, who had come to Shanghai for the Lunar New Year, were unhappy that I had locked myself in the study, and did not have time to do house work or communicate with them," said the head of the passenger vehicle department of a large auto group.
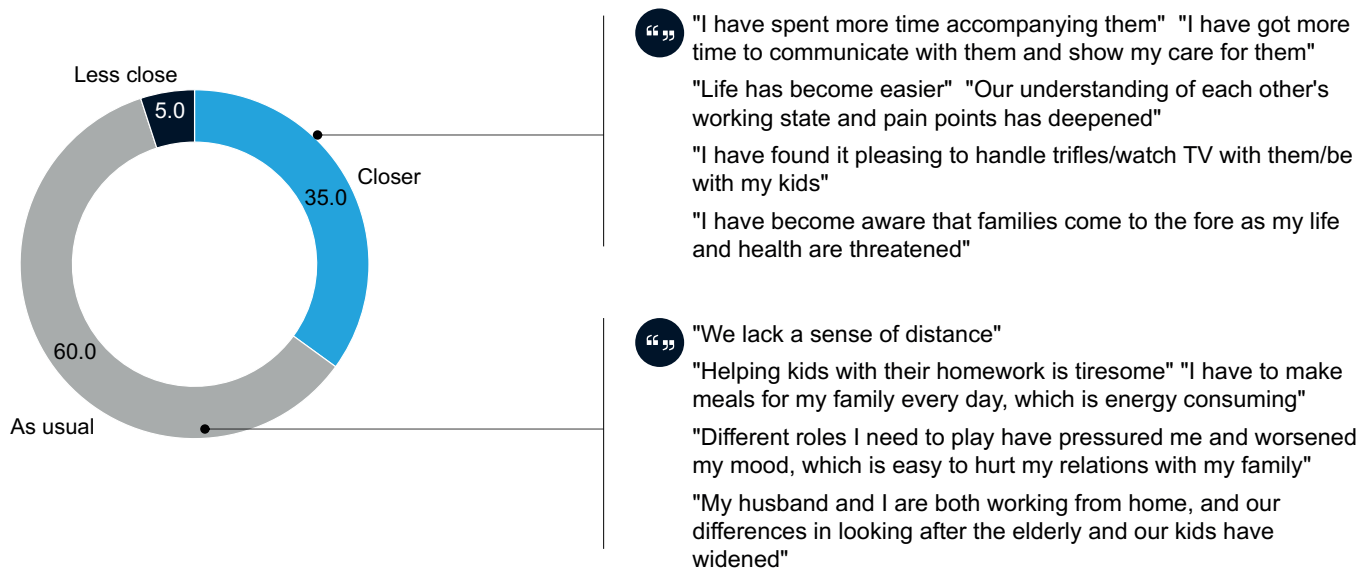
Navigating the COVID-19 crisis will likely be among the sternest tests company leaders have ever faced in their working lives, demanding an unprecedented degree of personal discipline and focus. By following the steps outlined here, business leaders may be better equipped to navigate the crisis.

Exhibit 4

Changes in family relationships during the COVID-19 crisis

Total # of respondents = 1,300

Q: What changes did you experience in your relationships with your family during the outbreak, compared with before the epidemic?

Less close 5.0

Closer 35.0

As usual 60.0

"I have spent more time accompanying them" "I have got more time to communicate with them and show my care for them"

"Life has become easier" "Our understanding of each other's working state and pain points has deepened"

"I have found it pleasing to handle trifles/watch TV with them/be with my kids"

"I have become aware that families come to the fore as my life and health are threatened"

"We lack a sense of distance"

"Helping kids with their homework is tiresome" "I have to make meals for my family every day, which is energy consuming"

"Different roles I need to play have pressured me and worsened my mood, which is easy to hurt my relations with my family"

"My husband and I are both working from home, and our differences in looking after the elderly and our kids have widened"

Source: Survey on Centered Leadership and Agile Work amid the Coronavirus Epidemic in China, conducted March 12 - 18, 2020