

# #WUEHEARYOU - The Podcast by the Office of the University Women's Representative

## Episode 1: Prof. Dr. Matthias Bode

*Hello and welcome to our WÜkit podcast, which is all about “Family-friendly leadership at JMU”. In this episode, our guest is Prof. Dr. Matthias Bode. In his position as Vice President, he is responsible for the portfolio of “innovation and knowledge transfer” and has additionally been holding the*



*Chair of Experimental Physics II since July 2010. Prof. Dr. Bode will give us exciting insights into how he creates a family-friendly work environment in his day-to-day work and research and what is particularly important to him. Enjoy!*

**Natalie Nikolaus (Office of the University Women's Representative):** Can you give us a few insights into how you make it easier for your employees to combine academic and family life?

**Professor Dr. Matthias Bode:** Yes, I'm happy to do that. However, I would like to point out that I believe that it is not limited to academia alone, but actually affects all areas of the university, no matter where we work, because this work is usually not done as a solitaire, but as part of a team; because we have to work together. And we should always ask ourselves: how are our employees doing? We should ask them about concerns that go beyond the purely professional. Of course, there must also be certain limits to this. Yes, there is a personal privacy that we don't want to violate, but a non-binding inquiry as a manager or person in charge is often helpful and reveals concerns and needs that we can then show a willingness to discuss and try to find solutions to together. After all, that's what it's all about: finding a compromise to reconcile private concerns with the demands of the job.

**NN:** In your opinion, what is the most important aspect of a manager's attitude in order to be able to lead in a family-friendly way?

**MB:** I think it's part of what I just said. The attitude of the person in charge. I actually have to signal a willingness to talk at all times, and I should avoid cultivating an authoritarian or absolutist management style. At least that's how I understand it. Of course, this also has its limits, because I sometimes have to tell my employees what to do and what not to do, but that's not the point here. It's simply about optimizing the necessary work processes in a way that makes it easier for everyone involved to manage the balancing act I just described. That's often the case. That's also the case for me, by the way, yes, I also have a work-life balance. It's not always easy, but I don't have a boss, I don't have to ask anyone, I just have to deal with my work-related matters, but we should all try to do that and I think it's important to create the right conditions. And, of course, the openness to talk, meaning the attitude of the manager. What does that mean? Being willing to talk and discuss. I can't necessarily respond to all requests, but I can make the offer to talk. You should try to find solutions cooperatively.

**NN:** That is definitely an important point, the willingness to talk. This is also important when it comes to reconciling the interests of all employees, because you certainly don't just have employees who have families or care responsibilities, but also other employees. How do you manage to reconcile all of these interests?

**MB:** Yes, that's difficult. I've already hinted at that. We also often forget that there are, I don't even know what you call it, hidden care tasks. We often only think of parents of children, small children, but there is also the care of older people. Maybe you just have friends that you look after. Yes, these are also care tasks that are part of my private life. And of course I have to solve the balancing act, or the problem, that on the one hand - let's take the example of parents with young children - ultimately this means a certain time restriction. If I have this time restriction, which I can totally understand, then that raises the question of who covers the remaining times. And finding this compromise is not easy, because the employees who don't seem to have any care duties sometimes feel left behind. That's difficult, it really is difficult, and you have to talk about it openly in the team, in the group, and try to find a compromise. It's not always possible to really find something that everyone is completely happy with, but

that's probably the nature of a compromise, yes. I really try to find one, but as I said, it's not always possible.

**NN:** I can understand that. You mentioned openness, within the team and from everyone involved. I think that's something that's good for every team and is also important when it comes to asserting concerns. It is often a bit difficult for young employees, or there is a certain inhibition threshold, to go to the manager and assert their needs with regard to family or care responsibilities. What approach would you recommend to employees?

