

Reaching the Top with Staying Power

■ **Success** – “If that doesn’t top it all!” The exclamation uttered by Barbara Ertl, wife of our latest Nobel Prize winner Gerhard Ertl, just about sums it up. A Nobel Prize is still the greatest, craziest, finest and most incredible thing that can happen to a scientist. The fact that two Nobel Prizes will go to Germany this year is also a huge success for the country itself. Both are richly deserved: Peter Grünberg, who works as a physicist at the Research Centre Jülich, discovered what is called the GMR effect, which makes the huge storage capacities of modern computer hard disks possible. Gerhard Ertl, Director emeritus at the Fritz Haber Institute of the Max Planck Society, developed the methodological foundations for an entirely new area of chemistry. Thanks to his research, we now understand in detail how chemical reactions take place on surfaces, and therefore also how catalysts work. The applications of his findings range from artificial fertilizers to semiconductor technology. Both successes demonstrate the high standards of basic research in Germany. And the applications of these discoveries show how urgently we need such research. Basic research opens the doors to entirely new fields, paving the way for both science and industry and creating a basis for genuine innovations. Urgent global problems, such as climate protection, feeding the world’s population or tackling spreading epidemics can likewise be solved only with the aid of fundamental new knowledge. Successful basic research calls for staying power. The Max Planck Society is in the fine position to safeguard long-term research programs, thanks not least to our subject-related independence and our stable financing. We pass on both to our Directors. The successful results prove this strategy to be correct: since the Society’s founding after World War II, 17 Max Planck scientists have received Nobel Prizes, the most recent being Theodor Hänsch, who won the 2005 prize for physics.

■ **Resolve** – In his book GUT FEELINGS: THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS, Gerd Gigerenzer, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, relates a wonderful anecdote: A professor – an economist, to be precise – is unable to decide whether to heed the call of another university. In response to the advice that he should follow his own theory of the maximization of benefits, he replies in exasperation, “Enough of that –

this is serious!” The story strikes me as very close to life. For one thing, I find Gigerenzer’s remarks on intuitive decisions very illuminating. And for another, enticing talent away from the competition is almost as common in science as it is in football. The Max Planck Society is a successful player in this contest. We regularly succeed in attracting top scientists from renowned research institutions worldwide. Already this year we have recruited researchers, both female and male, from Oxford, Yale and Princeton. Their gut feelings surely played a part in



Peter Gruss,
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Society

their decisions – I am thinking here of the desire to live in Germany, or the prospect of working in an inspiring scientific environment. However, in terms of personal benefits, we cannot offer as much as many universities abroad. It is simply the case that salaries in Germany are noticeably lower than, for example, in the USA or Switzerland. Nor can we offer additional benefits, such as retirement pensions or school fees for children. Not only does that make it hard for scientists to commit to coming here, but above all, it has a long-term weakening effect on German research. Top scientists such as the two German Nobel Prize winners are in demand internationally. They are on the receiving end of attractive offers from the most fascinating research centers worldwide. If we wish to attract them to Germany in the future, and to keep them here, we must continue to improve the general conditions offered – so that Nobel Prizes will continue to be awarded to researchers working in Germany.

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