

The New  
Normal



## Firefighters don't run from fires

How one New York healthcare organization stepped up during the COVID-19 crisis

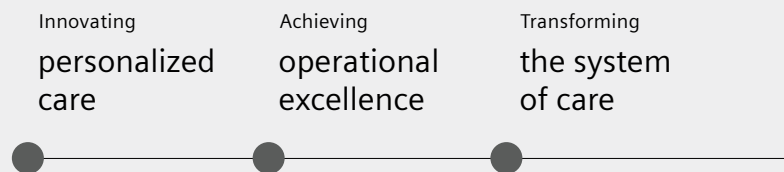
A thought leadership paper on "Achieving operational excellence"

# Preface

## The Insights Series

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# Executive summary

**There was a time during the early days of COVID-19 when New York City was North America's pandemic epicenter. It was a very bad time for New Yorkers, and an extremely bad time for the healthcare workers trying desperately to care for their patients. The pressure of dealing with sick and dying patients, knowing that even as they cared for these people they might be endangering themselves, left much of New York's healthcare staff coping with stress, depression, and crippling fear for themselves and their families.**

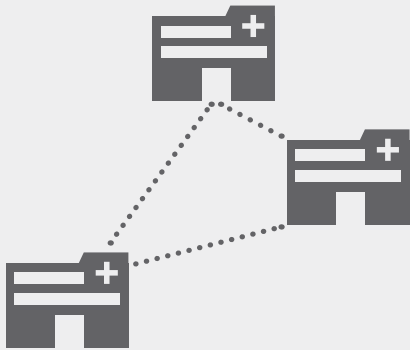
For NY healthcare organizations it was difficult to remain open. One such organization was Zwanger-Pesiri (ZP) Radiology, an independent radiology service provider operating in the Greater New York area. ZP CEO Dr. Steven Mendelsohn and COO Bob Day made a bold decision to remain open, in the face of a rapidly dwindling patient and revenue stream, and an uncertain and worried workforce.

This paper examines how Zwanger-Pesiri was able to remain open, ride out what was initially an extremely bad storm, and emerge with a stable core of loyal and grateful patients and a staff of committed and confident workers. In what is something of a departure for a Healthineers *Insights Series* paper, this is more of a story than a set of recommendations – a story told in large part through the words and emails of ZP COO Bob Day, who noted early on that “firefighters don’t run from fires” and decided that the healthcare workers at Zwanger-Pesiri would show that same professional commitment with respect to the pandemic.

What Bob Day understood is that in times of deep uncertainty, there is a specific type of dependable yet inspiring leadership required, and he set about providing it.

Day was guided by five clear principles

- Communicate
- Be transparent
- Protect
- Learn as you go
- Celebrate results and achievements



## Zwanger-Pesiri Radiology founded 1958

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Key figures (as of 2020)

**32** sites throughout the New York area

**1,250** employees

**1,200,000** exams p.a.

More than **50%** of all MRI exams within  
their geographic catchment area

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## Background

*"The 'how' is always the part that requires a certain fortitude, an ability to make a decision and then quickly change course, stay confident but be humble.*

*You may not always have all the answers yourself and not every decision is correct right out of the box, you correct them and make adjustments on the fly."*

Bob Day, April 19th, 2020

COVID-19 was officially declared to be a worldwide pandemic in March 2020. In those early days, New York City (NYC) was the North American epicenter of the crisis. The week of March 8th, there was an average of 274 COVID-19 diagnoses per day.<sup>1</sup> By the week of March 29th, that average had reached a peak of 5,132 cases per day.<sup>1</sup> Between March 15th and May 2nd, 2020, approximately 30,500 Americans died from COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> About half of those deaths were in New York City.<sup>2</sup> During this time, New Yorkers must surely have felt that they were living in a city under siege. And as challenging, inconvenient and dangerous as it was for ordinary citizens, it was dramatically more challenging, inconvenient, and dangerous for healthcare workers.

