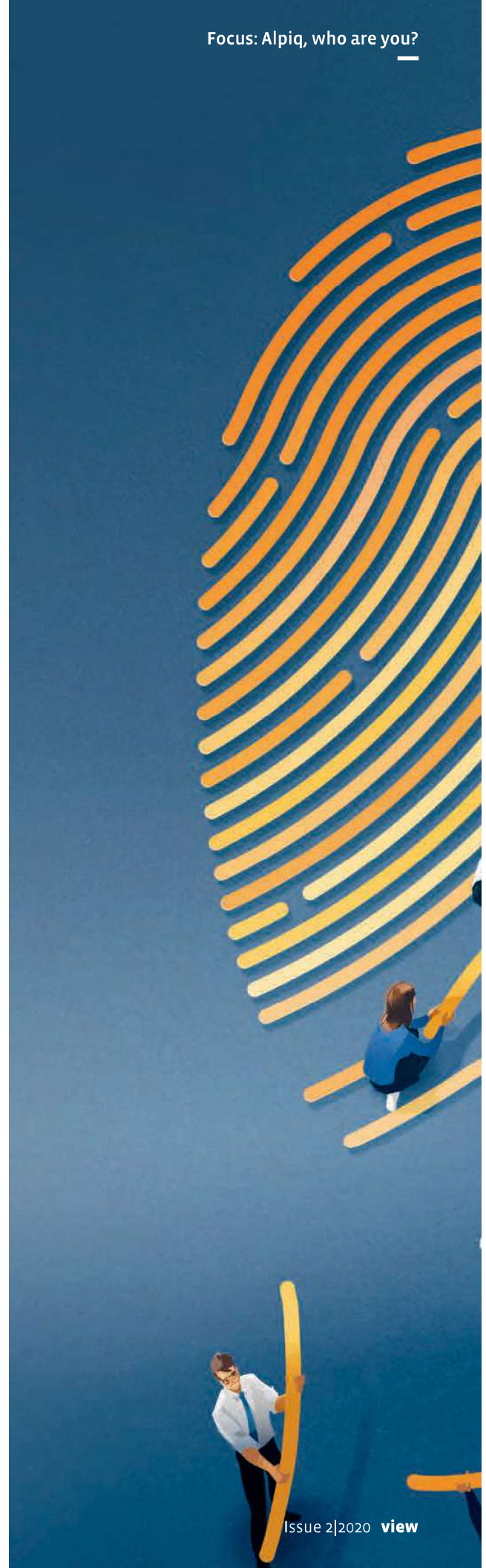


Our company has changed substantially in recent years. We sold our largest business division, withdrew from the coal business, have new owners and are no longer listed on the stock exchange. We have lost some trusted colleagues and embraced new ones. We are talking about new topics that have gained in importance for Alpiq. But there are also many things that have remained the same. The simple pleasures of everyday working life, like coffee breaks with our favourite colleagues. Established rituals that weld us together and help us to prevail even in times of crisis. Maybe we do not even realise it ourselves, but small changes often have a significant impact on how we are perceived externally. This is why we want to take a look in the mirror and ask ourselves:

# Alpiq, who are you?

Images: Patrick Oberholzer and Christoph Fischer



# We become who we are

**Andreas Oertli**, an independent management consultant and coach, talks to us about identity, culture and solidarity within a changing company like Alpiq.

Interview: Walter Schmid, cooperation: Andreas Meier

**Dear Andreas Oertli, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. How are you today?**

I'm fine, thanks. I am in excellent health and looking forward to our chat.

**Let's start off with an important question, particularly during the current corona crisis: Under what circumstances would you describe a company as healthy?**

A company is healthy when it knows what it stands for, what it has to fulfil vis-à-vis its employees, customers and shareholders, and when it is capable of delivering on this ambition. A company has to be aware of the value it creates for customers, owners and society at large. This value must be clear to everyone. Only then can the company be successful.

**What role does the corporate culture play in this?**

Culture in general, and hence also corporate culture, is highly sensitive to context. In other words, the societal, economic and social environment in which a company operates. Within this context, the objective of the corporate culture is always to strike a balance between what you are and what you want to be. The corporate culture provides answers





to questions such as: What do we stand for? What keeps us alive? What gives our company meaning? It is particularly in times of crisis that we realise how important this is.

