

Mental Trainers in the Factory

Photo JÖRG EBERL



How the physician and CeramTec CEO wants to create a modern working atmosphere.

Distinguishing between what is important and what isn't is a skill that Dr. Hadi Saleh learned during his time working as a physician in hospitals and ambulances. "Is someone bleeding or in a life-threatening condition?" was often his first question back then. "If not, everyone can take a deep breath." Today Saleh no longer works in the operating room at the university hospital, but as chairman of the executive board of CeramTec GmbH in Plochingen near Stuttgart in southwestern Germany. But the doctor did bring his imperturbable demeanor from the hospital to the business world. "I have learned how to deal with stress," says Saleh. "And that is something that translates very well to the business world."

Like a good doctor, he places great importance on talking with his employees in his role as CEO as well. "I listen a lot in order to get a sense of the needs of each individual," says Saleh. And those needs can be very different depending on the life situation: the young employee in a long-distance relationship longs for more leisure time; the young family father wants a bit more money; and colleagues who are caring for relatives benefit from more flexible working hours.

But Saleh also asks something of his employees as well: that they use their own heads. "I encourage my employees to think for themselves—which naturally also means that I have to accept pushback," explains the forty-six-year-old. "But that is completely normal nowadays;

the autocratic leadership style of the past is permanently passé." Saleh's goal is clear: he wants to infuse his employees with maximum motivation through personal responsibility and thereby push his team to achieve top results.

CeramTec has been a successful market presence for over a century. With 3,500 employees and locations in Europe, America, and Asia, the company counts among the leading international producers of high-performance ceramics. In many cases, the precision products work in the background: in the single-lever mixers at the washbasin or in the grinding mechanism of automatic coffee makers. "Many people come into contact with our products every day without knowing it," says Saleh. "We are truly one of the hidden champions—quite literally hidden, as it happens." CeramTec products are also used in aircraft, satellites, smartphones, electric vehicles, and medical products. Doctors around the world, for example, implant 1.6 million hip prostheses a year with ceramic from Germany. They are manufactured in a highly automated production facility in the Bavarian town of Marktredwitz and Plochingen in Swabia, where artificial knee joints, among other things, are also made. Shoulder joints made of ceramic are due to follow soon, and intervertebral discs of the biologically highly compatible material are also in the works. And there's a very simple reason why CeramTec's inventions are so sought after and so versatile: the special ceramics are in some cases harder than steel and more chemically resistant than plastic.

Hadi Saleh aims to maintain the globally leading role of CeramTec, and he is thinking hard about new motivational concepts as well. "I think a lot about the question of how we can make use of mental coaches, for example. Our employees are, after all, a high-performance team. And what works in sports can certainly be successfully applied to companies as well."