In the early days and weeks of COVID-19, healthcare workers faced enormous challenges. They dealt with a seemingly unending flood of sick and dying patients, knowing that even as they cared for these people, they might be endangering themselves. Like everyone else, they had to take care of their children at home, because schools were closed. Moreover, their increased likelihood of being exposed to the virus at work also increased the likelihood of them spreading the virus to family members. This only added to the stress and uncertainty that NYC healthcare workers had to bear. According to one study, 57% of the city's healthcare staff had acute stress, nearly half screened positive for depressive symptoms, and one third had anxiety symptoms.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many healthcare workers stayed away from work. Many others, of course, were unable to work because they had to self-isolate, or in some cases because they had to be hospitalized themselves.

There were also many cases of physicians shifting, or being shifted, to work exclusively with COVID-19 patients. As Dr. Hadi Halazun wrote in an opinion piece for the New York Times in April 2020, *"Yesterday we were your pediatricians. Your cardiologists. Your surgeons. Today, we are all COVID-19 doctors. Your appointments are canceled, and our offices are closed. We've been called to the front lines."*<sup>4</sup>

All in all, it was a situation that left many NYC healthcare organizations pondering the advisability, and viability, of remaining open during the pandemic. One such organization was Zwanger-Pesiri (ZP) Radiology, an independent radiology service provider operating in the Greater New York area. Founded in 1958, the family-owned business employs more than 1,250 people at 32 locations throughout the New York area. They perform more than 1,200,000 exams annually, including more than half of all MRI exams within their geographic catchment area.

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#### Survey among NYC healthcare workers conducted in April 2020<sup>3</sup>



ZP CEO Dr. Steven Mendelsohn and COO Bob Day looked at the havoc being wreaked by COVID-19 and realized they had a decision to make. Could a company that had built its reputation on providing first-class, dependable service to its community now close its doors, precisely at a time when medical care was needed more than ever? The answer, in their case, was no, though it was a decision taken with some trepidation. As Bob Day remembers, everyone at ZP was aware of the risks associated with the decision to remain open. Many were convinced it wasn't a good business decision – at least in the short-term – but Day was confident it was the right decision in the long-term. As he said at the time:

*"Firefighters don't run from fires ..."<sup>5</sup> "Our patients need us in their time of need and the hospitals are overwhelmed. The staff need jobs and a source of income. When this is over, we want to be here knowing we stayed in the fight and we never changed who we are. Not even this overwhelming crisis would knock us off our game." Bob Day, April 19th, 2020.*

This paper looks at the journey that Zwanger-Pesiri undertook at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, keeping their doors open at a time when many organizations could not. We are fortunate to have had the benefit of access to the many emails and other forms of internal communications sent by Bob Day to his team during these dark days and weeks. We were afforded an opportunity to follow, in real time, the thinking and decision-making of a leader working against significant odds to get his team through a serious crisis. The many quotes used in this paper primarily came from Bob Day's emails, and they reflect the information he had, or lacked, depending on when during the unfolding pandemic they were sent.

*“We’ve redefined  
what it means to be busy.”*

Bob Day<sup>5</sup>

## The challenge

**The COVID-19 pandemic completely changed the landscape for Zwanger-Pesiri and for other similar healthcare providers. The bold decision to stay open having been made, Mendelsohn and Day were suddenly struck by the challenges they had set for themselves.**

As Bob Day said in an email to employees in mid-March, *“I promise you all, I will keep trying to find any way I can to serve our patients, keep the practice open, and keep you safe.”* It is these three challenges that defined his work over the months ahead.

The most essential of the three was ensuring employee and patient safety. During the early months of the pandemic, the level of anxiety among both patients and employees was high. This virus was new and there was no reliable information on how it spread, on immunity, or on treatment protocols. Meanwhile, news from other parts of the world offered stark images of death and devastation. In such circumstances, healthcare workers were understandably concerned about coming to work. Others had no choice; they were forced to remain in quarantine because of possible exposure to the virus or in some cases because of actual illness. Patients had similar worries, particularly as civic leaders called for people to ‘shelter at home’. Safety had to be job number one.