**In view of the many countries and cultures involved, how does Alpiq succeed in creating a functioning corporate culture?**

Although it may seem banal on the surface, Alpiq must have a clear and honest answer to the question, “Who are we”? There must be a common understanding of what the employees and the company stand for. It should be clear to everyone what Alpiq is and what it is not. Naturally, the question of identity also extends to the company’s history. All Alpiq employees should know where they come from, why they are here and where they are heading. A company with clear values and an unambiguous value system will function smoothly across all internal boundaries because everyone shares a common basic understanding.

**What are the prerequisites for successful collaboration?**

Good communication. And by this, I mean communication that names things consistently and transparently. Both internally and externally. An authentic and consistent exchange of information, clearly expressed expectations and regular virtual and personal meetings at all levels. This is crucial. Of course, everyone involved must be willing to learn and possess both mental and physical agility.

**So if I understand you correctly, it is the corporate culture and communication that bind us together. How does this result in a corporate identity?**

A company can be viewed as a systemic organism. The interaction of many individuals results in a common identity. This identity continuously evolves. It is a biotope, which must be constantly nurtured to ensure it remains a place worth living in. Therefore, a corporate identity must always grow organically and cannot be imposed by external consultants.

**What happens when change virtually becomes a permanent state, as has been the case with Alpiq? How does this affect the corporate climate?**

The problem is that you are constantly questioning yourself. You are always under scrutiny. This can have a highly unsettling effect on employees. For this reason, the Executive Board must be frank and clear about each step of the change, why it is happening and what the company is trying to achieve with it. This

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**“The interaction of many individuals results in a common identity.”**

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is the only way to make the change credible and comprehensible for everyone. This reduces uncertainty and stress among employees.

**Can the sale of a major business division, as was the case at Alpiq two years ago, lead to disorientation?**

To prevent this, it is essential that such projects are processed emotionally and brought to a closure. It is important that the remaining employees are also able to find a new sense of belonging and adapt the identity accordingly.

Such projects must not be allowed to fizzle out by chance or through neglect. In the worst case, this can result in a whole history of unachieved goals. There are many companies that suffer under a plethora of attempted solutions because they never brought any of their initiatives to completion. In order to avoid this, consistent and firm decisions are required, which are communicated comprehensively and transparently.

Some employees can rapidly become overwhelmed or feel disoriented when faced with challenging situations. Some feel grief when their colleagues leave the company, some feel ashamed of the company or even suffer from survivors’ guilt. Frequently during change processes, the main focus is on the employees who are made redundant, and far too little attention is paid to those who stay on.

**The transformations of the past few years have had a strong impact on us and are still ongoing. Is there such a thing as a toxic legacy that stands in the way of a new culture?**

In many companies, toxic legacies are a recurring source of failure for change processes. In my experience, many companies have things that reach back far longer than a decade. Companies and organisations possess a collective memory that leads to attitudes such as: This is how we have always done things here. A problem arises when such attitudes are not regularly reviewed and the actions derived from them are not challenged to determine whether they are still appropriate.

Ideally, corporate change functions in a similar way to software updates: Everything that functions well is retained. And everything that is no longer relevant or that does not function smoothly is overwritten. Companies often fail to achieve their full potential because things that slow down their performance are carried over into the new release.

In addition, most companies have self-appointed guardians of the grail who perceive any change as a threat. Their objections are as understandable as they are simple: They do not recognise why the particular change makes sense. Ultimately, this is due to poor communications. The company failed to take them along on the journey. This is precisely why in communications, what reaches the recipient is more important than what was transmitted.

**Is this why change processes fail?**

Frequently, it is simply not clear where things are supposed to be heading, and it is exactly at this point where the risk of failure increases. If this clarity does not exist, the employees prefer to maintain the status quo; because then they cannot do anything wrong. What is required is an incentive to try out new approaches. After all, for an employee, not knowing what to expect involves a risk.

