

## **Interview with Wolfgang Dittrich, Manager Strategic Development Projects at Webasto**

Wolfgang Dittrich has worked, among others, as a project manager at Webasto for some 25 years. In January 2020, as Webasto was confronted with the first cases of the novel infection in Germany, he was asked to coordinate the 20 or so members of the internal Coronavirus Task Force.

### ***Mr. Dittrich, what did you think when you were asked to spontaneously put your actual duties and responsibilities on hold in order to become part of the Coronavirus Task Force?***

I was initially surprised, because I do not hold a global management function at the company. But during discussions with my colleagues I quickly realized that someone with my profile could be useful in this special crisis team.

At Webasto I am concerned with strategic projects relating to the development of roof systems. We work in global teams on complex and sometimes really tricky problems. In the process we have to – frequently under time pressure, but still at the highest quality standards – reconcile the demands of our customers regarding what is technically and financially feasible.

I was able to gain a great deal of know how regarding how to approach a new, complex challenge as a team in a structured manner, to take rapid decisions and implement the best possible solution, even if something unforeseen should happen “along the way”.

### ***But Covid-19 isn't a sunroof. Which methods were you able to fall back on, and what was new?***

It was certainly new that we were not dealing with a purely technical or logistical problem, but with an acute, at the time still completely unclear, threat to the health of our colleagues. Despite this, it was actually a classic remit and my experience dealing with difficult issues, together with the use of agile and conventional project management methods, proved to be of great benefit in this special situation too.

Specifically, I moderated the crisis team meetings, which initially took place several times a day, and structured all of the tasks. For instance, these included preparing contact lists, organizing tests, informing employees about new infections, drawing up tighter travel rules, implementing increased hygiene standards and dialog with the responsible authorities. We nominated a responsible person for each task. Moreover, I maintained the necessary level of calm to ensure the work results were submitted on-time and were also documented.

On this basis the Task Force was able to quickly and systematically implement effective measures, for instance the closure of our Stockdorf site under our own initiative. One of my responsibilities was to prescribe the structure that would allow everyone to concentrate fully on the tasks in hand.

***Did emotions sometimes run higher there?***

Of course. We weren't dealing with a technical problem, but with the well-being of people – ourselves included. Under these exceptional circumstances, with such a high level of uncertainty, it would have been somewhat strange for emotions not to have played a part.

For everyone in the Coronavirus Task Force it was important to do the right thing in order to protect colleagues and their families and friends. When necessary we also worked around the clock. Furthermore, we agreed to openly discuss over-stress situations or misunderstandings and to find speedy solutions for them.

Our team discussions were highly purposeful and simultaneously respectful. The team spirit was excellent, and this also reflects our corporate culture. Everyone was treated equally, irrespective of their position in the company, and we took all decisions jointly.

***What were your primary personal concerns during those weeks?***

I was a little unsettled because we didn't have the specialist expertise on which we normally build during critical situations. Initially we had no idea whatsoever about how to deal with the situation. No one had experienced a similar situation and there was no one to give us direction. Furthermore, the scientists had little knowledge of the virus either, and there were hardly any official guidelines.

What concerned me most was whether our measures were actually working. In addition came the worry of catching the virus myself, thereby putting my family and friends at risk too. I think we did a good job and were able to thus break the chain of infection. I am very proud of both this result – and of being a member of the “Webasto Family”. I have once again come to experience that people are the most important at Webasto, and I have that good feeling of having helped to master this difficult situation. I hope now that we can soon close the coronavirus chapter and return to an organized “normal state” again.