The second fundamental challenge was keeping the practice open. This required more than just keeping the doors open; patients also had to know that ZP was there, ready and willing to help them. Traditionally, ZP received their patients through referring physicians. However, as COVID-19 took hold, most of these physicians had either closed their doors or shifted to pandemic-related work. By Bob Day’s estimate, 80% of ZP’s referring physicians were no longer working by April of 2020. The organization suddenly had to reach out to patients and to the public directly. This demanded a re-think of how they positioned themselves, updated marketing messages, new visibility and advertising, and heightened customer-awareness. Treating the “sickest of the sick” during a pandemic is a noble mission, but it is only possible if these patients know that your doors are open.

The third challenge was internal: serving patients in new ways. In addition to providing imaging services, other operational changes to ZP’s daily work became necessary. One example was communicating results of imaging procedures. Previously, once radiology tests had been completed, this data was sent to the referring physician who in turn communicated these results to the patient. With these referring physicians no longer available, ZP had to share these results with patients directly. This called for staff to develop new communication skills – a “bedside manner” of sorts. This not only added a new step to their work, it was also, in the words of Bob Day, a “philosophical change” for many radiologists.

## Leadership principles



### 1. Communicate



### 2. Be transparent



### 3. Protect



### 4. Learn as you go



### 5. Celebrate results and achievements

## The solution

*"I am sure someday down the road I may be asked how ZP was able to hold it together, keep going and never miss a beat. There is a simple answer to that question. It's what allows us to be different and special. It's a two-word answer: OUR PEOPLE!!!!!"*

Bob Day, May 7th, 2020



**Bob Day joined Zwanger-Pesiri 20 years ago as an MRI technologist. He is now Chief Operating Officer of the organization, having long since traded in his medical gown for a suit and tie. There were times, in the early days of the pandemic, when 75% of his workforce was suddenly not available, either because of quarantine restrictions or concerns about their safety. On those days, he realized he would have to return to frontline duty. He quickly rediscovered his skills as a technician, but as it turned out, he also had to perform other tasks as well. Cleaning staff were in short supply during the pandemic, so Bob Day did his part, sweeping, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces at the end of the day.**

Understanding that story, and imagining the effect it had on staff to see a member of senior management pushing a broom and operating medical equipment, is key to understanding ZP's success during the pandemic. The people who worked there understood that it was not going to be business as usual, and the folks in charge would do whatever needed doing to get the job done and not run from this challenge.

Looking back on those early days of the pandemic, Bob Day admits that the best way for him to make decisions about how to keep ZP's offices functioning was to *"turn off the TV news and trust my gut. We needed to make decisions on the fly, and we had little or no clear guidance from medical or public health authorities."*<sup>5</sup>

What Day realized is that in such uncertain times he could only depend on himself and his staff. So he kept things as simple as possible. Deal first with the problems in front of you. Never lose sight of the fact that you are in the business of looking after sick people. And never forget that people – patients as well as staff – need to feel safe.

With that in mind, and the challenges ZP faced, Bob Day followed five leadership principles.

*"I think I've written more emails in the last week than I have in the last 5 years combined."*

Bob Day, March 18th, 2020

## 1 Communicate

In 2003, Dr. Robert Ulmer, Matthew Seeger and Timothy Sellnow wrote a book about how organizations should respond to crisis. Their central point was this: *"Communication is the primary means for organizations to reduce uncertainty and coordinate actions."*<sup>6</sup>

From the management of the crisis to recovery, and often even to post-crisis growth, the key historically has been good communication. The way Bob Day saw it, he and Steven Mendelsohn were asking a great deal of ZP's staff at an extremely challenging and uncertain time. And the least he could do was to make sure they knew exactly what was going on.

So the principle rule embraced by Bob Day as he prepared for the epic challenge ahead was to communicate with his team. Regular, honest, open communication via phone, face-to-face and most often email, every single day. The idea was to establish common cause, to convey the sense that regardless of what was going on outside in the city, within the doors of Zwanger-Pesiri healthcare was being practiced by a team of dedicated professionals.

