

## Agora Round-up

*5<sup>th</sup> Agora with Prof. Dr. Daniel Zajfman, President of the Weizmann Institute of Science, on "Curiosity driven research as driver for high value innovation"*

"There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know."

(Donald Rumsfeld)

Science is magic without lies. Science should discover what the world is made of and it should trigger change for the benefit of humanity. History shows that major scientific innovations were never made on purpose. Yet we keep pretending to be able to agree on what is important and what should have priority when it comes to investing in scientific ventures: Serious money was spent in 19<sup>th</sup> century England to try to produce better long lasting candles, until one day a very curious, passionate and knowledgeable scientist, Michael Faraday, advanced the research and the know-how of electromagnetism and electrochemistry and by that advanced dramatically the discovery of electricity.

With a strong argument in favor of more bottom-up curiosity Daniel Zajfman shared some of his key beliefs about how he and the Weizmann Institute of Science promote high level scientific research. He championed "research without scientific strategy" as – in the long-run – a much more fertile approach to get applicable innovation than any targeted process. Teach kids "in between the fields" rather than breeding a generation of experts in specific fields in a time when the accelerating speed of change makes teaching content obsolete quicker than ever before.

"Ask the researchers what they think has to change and give them ownership." During the lively Q&A session and discussion, Daniel Zajfman called on the twenty participants to rely on people who demonstrate above all curiosity and passion before knowledge and talent. "Excellence is not what you do but who you are." He drew the picture of an open-minded management and leadership style as an unconditional necessity in a world full of open-end opportunities. To him, authentic leaders need the courage to admit not to know what the future holds and take it from there with curiosity. Decency and the absence of ego need to be duly checked first with all applicants for influential tasks and positions. Daniel also argued that it is always better to hire good people without hesitation rather than waiting to fill free slots.

Elaborating on the great success of the Weizmann "Pub lectures", Prof. Zajfman finally made a strong point for scientists not to sit and wait for people to come to a centre of competence such as the Weizmann Institute but to get out to the public and share information and opinions about their work with a broader audience in places where it is fun to be. "We do not want to be an ivory tower but a lighthouse".

Hero's seek help.

Yours truly

Evelyne Thalmann  
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