**MB:** What would I recommend... I can imagine the difficulty, because, as I've already mentioned, you should have an open communication style, even as a manager. That is certainly not the case everywhere, not even at our university. These are the cases of conflict. I would go into it confidently, yes, I would advise everyone to do that, with a certain amount of self-confidence. Not too much, not arrogance, but self-confidence as an applicant, I call it, to go into this discussion, to communicate at an early stage. Not too late, especially when we think about pregnancy, which usually takes around nine months, and not just communicating at the last minute that you want to take some time off, but to do so early on. But with a certain amount of self-confidence. I believe this is necessary for legal reasons to protect my rights to certain positions, for example a certain management position. Should I have the conversation before the pregnancy is obvious? That's what I was getting at.

**NN:** You've just mentioned pregnancy. This is usually already apparent in women at some point. You don't necessarily see it in young fathers-to-be. Do you also notice gender-specific differences?

**MB:** Well, we all know what the reality is. There is the right to, now I have to pay attention again. It's not called child-rearing leave, that's what it used to be called...

**NN:** Parental leave.

**MB:** Thank you, I've already gotten myself into hot water a few times. Parental leave, both partners are entitled to it, but it is taken asymmetrically, let me put it that way. So the need should actually be evenly distributed. In fact, it obviously isn't. There is no reason for this, fathers should also take a more offensive approach to the issue and then claim the rights to which they are entitled, I think. I think we'll get to that. Of course,

it has certain professional consequences, yes, you just have to say that. It shouldn't have any institutional consequences, so I can't hinder anyone's progress because they take parental leave, but every time I take care of others, I'm investing time. Yes, it's time that I no longer have available for other tasks and even if I've worked full time in the past, even as a young father, it's something you notice. You have children at home, you can't spend the weekend thinking about academic issues, your focus is elsewhere. I had to realize that in the past. If there is this time investment, then I simply don't have time for anything else and then others will overtake me because they have 20, 30, 40 hours a week that I don't have to stay informed on the newest scientific developments, to set up projects and so on. And that's something you can't make up for. I had to realize that too. But nevertheless, I don't know whether this is really scientifically sound, I think it's good to have children, because it also helps to shape your personality and I once read statistics, as I said, I don't know whether they are scientifically relevant, that people with families, even if they have these disadvantages, are not necessarily worse off in their professional lives. And I think there's a reason for that. So you shouldn't be put off by something like that.

**NN:** Are there any ways you see in which university contact points can support your employees or you as a manager in terms of compatibility? Perhaps offer some relieve? I'm thinking of the Office of the University Women's Representative, that's us, Family Services, Human Resources.

**MB:** These contact points are already quite good at providing institutional advice. My impression when I speak to employees is that there is often a problem with the actual implementation. So questions like "I have a legal entitlement to a nursery place, but I can't find one right now." These are the things that really hurt. When there are rights that cannot be exercised due to a lack of staff, for example - we hear this every day in the media - because it is simply not possible to recruit the right staff. And these are the things that really hurt in everyday life, because word gets around, you hear about it. And this compatibility that is always propagated between work and family simply no longer exists. I think I just read in the newspaper today that nurseries are starting to reduce their opening hours because they no longer have the staff. That's going in exactly the wrong direction. It's not because we don't have good regulations or good rules, but because we're not managing to meet the higher demands? It's not that I have a solution for this. I also don't know how we're going to find 10, 20, 30,000 nursery

school teachers and educators in the next few years. But we have to work towards that, I think that's the essential point.

**NN:** That's an aspect in which we unfortunately can't work magic either. But we can provide support because we also have some contacts, and I think that's an important point that we can tackle. We can bring this into the public eye, to the employees, so that we perhaps have opportunities to support them, even if it is difficult. Let's go in a slightly different direction. As I said, your management style has been praised as family-friendly. Do you have any idea how you have developed in this direction, that you have an open ear for all concerns?