Day wrote literally hundreds of emails during this period. This one captures his attitude and approach:

*"As we begin to piece our practice back together,  
I have some thoughts, general concepts or themes that are in my head:*

- We will be better and stronger*
- It will be different*
- Efficiencies- do more with less*
- Multi-tasking, cross training*
- We will reinvent every workflow/process and streamline them all*
- We need buy in from everyone with all our upcoming changes*
- No rank no privilege, all hands on deck*
- Only positive attitudes, negativity has no place*
- We will continue to support and grow our amazing leadership*
- We have discovered and will continue to mentor our new rising leaders*
- Hope and hard work won out. It got us this far so we will never change and stay true to who we are*

*Happy Mother's Day to all the Moms out there. You make the world a better place for all of us. Have a great weekend"*

—  
Bob Day, May 9th, 2020



*"I am going into survival mode and promise I will do whatever I can to keep this going."*

Bob Day, March 27th, 2020

## 2 Be transparent

There is occasionally an instinct at the executive level to hide bad news from employees. As Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, noted in the Harvard Business Review, *"Transparency is 'job one' for leaders in a crisis. Be clear what you know, what you don't know, and what you're doing to learn more ... Hiding bad news is virtually a reflex in most organizations, but thoughtful leaders recognize that speaking up early and truthfully is a vital strategy in a fast-moving crisis."*<sup>7</sup>

For Bob Day, a big part of communicating with his staff was communicating everything, bad news as well as good. Day knew that when a company faces financial challenges, the employees face them as well. As his emails from that time show, he made no effort to hide from his staff the perils the organization faced, as patient volumes dropped and revenues shrank.

Every day, ZP staff knew they could count on receiving an email from the boss, detailing how the day had gone, laying out how many examinations had been done, reassuring people that they would be paid and, on bad days, giving them reason to believe that things would soon turn around.



*"This is the email I had hoped to avoid.  
We continue to be in free fall with declining patient volumes."*

—  
Bob Day, March 23rd, 2020



*"At any time if you feel we are not protecting you adequately or the risk outweighs the reward you have every right to step away. Again, no judgment and we will see you when this is all behind us and you feel comfortable returning to work."*

