

5 QUESTIONS

Gerd Folkers firmly believes that you need to have faith in talented people. *“Fundamentally new things often emerge in the twilight or shadows – rarely in the cold light of analysis.”*



Gerd Folkers

is an ETH Professor of Pharmaceutical Chemistry. From 2004 to 2015 he served as the Chair of Collegium Helveticum, a joint think tank of ETH Zurich and University of Zurich dedicated to the study of new transdisciplinary scientific perspectives. Folkers was appointed head of the Critical Thinking Initiative at the start of 2016.

→ www.criticalthinking.ethz.ch

1 Which teacher or professor had the most far-reaching impact on your career?

I could name several, but in particular Günther Jung in Tübingen (Professor of Organic Chemistry), Hans-Dieter Höltje in Berlin (Professor of Pharmaceutical and Medicinal Chemistry) and Tom Blundell in London (Professor of Biochemistry). They encouraged young scientists like me to question the received wisdom, to break out of the standard doctrines and dogmas, and to set our ambitions higher than ever before. And they were always right there in the thick of things.

2 Is the current system of publishing bad for science and research?

As always, the real damage is caused by people taking things to extremes. Piecemeal publication just for the sake of statistics, citation cartels to boost the h-index, texts that are mostly standardised, and prettified narratives with no negative components – none of these things fit the tradition of enlightened, polarising scientific discourse. And that’s why this form of discourse is increasingly turning to modern media publishing formats.

3 What does “critical thinking” mean to you? And how do you apply it on a daily basis?

Acquiring the capability to make well-founded decisions and to separate the good from the bad – and maintaining that ability in the long term. It applies to everything from reading to cooking.

4 Are there any areas in which your work hasn’t been a success?

Drug design – for example the design of orally administered peptides. All the necessary parameters seemed to be known but they weren’t. We had no luck with combinatorial analysis or simulations, but now it’s getting interesting again because we might see some solutions emerging from genetic/cellular engineering, so from a completely different perspective. That’s what makes science and research so exciting.

5 What’s the best way of helping talented people to flourish?

Having faith in someone instead of expecting the worst. Many positive elements of the new public management system have been completely reversed and are now perceived unfavourably as a form of control. The well-intentioned notion of transparency has morphed into a threat and become a source of relentless individual strategies of self-justification. Fundamentally new things often emerge in the twilight or shadows, rarely in the cold light of analysis.

– Interview by Felix Würsten