



WHEN PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

INTERVIEW

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MARCO MARCHESI IS CHAIRMAN OF CYMBIQ GROUP AG, PROVIDER OF INTEGRATED SECURITY SOLUTIONS AND CYBER RISK RESILIENCE. WITH INSTINCT AND COMMITMENT, HE HAS GONE FROM ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING TO THE CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF SEVERAL COMPANIES. IT ALL BEGAN WITH A VISION THAT HE WAS DETERMINED TO SELL TO HIS BOSS AND THAT ALMOST COST HIM EVERYTHING. HIS INSTINCTS WERE ONLY CONFIRMED YEARS LATER, IN A LIFT, WHEN HE UTTERED THE MAGIC WORD: CYBER-SECURITY.

Mr Marchesi, are you more entrepreneur or more IT expert?

I'm an entrepreneur first but digitalisation is forcing every business owner to become proficient in IT. I did an electrical engineering degree and then worked as an application engineer at a tech start-up that nearly went bust twice. That's when I understood how dependent technology and business are on each other, so I did another degree – in business engineering.

You recognised the IT security trend early on.

I went to an expert in LAN networks as a consultant and project manager. We were early adopters of firewalls and by 1997 we were sensing a trend. We went to the boss and proposed setting up an IT security department. He refused but I wouldn't back down

and we argued for hours. Late in the evening he said yes but didn't give me any budget. Then he threw me out of the office (laughs).

How did you manage with no budget?

Some of our consultants were working on lucrative contracts, so we built the department on the profits. That's how I learned to think commercially. It wasn't long before we were getting fantastic feedback. That pushed me to go out on my own and at the turn of the millennium I founded ISPIN with five partners.

What did ISPIN focus on back then?

IT security. When we set up ISPIN, firewalls were all everyone was worried about. We saw a future in our all-in approach that also included people, technology and organisation. We were convinced that we were right, although

we realised that few in the industry really understood what we were doing.

How did you manage to explain?

It was years later, at a conference. I got into the lift with a businessman I didn't know. He asked what I did. "Cybersecurity", I answered. "Sounds like a movie I want to see", he said. He gave me his card and got out at his floor. I was totally confused. I'd been wondering for 15 years how to explain what I do but nobody got it. Now I say "cybersecurity" and they understand.

Do you still remember your first customer at ISPIN?

We won a few big contracts right from the start. That's even though I turned down the very first enquiry we got. We had put in a 400K bid for a global VPN but the customer only

wanted to pay 150K, so they went to a competitor. A few months later he called up and asked us to sort out the mess.

Sounds like the perfect start!

Yes, but in our excitement we forgot about securing backing and were almost broke by 2003. We all suffered, not just the business but personally. And we had no investors. Over time we have learned always to grow profitably. In 2006 it was clear that we were growing too slowly to keep up with the rapidly expanding market.

So you went on the offensive?

I wasn't just looking for people who'd give us money but for long-term partners who would be a good fit strategically as well as personally. In 2010 I secured the first private investor. They were joined

in 2018 by an owner-managed private equity firm and we founded CymbiQ Group AG. As the parent company of ISPIN it is now driving consolidation in the European market. We have already bought three companies since then.

How do you check companies out at the acquisition stage?

After 25 years as a business owner – and as a former ice-hockey player – I've developed a good sense of team dynamics. Team spirit, really. That allows me to absorb a company's operating atmosphere really quickly. Most of the time I can tell from the leadership, sometimes even from the way their assistants behave.

Is team spirit important in your work with Airlock?

Yes. What I value most is that we can always rely on each other. Open and honest two-way communication is another thing.

What are you aiming for next?

First, we want CymbiQ Group to become the leading cybersecurity service provider in Europe, with a clear focus on the DACH region. I firmly believe that there should be a leader like that from Switzerland. Otherwise I want to extend my interests as an investor and director in companies and start-ups

Your leadership principles?

Integrity, trust, reliability and humanity. You have to create a space in which people want to grow outside of themselves. At the end of the day, it's all a matter of commitment. My youth trainer Vladimír Kobranov said to me once: "If you want to play ice hockey, stay here. Otherwise, go home."

Advice for young entrepreneurs?

If you're sure, just do it. In most cases you'll have an entrepreneurial mindset before you actually become an entrepreneur. />

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