Bob Day, April 21st, 2020

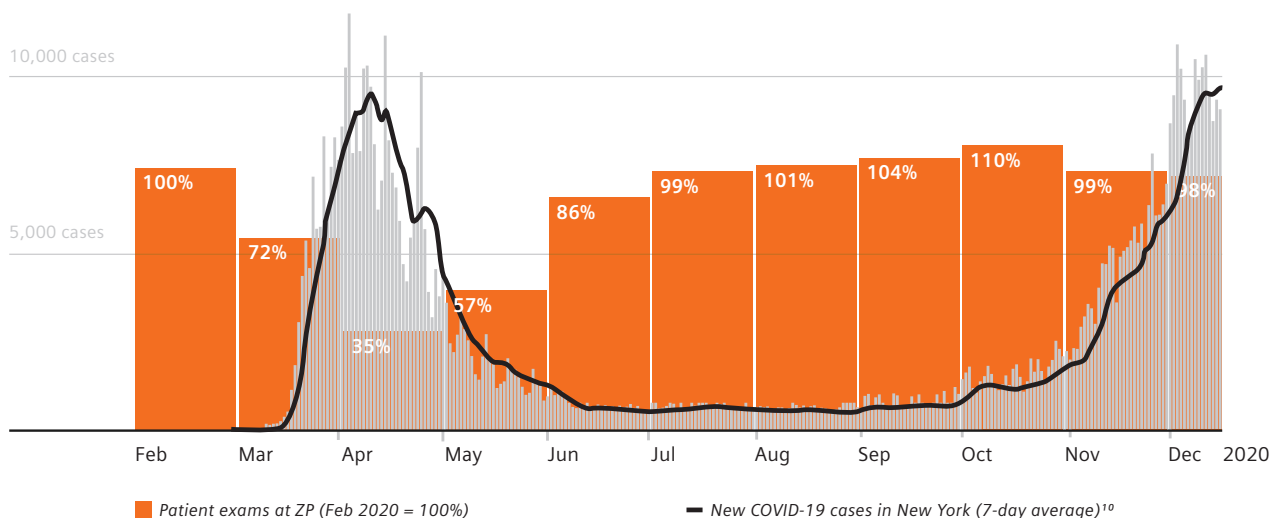
### 3 Protect

As financial pressures mounted in the spring of 2020, Bob Day recognized the crucial importance of keeping the entire ZP organization financially viable. Only then could they provide care to their patients and a livelihood for their employees. But an even more fundamental challenge was ensuring everyone's safety. If people were not protected from the virus, the entire enterprise would falter – and people's lives would be at risk.

ZP brought in a number of innovative measures to protect staff and patients. Workflows were adjusted. Patient protocols were tightened, for example by excluding family members. Even the registration process was streamlined, with much of this work being transferred from the reception desk to the parking lot. Patients were able to register digitally, directly from their cars, where they then waited for their exams. When it was time for their exam, they received a notification or text message and proceeded directly to the scan, thus limiting contact with employees and with other patients.

In addition to limiting interaction between staff and patients, ZP asked patients to answer a number of screening questions, focusing on their possible exposure to COVID-19, and staff were provided with clear guidance about how to respond if patients' answers triggered concerns. Day also made it a priority to ensure that his people had the best personal protective equipment. He saw it as the absolute minimum that ZP could do, given its commitment to helping everyone who needed it.

*"We are protected. We must follow protocol,"* said Day at the time. *"We will see high risk patients. All the questionable patients. We are helping those patients who have nowhere else to go."* (April 10th, 2020).



*"I went to the library to look for a book on how to deal with a 'Coronavirus Crisis for Outpatient Radiology'. They were either all checked out or no one has written on this subject."*

Bob Day, March 18th, 2020

#### 4 Learn as you go

One of the most unsettling aspects of COVID-19, especially early on, was how new and different it was. There was little reliable information about how to deal with it – something to which the healthcare industry is unaccustomed. Today, everyone from senior surgeons to patients relies on having established, verified knowledge. They are used to consulting reliable sources and having recognized experts to refer to. Suddenly this foundation of established expertise was non-existent.

With the scientific certainty that the medical community normally takes for granted suddenly unavailable, caregivers had to embrace an entirely new approach to learning and decision-making. Lorraine Daston of the Max Planck Institute has referred to this type of information-gathering and decision-making as *"ground zero empiricism"*, a method of acquiring information and knowledge in real time, one fact and one experience at a time, not unlike what was common in the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup>

According to Daston, *"Chance observations, apparent correlations, and anecdotes that would ordinarily barely merit mention, much less publication in peer-reviewed journals, had the internet buzzing with speculations among physicians, virologists, epidemiologists, microbiologists, and the interested lay public."*<sup>8</sup>

The staff at ZP were part of this process, fully engaged in acquiring data from their first-hand experiences and observations, and applying this new information. Every day at ZP, the team gained fresh knowledge about the virus – everything from new disinfection measures, more efficient workflows or better ways of diagnosing COVID-19. Bob Day made it clear early and often that as soon as useful facts were verified, they should be shared across all sites and among all staff immediately. Staff became accustomed to receiving emails like this one from their boss:

*"This is information on how it works in the HIGH-RISK OFFICE. We will be wearing N95 masks. A gown, disposable pants, gloves -2 sets, eye goggles, booties and hairnet with long hair in a bun or ponytail. NO jewelry. We will remain in all the protective gear, EXCEPT for lunch. All of this was done by CDC guidelines. The Assistant Directors and myself went through training to put all of this on and off. We will show all of you. As well as the Nurses made a video and they will be making rounds to those offices."*

—  
Email from an employee  
shared by Bob Day, April 10th, 2020



*"I continue to be amazed and could not be prouder to be a part of this team. You all give me strength and keep me going."*

Bob Day, May 17th, 2020

## 5 Celebrate results and achievements

There is growing understanding in the business community that acknowledging and celebrating the accomplishments of employees is not just a nice thing to do, it is the right thing to do for the business. Studies have shown that a working environment in which employees are praised and appreciated leads to lower turnover and increased productivity.<sup>9</sup> During a time of crisis and uncertainty, such praise and recognition are particularly important.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of ZP, the contribution of employees – the determination and courage they showed day in and day out – never went unnoticed, or un-celebrated. Bob Day and the ZP management team made it a priority to let their employees know the difference their service was making in people's lives. One story he made sure to circulate was about a nine-year old boy who, for the purposes of this paper, we will call John.

