



Our Communication And Semantics Change Perception And Culture.



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Lauterbach: How did you become a CEO?

Wagner: I spent my entire career in the automotive industry, first in an international corporation. I became CEO of Fiat Germany and witnessed how, despite delivering top performance, men got promoted over me. I bought out a distressed automotive supplier in South Bavaria and became CEO and entrepreneur. The turnaround succeeded, and I could shape the company's strategy and culture. Being deeply embedded in the automotive sector helped, along with knowledge of accounting and controlling.

Lauterbach: What kind of advice would you give your younger self today?

Wagner: I would have invested more in legal advice, as when you acquire a business in bankruptcy, you spend a lot of time dealing with special provisions, reframing contracts, and negotiating agreements. Still, you can't advise too much on risk. Jumping into entrepreneurship calls for courage. There aren't ways to smooth things, and you must deal with disruption when it comes.

Lauterbach: What is different in leadership today compared to when you first started?

Wagner: The pace of change is unprecedented, and things are coinciding. Culture is a game changer. Decades ago, there was a habit of educated engineers in automotive companies looking down on those working at the assembly lines. When hiring, we received ten to twenty applications for every position. Today, we compete for every engineer and every worker. I don't see a trend of retreating globalization. I see migration and working cross-border becoming integral to OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers). Competition for the workforce goes beyond salaries. As an automotive supplier, we can't pass along significant salary increases to the customers. So we must offer something more than money. It is about education and training opportunities, diversity and inclusion, and bringing women to work. When I first started, there was hidden unemployment in Germany as policymakers issued laws and regulations to keep women home. This must change, because without women, we can't succeed as businesses and as a whole economy.

Lauterbach: How do you address equality and inclusion in your business culture?

Wagner: Treating people with respect and accountability for the culture of equality and inclusion is non-negotiable. I am not talking about German colleagues working side-by-side with Hungarians or Croats. I am addressing differences and biases between Croats and Serbs, Christians and Muslims, and people working in HQs and our Hungarian factory. In Bavaria, we've got 150 people and 18 nationalities. Sensitivity towards biases and the necessity to learn how to

adapt and adjust is something for every person involved in the business.

Lauterbach: Can you teach an organization to change?

Wagner: You must! And you have to lead by example. Every significant cultural shift comes from the top.

Lauterbach: What do you think about gendered language in Germany? Is it a significant factor in reshaping culture?

Wagner: I learned that images in my head shifted when I used gendered language. There is a ton of research about how children perceive occupations and gender, and how talking about female engineers and doctors or male nurses changes what boys and girls want to be when they grow up, just as an example. I wish we wouldn't need to think hard about language, but our communication and semantics change perception and culture.

Lauterbach: What initiatives do you support beyond your role as a CEO for an automotive supplier?

Wagner: We must support entrepreneurship and raise the number of female founders. I systematically organize and support venture capital and angel investing. I am amazed to see such a large number of top women investing in startups and creating new businesses. Technology is a great enabler and a reason to never stop learning.