



# WUHAN SMART START: LESSONS IN DEDICATION AND LEADERSHIP

**EMPLOYEES AT THE WUHAN DONGFENG GETRAG PLANT FACED A DILEMMA WHEN THE FACILITY BEGAN A GRADUAL RESTART IN MID-MARCH FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK: CHINESE AUTHORITIES HAD GIVEN THEM PERMISSION TO LEAVE THEIR HOMES, BUT IT WAS UNCLEAR IF THEY COULD RETURN. SO SOME OF THEM PACKED SUITCASES AND HEADED TO THE FACTORY ANYWAY.**

“They came from the shop floor, maintenance and engineering,” recalled Javier Perez, the facility’s executive vice president. “It was incredible dedication. Some of them came to work knowing they couldn’t go home and would have to stay in a company dormitory. We hurried to find blankets to make everybody comfortable.”

Getting those committed employees safely back to work was the biggest challenge following the shutdown at the transmission plant. The outbreak of the virus began in Wuhan, and then quickly spread around the world.

“We were the first ones getting into the problem – and the first ones getting out,” said Perez. “The biggest takeaway from this experience is that’s when you see leadership – the leadership of each individual who is willing to do whatever it takes to go forward. It was a real sense of community.”

The 800 employees who attended the plant’s annual dinner party and talent show on January 20 had little inkling of what would become a global pandemic and an economic crisis. As a precaution that day, Perez and other managers handed out masks and took temperatures before several employee performances that included comedy sketches and a traditional dragon dance. One week later, authorities closed down Wuhan for two months.

During that period, Perez and his partner, General Manager Xiaochuan Xia, were confined to their homes, like others, by government order, but spoke on the phone every day planning the restart. The support and global reach of Magna helped them to navigate the crisis.



China facilities Smart Restart video



**JAVIER PEREZ (RIGHT)**, Executive vice president and **XIAOCHUAN XIA**, General Manager Wuhan Dongfeng Getrag

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and then sent some donations of personal protective equipment,” Perez said. “The phone calls from Germany and the U.S. started. It was, ‘How can we help? Do you need anything?’ Tom Rucker, the president of Magna Powertrain contacted me directly. I felt that Magna people were genuinely concerned.”

In return, Magna’s Wuhan staff began sharing best practices on the successful restart with other Magna facilities around the world – and even returned the favor to the plant in Bari by supporting Magna in sending personal protection equipment when the virus hit Italy.

On April 8, government restrictions in China were fully lifted and the Wuhan plant officially resumed production with new protocols in place, including an isolation room for sick employees, social distancing and daily temperature checks. Employees have returned to their homes and unpacked their suitcases, but have not let down their guard.

“At the personal and professional level, we have not relaxed,” Perez said. “We know there could be a second wave.”

But he is confident that the plant’s strong workplace culture can handle just about any crisis.

“We proved it with COVID-19,” Perez said. “People were willing to do whatever they had to do to show we could beat it.”

## DECIDING TO STAY

When the Argentinian embassy contacted Javier Perez with the offer of an evacuation flight back to his homeland during the COVID-19 crisis, almost hourly discussions began with his wife Joy. Should they stay in Wuhan with their infant son Allan and four-year-old daughter Cecilia or should they leave? Most of the 60 expatriate families in their Wuhan neighborhood had fled.

Perez, the executive vice president of the Wuhan Dongfeng Getrag plant, found himself grappling with a dual challenge.

“I wanted to be the best that I could for the company and the best that I could for my family,” he said.

The long flight to Buenos Aires included a stopover in the Ukraine, which refused to accept Chinese nationals at the time. Perez’s wife is Chinese. She urged him to take the kids and leave. But he refused.

“I’m so happy that we made the priority staying together as a family,” he said. “Personally, this changed me a lot. I realized we don’t need to go to Disneyland to have fun. We can be very creative in how we play and how we support each other. My cooking has improved, too. And I didn’t have to separate my life from the company.”



**JAVIER PEREZ**, Executive vice president  
Wuhan Dongfeng Getrag and family