**Who within the company is really responsible for the corporate culture?**

Everyone. Although admittedly, the primary responsibility lies with the owners or shareholders. They have to inform the management how they want to shape their investment. Ideally, it would subsequently cascade through all levels to each individual employee. In reality,

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**Name:** Andreas Oertli  
**Lives in:** Pfannenstiel (near Zurich) and in the Appenzeller Vorderland, Switzerland  
**Age:** 53  
**Function:** Senior Leadership Advisor and Executive Coach  
**Previous experience:** various management positions with shipping and commodity trading companies, founding partner of a consulting boutique specialising in corporate development, restructuring and M&A  
**Free time:** travel, gastronomy, wines, reading, forest, home and garden  
**Family:** married

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however, every individual employee contributes towards the corporate culture – whether consciously or unconsciously, both through action and omission.

To ensure that the corporate culture is actively put into practice, it is important that all employees are involved. Each individual bears responsibility for the community. Nevertheless, this community can and should also be criticised, which requires all of us to maintain a healthy tolerance for frustration.

### **Are companies with high levels of employee identification more successful?**

Yes, this is inherently logical. A strong team spirit results in common goals, which the employees fight for. This makes the company stronger. But it also poses a risk: Making demands and launching cultural initiatives can also entail a dictatorial element. If “making culture” becomes totalitarian, it is doomed to fail, because not everyone concerned is involved in shaping it.

### **Is it even possible to measure the identification or satisfaction of employees?**

Yes, absolutely, by means of surveys. But the more important question is: Does the company have the courage to face the results and work with them in a constructive way? What is crucial are the measures that are derived from the criticism in order to change the situation. I have experienced many companies that are afraid and although they want to know what their employees think, they do not use the results to take action. This naturally raises the question: What prevented these companies from implementing the insights gained? However, if suggestions for improvement are actually implemented, this increases the employees' identification and their willingness to assume responsibility. Because then they see that everyone has a say and that their own ideas become reality.

### **What are the strengths of a corporate group like Alpiq?**

The strength of Alpiq is definitely its diversity. The fact that people from so many different countries, generations and disciplines work together. So it is absolutely essential to harness this strength. Only if diversity is genuinely put into practice, only if there is an exchange of expertise and experience, and only if border-spanning projects are pursued, a strong sense of solidarity and mutual understanding can develop over time. And the more we are able to learn from our experience, the faster we can optimise the company as a whole.

Here, the corporate identity also plays an important role. The key questions must be addressed: Why are we here, who are we, where

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“The key questions must be addressed: Why are we here, who are we, where are we going? Only then can we learn from each other.”

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are we going? Only then can we learn from each other. Under no circumstances should this be taken for granted.

### **Can this also help us to weather exceptional situations such as the corona crisis?**

Maybe in a general way: The more flexible and agile we are, the faster we can respond to change. And the easier we find it to think the unthinkable, the faster we will adapt to extraordinary situations. It is not a question of being perfect, but rather of dealing with the situation in the best possible way. Many companies are currently faced with the question of their *raison d'être*. Consequently, they are adapting their range of products or services. Clothing companies, for example, started manufacturing protective masks. The main concern is to stay in contact with the customers and to communicate with each other in order to understand how the market environment is developing.

### **What is your own impression of Alpiq?**

So far I have only met a mere handful of Alpiq employees in person. Hence, I am not yet able to form a conclusive verdict on the company. But in general, Alpiq has to face the question: How long can the company continue to focus on its past? Most people in Switzerland probably still associate Alpiq with electricians because their vehicles used to be fairly commonplace on the roads. Today, a new symbol for public awareness is required. Such changes also offer tremendous opportunities. Namely to readdress the questions: Who do we want to be? Who are we still? What do we need to be able to survive? How do we want to be perceived? The corporate identity must be attractive right across the board; this is of the utmost importance. Equally for customers and employees, both of whom we want to attract and retain. Fostering identification with the company is a demanding and long-term task that is enjoyable but also requires a great deal of perseverance.

Focus: Alpiq, who are you?



What Fabio likes about Alpiq is the pragmatism

We all are Alpiq and all of us play our part. But how do we actually see Alpiq? What does our company mean to me? These are questions that each of us should reflect upon from time to time. As examples, six colleagues from all over Europe tell us why they work for Alpiq and what the company stands for in their eyes.