

Mario Räber, Mayor of Besenbüren

«You have to constantly broaden your own horizons.»

Some work on a large scale, trying to change the world. Others apply their commitment in a small municipality of 600 inhabitants. The big doesn't move without the small – that's something Mario Räber knows well, and he is ready to explore new paths.



As mayor of Besenbüren, you are a «top manager on a small scale.» That means you have to develop a pioneering spirit from time to time. What qualities do you believe make a pioneer?

I wonder if I'm really such a great pioneer. I like to try new things and also try to take new or different paths. I'm not alone in this either; many solutions arise through constructive discussions in the municipal council or with the administration. Ultimately, even in a small municipality, it's about handling the tasks at hand as efficiently as possible with the available resources. Currently, the expansion of the school facilities and the revision of the waste regulations are on the agenda. The question arises how to gather as many opinions as possible from the population to create the greatest benefit for the village. The challenge is that many people do not publicly express their opinions. The municipal council's approach was to collect the views of these people through a low-threshold offering. We succeeded in doing so with BrainE4.

We are living in difficult times. What does that mean for you?

We are definitely in a period of upheaval. In my life so far, things have never been so turbulent. For me, this means that in addition to the usual tasks, there are also additional challenges. At least at the municipal level, things are currently somewhat calmer again. But I also think this has always been the case, perhaps just not as pronounced as during the Corona period.

Do you perceive this more as an opportunity or a threat — for yourself and the municipality?

For me, like the municipality, it is more of an opportunity. I have to take things as they come. Sometimes I do wonder if all this really has to happen now. But I still can't change it. I can only try to make the best out of the situation. It is also an opportunity to grow, both as an individual and as a team.

During the Corona period, for example, we tried to hold as many events as possible while of course complying with the federal regulations. This was mostly positively received by the population.

You can also prepare for certain scenarios without immediately painting the worst-case picture. For example, we have always procured energy for Elektra in instalments. This has saved us from having to buy electricity at exorbitant prices and pass these costs on to the residents of the municipality. Today, this approach is legally required.

As mayor, you often have to please everyone. Where is there still room for pioneering spirit?

«Pleasing everyone is an art that no one can master.» You have to be able to deal with that. Most people are also aware of this and accept that as mayor, you don't necessarily have to share their opinion. But it is important to have the right arguments. That is one thing.

«Pragmatism is not a dirty word for me.»

The other thing is: You have to constantly broaden your own horizons and look beyond your own backyard. For example, how are tasks solved in other municipalities? This only works if you exchange ideas with other municipal council members or people living in those communities. Professionally, as an engineer, I am also innovative and used to looking for simple, functional solutions. Decision-making in a municipality is strictly regulated by law. However, the path from the idea and the need to the proposal is flexible. With the possibilities offered by BrainE4, we can try to reach people better and obtain a broadly supported picture of what the people think and what moves them.

At information events, you only hear from those who dare to speak up. The others remain quiet or talk behind the scenes. That can be frustrating at times. But since we cannot (and do not want to) change people, we have to ensure that we find out what concerns the people in the village through other means.

So, for you, the use of BrainE4 was an important step in innovation.

That is true. At the same time, we must continue to adhere to procedures. Democratic processes remain in place. The municipal assembly has the final say. Participants in the online dialogue must also be aware of this.

I hope that from the insights we gained through the online dialogue, we can better understand what truly moves people. Unfortunately, the political aperitif or the municipal assembly offer significantly less transparency in this regard.

If you could wish for something for your municipality, what would it be?

That significantly more people would be willing to come to the political aperitif and the municipal assembly and stand up for their opinions.

Do you have role models?

My role models are people who are pragmatic. Pragmatism may be a dirty word today — but not for me. I also like to look up to people who are open in every direction. One of my biggest concerns, however, is that we regulate ourselves to death.

«Nowadays, no one wants to take responsibility anymore.»

What do you mean by that?

There are too many regulations that already slow down innovation before you even get to try something. It's incredible how much paperwork you have to do to prove that something really helps us move forward.
In other words: nowadays, no one wants to take responsibility anymore. Everyone wants to hide. In this game of hide-and-seek, there are more and more documents that have to be filled out — so that everyone can cover themselves completely. This prevents people from saying, «Let's get started and accept the risk of failure.» That annoys me.

How do you counteract this?

It's not easy. But at the level where I have influence, we did it. We significantly simplified processes, shifted competencies, and defined responsibilities. Of course, legal requirements had to be met.
As a result, significantly fewer matters now go through the municipal council. This relieves the council on the one hand and the administration, which has to prepare and follow up on these matters, on the other.
Today, the municipal council has time for its core tasks and is no longer involved in day-to-day operations. The administration, on the other hand, received significantly more competencies. Resistance to change was great at the beginning, and resources were scarce. But with every small step, successes were recorded. Today, no one wants to return to the old, historically grown system.

How do you deal with internal and external resistance?

When I was young, I practiced judo. What I took away from it is this: you can use the resistance you face to move forward. If you can integrate that energy into finding solutions, you usually get better results.

A nice closing remark. Thank you for the interview.

Interview: thk.