Many radiology services are elective. They can be re-scheduled or postponed to suit a patient's schedule. In other cases, however, a timely scan is absolutely essential. During the pandemic, the patients who came through ZP's door were, in the words of Bob Day, the "sickest of the sick," often with serious medical conditions and with nowhere else to turn. One such patient was John, who arrived at the clinic after suffering a bad headache for several days. Under normal circumstances John would have gone to his local hospital, but when his grandmother contacted that hospital, she was told that because of COVID-19, there was simply no capacity. John and his grandmother tried ZP, and they were told that capacity would be found. John's same-day scan revealed a brain tumor that required immediate treatment, which might otherwise have gone un-diagnosed for weeks.

This was one of many stories that Day shared with employees, helping them to appreciate the value of their efforts. He also made it a daily priority to share with them his personal appreciation for their efforts, their commitment and their willingness to put themselves at risk for patients and for the organization. On the 16th of May, he wrote this:

*"I want to thank all of you for these past two months of hard work and dedication. The sacrifices you have made are truly inspiring and remarkable. The stress and fear you have endured goes above and beyond my wildest expectations. Many of you have worked without a day off and some of you have been separated from your loved ones due to your exposure to the virus. I feel your pain and know the cost you have paid to keep the practice alive and to be there for our patients. I am also aware of many of you working beyond 40 hours and clocking out and not being paid for the additional hours worked. You are an incredible group and unique team of individuals. The practice, Dr. Mendelsohn and I, will never forget your heroic efforts. From the bottom of our hearts THANK YOU!!!"*

—

Bob Day, May 16th, 2020



## Conclusion

The approach taken by Bob Day at Zwanger-Pesiri is not a blueprint for crisis management, nor is it a checklist of pandemic do's and don'ts. What Bob Day's energy, passion, and determination offer us is a snapshot of how a real leader can improvise and adapt in the face of a tornado of startling new developments, while maintaining an unshakable commitment to a set of clear principles, to his staff and to his patients.

ZP emerged from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic having accomplished something quite extraordinary. They pulled together in the face of widespread confusion and fear, at a time when nobody knew what was happening or how to cope, and they offered patients who were in need an open door and professional help.

Every day, the team diagnosed more than 200 at-risk patients who literally had nowhere else to turn because hospitals could no longer take them in. In many cases, the team at ZP found evidence of serious illnesses that would have gone undiagnosed for too long. And what they heard from their patients is that it was greatly appreciated.

*"You don't know how fast you can run until you have a dog chasing you."*

Bob Day<sup>5</sup>

*"I just want to tell you how much I appreciate your company ... the technician and radiologist could not have been better ... I spoke to the woman at the phone, she could not have been nicer."*

—  
Patient, March 31st, 2020

*"I was really nervous and almost cancelled my appointment. I pulled up and before I even got in the door, I was greeted by an employee with a gown and mask on. She asked me questions and took my temperature. I was so happy they were taking such precautions. Then after my Doppler was done and I was getting dressed and putting my shoes on, the technician was already disinfecting everything. That made me smile a little wider. ... Thank you for making my testing a little easier."*

—  
Patient, April 4th, 2020



The team at ZP had no time to rest on their laurels. A second wave hit New York in the fall of 2020, and as 2021 begins an end to the pandemic is not yet in sight. Yet for Bob Day and the team at ZP, it continues to be business as usual.

