

Matthias Schupp, CEO medartis, Basel

«Euphoria is slowly building.»

Matthias Schupp worked for 17 years at the dental implant manufacturer Straumann, spending the last 13 years in Brazil. Since November 2024, he has been CEO of Medartis in Basel, which supplies the global market with innovative titanium implants. Schupp knows that to build on his past successes, he needs at least two character traits – an open ear and a pioneering spirit.



Mr. Schupp, what qualities make a pioneer?

That he is courageous, explores new paths, is curious, and tries to put that into practice. It takes courage, but also always a good team. Then success follows.

Does that apply to you?

I'm certainly not a pioneer if you define the term in the classical sense of development and invention. I believe I'm more of a pioneer when it comes to building teams and exploring new paths – even when it concerns company culture.

You said courage is a trait of a pioneer. Courage means overcoming fear. When have you felt fear?

Several times in different situations. Very early in my career: 25 years ago, I suddenly stepped out of my comfort zone and moved with my family to Russia. I was definitely afraid. A completely new culture and language combined with an unstable political and economic environment. I was a bit scared. But «fear» is such a strong word. I would say it was more respect.

Overcoming?

Yes, that's it. Family also plays a role. We often underestimate this: it's the family that supports or strengthens you for these adventures and tasks.

«Statements like 'That's difficult.' or 'That won't work.' don't work on me.»

Is that why your children now speak Russian?

My wife, yes. The children attended an international school there — an American one. In that respect, it was also a huge personal development for them. It's a win-win. I have to say: despite all the ups and downs in my professional life, everything turned out to be an important learning experience and a success in hindsight.

We live in uncertain times. Where do you see opportunities or risks for yourself and your company?

Digital transformation. It's a huge opportunity. But it's also a topic that many of our employees fear. «Oh, this will overwhelm me. It will eliminate my job.» Over the past four years, I've especially embedded this deeply in our cultural journey. Engaging people and showing them that digital transformation has been part of our lives for decades. This often goes unnoticed. Telex, landline phones — you still remember those. Today, hardly anyone uses a landline anymore. Then came fax and email. Documents moved from paper folders to computers. And today, we're talking about AI.

Which is far from being fully debated yet.

I have great respect for that. Also fear when I think about the company. How much data is lost? Are confidential data suddenly publicly available? We have to lead by example, but also show understanding that many employees are afraid of this.

When I talk about upheaval, I also mean the political situation.

I take a somewhat more relaxed view. I was in El Salvador shortly after the civil war ended. In 2000, I was in Russia, where the 1998 financial crisis left clear marks and meant a major upheaval. I've just returned from Brazil after 13 years and was actively involved in Argentina. I've experienced disruptive political changes and have learned to cope with them and maintain a certain distance.

We tend to always see the negative first. Those tariffs from Trump. An SRF reporter asked me: «Are you in shock?» I wasn't. I dealt with it early on. Trump had announced it. I said early that it would be regulated. The fact is: it was first 31%. Then Trump suspended them. After that, it was 10% and later 50%. No one knows. We quickly took internal countermeasures and will adapt to the new reality.

That was a lesson in approaching things quite relaxed and waiting to see what happens. I think Brazil was a tough school.

So you worked for Straumann then.

I worked at Straumann for 17 years, almost 13 of those in Brazil.

You were able to contribute yourself there, right? Or did you have to execute what you were told from Basel?

Of course I was able to contribute. In 2012, we acquired the family-owned company Neodent, which was the third-largest player in the Brazilian implant market with less than 30% share. Due to my Latin America experience and language skills, I was well suited for the role. However, it turned out that the company was actually a turnaround candidate and appeared healthier externally than it really was. There was a risk of impairment of the balance sheet values.

The company was dressed up for the sale. But after six months of analysis, I came to the conclusion that Neodent had the potential to become an international player.

Growth resumed in 2014. By November 2024, when I left, the market share in Brazil was well over 60%, and in terms of volume, Neodent had the largest implant production in the world.

I want to come back to the pioneer. As a pioneer, you want to create something new and extraordinary. What else is on your wish list in that regard?

My big wish and dream is to repeat with Medartis what we just achieved with Neodent. That is, to establish Medartis worldwide as the leading orthopedic company in the field of hand and wrist — not just another player in the global market. We have everything it takes to become world market leaders in several areas and make the impossible possible.

How?

We have to inspire people. But the numbers have to add up. We have to prove ourselves. It will develop gradually. Euphoria is slowly building. This is not something that happens overnight. But this dream I have — and it's realistic.

And what is your dream for the world?

(laughs) If I could just wish for something? It would be wonderful if we no longer had crisis hotspots in the world. If racism no longer existed and we could truly live together in harmony. The tolerance of diversity and the willingness to integrate — that's still lacking today.

«Digital transformation is a huge opportunity.»

Do you have role models?

Well, everyone surely mentions Nelson Mandela.

No, not really.

I think I have role models in my family. We are a multicultural family. Mandela feels very close in that regard. I have a Latin American wife. My children have a Latino background. We've lived not only in Switzerland but also in Germany. You experience all kinds of things there. My wife is a role model for how she managed it — the different cultures in Germany, Russia, and elsewhere. How she opened the community for herself. She never withdrew or sought a protective bubble. Hats off to her.

So Mandela and your wife are your role models?

(laughs) That's right — exactly. It was sometimes tough, especially in Russia. Even just the cold. And also dealing with the Russians. That's not easy.

When it comes to new developments, you as CEO have to deal with internal and external resistance. What are your strategies and experiences?

I listen. But I'm also very transparent. I ask for arguments, contribute my own, and am always open to robust dialogue. What doesn't work at all for me are statements like: «That won't work», «We've always done it this way» or «That's difficult.» If no arguments follow, I'm also someone who sometimes makes top-down decisions.

Basically, for me it's about dialogue, discussion, and trying to reach common ground. But ultimately, I'm the one who makes the decision and bears the responsibility.

«I want a very agile corporate culture...»

You surely experienced differences in mentality.

Yes, of course. Especially in Switzerland — more so than in Brazil — there's a tendency to try to discuss everything extensively.

Where do you see the limits of dialogue?

If it's not possible to reach common ground, I have to be willing to take risks — even when I only have 80% of the information. This works because I want a very agile corporate culture. Decisions are made. But we also allow mistakes. Everyone — myself included. I'm not perfect. Decisions have to be made. They can be wrong. Endless waiting doesn't get you anywhere. That's the problem with many companies.

How does listening work for you?

It starts with an open office door. Anyone can come in. Not just my direct team. Anyone can come, anyone can talk to me. I'm also often on the move within the company, present and in close exchange with people.

Some interesting ideas come up that way. Then we schedule a separate meeting and delve deeper into them.

Employees also come with questions, for example about my monthly video messages. That way, they are always well informed about what is happening and being decided in the executive floor on the 8th floor. That raises questions. This helps me sense whether the strategy is being understood.

This is complemented by the exchange through my communications department and, of course, social media with a focus on LinkedIn. This cultural communication apparatus has developed over years. And finally, I also produce a weekly podcast for radio stations in Brazil.

Thank you for your time, Mr. Schupp.

Interview: thk.