**MB:** That's a difficult question. If we start from the very beginning: I would describe myself as more of a conservative person, yes, but even conservative people naturally go through a certain development and at the same time I would describe myself as empathetic. I also have children, yes, I talk to them about issues and in that respect you can see that many things that used to be taken for granted, such as marriages in which only one partner has a job, are no longer a thing, so young people simply don't want that. And you can now say, "it will work or it won't work." But I have to accept that this is simply a fact. And we have to move in that direction. It's a very sensible development. Of course, this means that we have to make changes. As I just mentioned, it's no longer wanted today, and in my opinion it's never really been desirable for one partner to stay at home and look after the children and the household while the other works endless hours - that can't be my purpose in life. I've never felt that way either. But what I hear from young people now is that both partners want to have equal jobs, have the same support for their family, so that instead of having, say, one and a half jobs where one partner works all the time and one is at home, we have two three-quarter jobs. These are social realities that we have to live with and that I am happy to face. I think we can and should work towards that, yes. There's no secret to it. It is simply a matter of listening and responding to the legitimate demands and wishes that are expressed.

**NN:** It's very important to perhaps reorient oneself, so to speak. I think you can definitely recommend that to managers in general. Are there any other reasons or why would you recommend that colleagues adopt a family-friendly management style?

**MB:** Because it means employee loyalty. If the purely interpersonal aspect is not enough for you, if you want to have a measurable value, which should not necessarily be the primary concern, but can be, I would say that it contributes to employee loyalty. If I treat my employees badly, then they will be gone in no time at all, and especially in times of a personnel crisis, this is of no use to me. Instead, I have to try to retain employees in my workplace so that they feel that I am in good hands at the University of Würzburg, that this is a workplace that I can still imagine myself in five or ten or 15 years' time. That includes a lot of things, salary is one aspect, but family friendliness is another and that's why we should position ourselves very well.

**NN:** Is there a best-practice example for a university, a country? Have you ever experienced anything more family-friendly than here in Würzburg?

**MB:** I think what many institutions do better, for whatever reason, is what I said earlier about implementation. That it simply runs more smoothly. There are definitely countries where you can really rely on childcare in daycare centers, for example, which are also much more extensive in terms of opening hours than is the case here. I don't have the insight to judge why this is the case there. I can't say whether it's because the childcare jobs are valued more, better paid and more highly recognized. I don't think it's - and I'll repeat what I said earlier - that it's because of the actual statutory requirements of the system, but it's simply the lack of implementation that's the problem here. And here, I repeat myself, we should do better. If we could and would implement everything that we have set out to do, then we would be a long way ahead.

**NN:** Yes, that's probably true. Childcare enables a great deal or can also restrict a great deal. Would you like to say something else about this?

**MB:** Yes, I just wanted to say that it's not just about childcare, it's also about caring for the elderly, for example. I already mentioned that earlier. Care, or looking after someone, can mean more than just children, it's very diverse and these shortcomings - we only need to open the newspaper - are everywhere. It affects us massively. I just wanted to say that I wouldn't limit it to children, but we need to improve the implementation. It's not good enough, even when it comes to care. If I have someone to care for, it's nice to have them, but it's incredibly difficult to find a place in a home or support at home. That's the equivalent of it. Care means more than just children.

**NN:** Actually, you've already partly answered the last question I wanted to ask you. Perhaps. But I'll ask it again anyway. If you had one wish, what measures would you like to see either from the university itself or from politicians, so that you, as a manager, could promote the careers of academics with care and family responsibilities at universities on an equal footing?

**MB:** Now, it has to be said that I am a member of the university management myself, so I know what heated discussions are being held there to improve the situation of women in particular, for example. But not only that, it's also about parents in general. We are endeavoring to significantly improve this professional flexibility and support for young families - but not only for them, as I have already indicated. It is difficult to find providers for daycare centers, for example, and these providers then have the problem that they cannot find the staff. I believe this is the most important lever. No, that is not politics and university management either. If I may say so again, I would like to advise women - as I said earlier - to be more self-confident, not to let the butter be taken off their bread, but simply to demand their usual entitlement or share in the development.

*A big thank you to Prof. Dr. Bode for the interview and many thanks to everyone listening for tuning in. Hear you next time.*