

Pharmaceuticals & Medical Products Practice

# Thermo Fisher Scientific CEO Marc Casper on provisioning the front lines in the pandemic

Governments, healthcare providers, and pharmaceutical companies are battling COVID-19 on different fronts. Thermo Fisher Scientific is at the nexus of all of these endeavors.



**The first news** of the COVID-19 pandemic set off an urgent effort by governments to ensure that healthcare providers, first responders, and other at-risk workers had access to personal protective equipment and other necessary supplies. While countries around the world are now taking the first steps toward reopening society, the demand for these supplies isn't likely to let up any time soon.

Marc Casper has been at the center of these activities since the onset of the pandemic. As CEO of Thermo Fisher Scientific, a provider of scientific instrumentation, reagents and consumables, and software, he has had to manage the crisis on two fronts: helping his company adapt, and directing supplies and expertise where they are needed most. He notes, "It's been the most intense period of my business career: keeping our 900 sites open so that we can support the response and, most important, keep our colleagues safe while we do it."

In a video conversation with McKinsey's Jeffrey Algazy and Ramesh Srinivasan, Casper shared his insights on the challenges of working with a wide range of stakeholders, what the pandemic has taught him about leadership, and why he's hopeful for the future. A condensed and edited version of Casper's remarks follows.

### **Collaboration with governments, biotechs, and pharma companies**

Government relations, other than regulatory compliance, has historically been a very small

proportion of our work. We typically engage directly with our customers—whether a hospital or a pharmaceutical company. Now government has become an absolutely essential enabler of the response. Activities include everything from dramatically accelerated regulatory pathways on products to working out all the logistics to ship products.

We're a big global company, with half of our employees based in the United States. Historically, we would have spent very little time working with individual states. Because the US response is primarily at the state level, we've been working aggressively to support the 50 states. From a management-bandwidth perspective, that has been an interesting challenge.

Pharma and biotech is our traditional customer base and represents about half of our revenue. We're helping companies in these sectors with COVID-19 testing for their own colleagues as well as how to screen compounds that might be effective in treating this virus. How do they accelerate vaccine production? If they are successful, all of a sudden they have to scale a therapy or vaccine well beyond what they ever dreamed.

### **Supporting state governments**

We're making sure that states understand their choices—antibody testing, the actual virology testing, and point-of-care versus central lab. We want to give them the basics of the landscape so

**“We have learned a lot about what a return to work looks like. And now we're really working on how to give society the scale to be able to address key questions.”**

# “The thing that gives me hope is the best minds in the world are focused on addressing the challenge at hand.”

they can pursue a strategy that makes sense for their population.

We do some basic education. We want to have enough capacity so that states can actually get their economies up and running. We have collaborated with a number of states to help their labs ramp up testing capacity and give them assurance on supplies.

We've also identified labs within states and moved equipment to those labs to scale them up. Certain states, such as Ohio, have asked us to commit longer term to support a real dramatic ramp-up in testing.

## **A return for business and society**

I think about return through two lenses: first, operating the company; and second, how we enable society to accelerate.

We have learned a lot about what a return to work looks like in this environment. And now we're really working on how to give society the scale to be able to address key questions. What's the role of testing, and how do you make it widely available? How do you then do contact tracing and isolation and help governments think through execution?

At the same time, what will help accelerate the ramp-up is not just information about testing and isolation but testing and some therapy, even if it only helps blunt the symptoms. And then ultimately a vaccine will be needed for life in a post-COVID-19 world.

At the least, for people at high risk we want a level of acceptability in line with the flu. Currently, we don't avoid going out because we might get the flu. Some people get very sick or even pass away from the flu. But we need to get to a point where the level of risk from the coronavirus is acceptable. We need to implement strategies to do that.

## **Lessons for leadership**

Normally when you have challenging news, you really like to have your frontline leaders communicate it, because they have a relationship with their colleagues. For the pandemic, I did global town halls, and I'm super candid: I've walked the factory floors, and I've been here a long time. I gave the good news and the bad news. I expressed gratitude directly and skipped all of the management layers.

Our colleagues hugely valued that. But at the same time, it makes your management team less effective. That has been a real lesson learned. I was aware of what I was doing, but I didn't want to have 10,000 managers communicate any level of bad news when I wouldn't be able to really educate them and put them in a position to be successful.

The other thing I've learned is no matter what the message is, you can't overcommunicate enough. I always believed that, but the cadence of communication has really been important to be able to navigate this time.

## Better days ahead

The thing that gives me hope is the best minds in the world are focused on addressing the challenge at hand. I have tremendous confidence that with the brain power and investment, we'll look back on this time and say, "It's amazing how society responded to put the virus behind us."

It's going to take some time, but I'm actually optimistic that there will be therapies and eventually a vaccine, and that testing strategies will be put in place across the world that facilitate some sort of new normal.

*Comments and opinions expressed by interviewees are their own and do not represent or reflect opinion, policy, position, or endorsement of/by McKinsey & Company.*

**Marc Casper** is CEO of Thermo Fisher Scientific. **Jeffrey Algazy** is a senior partner in McKinsey's New Jersey office, and **Ramesh Srinivasan** is a senior partner in the New York office.

Designed by Global Editorial Services  
Copyright © 2020 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.