

Edgar Bachmann, CEO , SOCAR Energy Switzerland

«If you want to convince your environment, you have to lead by example.»

As CEO of Socar Switzerland, Edgar Bachmann should, in theory, have a tunnel vision focused solely on oil as an energy source. But at heart, he is a pioneer who looks far beyond that. For him, «energy» is the real topic, and constant change is the reality. That's why he wants to prepare for the day after tomorrow, starting today.

Mr. Bachmann, what makes a manager a pioneer?

First of all, I'd like to clarify that I don't necessarily see myself as a pioneer.

Because pioneers set impulses that go far beyond the mainstream of business. I see myself as an innovative, dynamic, and open-minded manager. Much of it has to do with a manager's personality. I have an unshakable optimism and I don't like to be shaped by my environment. I prefer to drive my environment rather than be driven by it.

«You have to see things that are not yet real.»

That is probably a basic requirement for an innovative manager: «I always want to be one step ahead.»

For that, you constantly need new visions. You have to see things that are not yet real but could eventually become reality.

I also believe that, as an innovative manager, you need to have an approachable and empathetic personality.

I don't see it that way. It may help. I consider Elon Musk a pioneer — but empathetic?

Admittedly, he is not. But fundamentally, what's needed is the will to shape things. I always tell my team: «I don't want to be driven by the industry; I want to drive the industry.»

Were you able to do that?

I believe so. I may not be a classic pioneer, but I recognize trends very early on. I didn't invent e-mobility, but I saw early on that you cannot close yourself off to it. In 2012, when we started with SOCAR in Switzerland, we developed a vision in which we deliberately used the word «energy» instead of «oil». At the time, that was quite a significant step in our industry and for the company.

«A step into the complete unknown is something I enjoy.»

And in the same year, we decided to build fast-charging stations. At that time, it was a step into the complete unknown. I enjoy things like that. We made an impact in the mobility industry.



Did it pay off as well?

Financially, no. That wasn't our goal either. Just recently, we had to discuss a hydrogen project with the shareholder. I couldn't guarantee that it would ever be profitable. But I can guarantee that we will learn something and be part of an important trend.

«Right now, we need the mindset to invest and not stand still.»

Our Group CEO then supported the initiative at the last moment as a «research and development» project. In the fuel station sector, there is not much investment in research anymore – and yet, right now, we need the mindset to invest and not stand still.

The global situation is uncertain. Where do you see opportunities and risks – both personally and for your company?

The privilege of my age (58) is that I have fewer obligations and more freedom than before, and I can prepare myself for a new stage of life. Of course, there's the risk that I might fall into a void once I work less or stop working altogether. But personally, I try to enjoy the positive aspects of life despite all the turbulence.

And what about the global situation?

It worries me, but as an optimist, I am convinced that good will prevail – even if it takes some time. This piece of wisdom, which has carried me through life, was passed on to me by my grandmother.

I try not to let myself be too influenced, even though certain news and events do shock me. For me, it's important to distinguish between the micro and the macro level. The global situation is critical, but I still see Switzerland as being in a strong position.

I see opportunities and challenges for the company as less dependent on the political situation. Our business is quite stable because, regardless of the global situation, people want to stay mobile. The heating market is declining sharply, and that trend will continue.

Are your investments in mobility increasingly shifting toward e-mobility as well?

This transition is underway. I actually see it as an opportunity for us, not a threat.

I am convinced that this is about much more than just better batteries.

I also see opportunities for oil-focused companies to gain a foothold. But it requires a clear strategy. What's important is that we already have a network and can act when something new emerges.

«Perhaps the battery is not the ideal solution for e-mobility.»

You may remember the early days of video cassettes. Back then, there was a debate over VHS, Betamax, or VCR. And just as VHS became the standard, the DVD arrived. A few decades later, it was replaced by streaming.

I consider such leaps in e-mobility to be possible. Perhaps the battery is not the ideal solution for e-mobility. If something happens, we must be ready for it.

How do you keep this readiness, this pioneering spirit, alive?

For me, it has a lot to do with the team. You can be as innovative as you want, but if the team doesn't get on board, nothing will happen. There must be the motivation to contribute something meaningful to the next generation in shaping the world. And this is not limited to pioneers or management.

We have over 800 employees. Among them are some very bright minds.

In a way, yes. I want to bring out the pioneering spirit that already exists within our people.

Exactly.

How do you listen?

My door is always open, and I attend many events. I talk a lot with people, walk through the entire office every day, join meetings, and take every opportunity to exchange ideas – whether over a coffee or a beer. These personal interactions are essential for me.

That's why I'm not a big fan of working from home. Operationally, it might work, but the social culture and innovative power suffer as a result.

Where do your best ideas come from?

That fits with what I just said: I don't have the best ideas alone. They come to me through exchanges with others, in conversations, and in discussions.

If you could wish for anything, what would it be?

Ha! Regarding mobility, it would of course be great if one day we could fly everywhere CO2-neutral and emission-free. Imagine if this afternoon I could just go up to the roof and zip home in 10 minutes by drone or something like that.

I'm even convinced that it will happen one day.

Watch old science fiction movies. Many of the things people imagined back then are reality today.

There's still a lot to come.

Do you have role models?

My role models don't come from the wider world, but from my immediate environment — my family.

My role model was actually my grandmother. A very educated, fascinating, and wise person who imparted a lot of life philosophy to me.

She shaped my outlook on life. She means more to me as a role model than Elon Musk. He may be dynamic and innovative, but that's not enough for me.

How do you deal with fears? Does your fundamental optimism help you with that?

Besides my optimism, my trust in the people around me and my employees is probably another important trait of mine. I have complete confidence in my team. I know things can sometimes go wrong.

When you give someone the benefit of the doubt, you have less fear.

«Personal encounters with my employees are crucial for me.»

When it comes to physical danger, I'm a bit of a scaredy-cat. I'm also afraid of heights, so bungee jumping and things like that aren't really my thing.

But in business, I have no fear when making decisions. Others often have many more concerns, and those are exactly the perspectives I need on the team. Without them, it wouldn't work.

How do you deal with resistance?

If you want to create change, you have to lead by example.

For example: When we decided over 10 years ago to invest in e-infrastructure, it was clear to me that I had to have an electric car — a Hyundai Kona — and a charging station at work — as the CEO of an oil company.

«My grandmother is a better role model for me than Elon Musk.»

I didn't have to explain much — it happened naturally. There were some strong negative reactions, clearly fear responses. Others really warmed up. If you want to convince your environment, you have to lead by example.

And on that note: You have to be willing to repeat important things often — but also able to let other opinions stand without trying to change them.

Interview: thk.