As Bob Day put it in December of 2020, a full nine months after the pandemic first hit:

*"The game plan hasn't changed, I always make our first priority staff and patient safety with the understanding we are health care providers and we also have a business that we want to remain viable ... We have done this before, we are battle tested and willing and able to do it again."*

—  
Bob Day, December 7th, 2020

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the Zwanger-Pesiri story is that they not only made it through the pandemic's first wave in early 2020, they actually saw their patient volumes remain steady throughout this unsettled time. The main reason for this is the large number of new patients whom they served. During the pandemic's first wave, more than 70% of the patients they saw were new patients.

In addition to keeping the business operating, Bob Day and the entire ZP team also worked hard learn from what they saw and experienced throughout the pandemic and to respond appropriately. They introduced measures such as employee temperature stations at every time clock, questionnaires that need to be filled out regularly, and disinfecting offices and workspaces every evening. These changes were in response to the pandemic, but many are likely to endure even after the COVID-19 crisis subsides.

What has not changed at ZP, of course, is Bob Day. He is still running towards that fire. He remains committed to his staff and his patients, to his company and to the New York area. He continues to believe that leading by example is the only way to lead, and he still writes a lot of emails like this one:

*"I give up trying to predict when it may happen but some day life will be back to finding something other than COVID to obsess and worry about and then we will be back to normal. Until that day when 'normal' returns we stick together and stay locked in to the script and do what we do ... Wear your masks, wash your hands, social distance when possible, don't let your guard down, treat the virus with respect and most importantly you and your loved ones stay safe."*

—  
Bob Day, December 7th, 2020







## Suggested follow-up on

[Siemens-healthineers.com/insights](https://siemens-healthineers.com/insights)

- Insights Series, Issue 17:  
Protecting those who protect others: Steps to ensure caregivers' physical and mental health  
[siemens-healthineers.com/protect-healthcare-workers-covid-19](https://siemens-healthineers.com/protect-healthcare-workers-covid-19)
- Insights Series, Issue 10:  
Remote work for healthcare professionals  
[siemens-healthineers.com/remote-work-in-healthcare](https://siemens-healthineers.com/remote-work-in-healthcare)
- Insights Series, Issue 9:  
Managing the impact of caregiver stress and trauma in the COVID-19 era: a strategy toward resilience-building  
[siemens-healthineers.com/caregiver-stress](https://siemens-healthineers.com/caregiver-stress)



## Information

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Ralf Meinhardt leads Siemens Healthineers' thought leadership activities related to Transforming Care Delivery. Previously, Ralf worked in the pharmaceutical industry, as well consulting and scientific research. Ralf holds a Doctor of Economics and Social Sciences degree from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. He also holds a Master of Science degree in Management as well as a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Administration. In addition to his academic work at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, he also studied at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB). His scientific background is in the field of corporate strategy, a subject on which he has authored several publications.



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Herbert Staehr serves as Global Head of Transforming Care Delivery for Siemens Healthineers, driving the company's activities and messaging around delivering high-value care. In this capacity, he develops and executes programs and outreach strategies aimed at healthcare providers around the world, as well as stakeholders in every branch of the healthcare industry. Before joining Siemens Healthineers, Herbert spent several years with one of Germany's leading private hospital groups, as head of the Corporate Development department and serving as Managing Director of an acute care and a post-acute care hospital in Germany. He also spent several years with McKinsey & Company with their healthcare practice, providing strategic advice to a wide range of international clients. Herbert holds a doctorate in Healthcare Economics from the University of Hohenheim.

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At Siemens Healthineers, our purpose is to enable healthcare providers to increase value by empowering them on their journey towards expanding precision medicine, transforming care delivery, and improving patient experience, all enabled by digitalizing healthcare. An estimated five million patients worldwide benefit every day from our innovative technologies and services in the areas of diagnostic and therapeutic imaging, laboratory diagnostics and molecular medicine as well as digital health and enterprise services.

We are a leading medical technology company with over 120 years of experience and 18,500 patents globally. With about 50,000 dedicated colleagues in over 70 countries, we will continue to innovate and shape the future of healthcare.

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