

“That’s Understandable” Podcast - Season 1 - Episode 1
Moving Mountains
Final Transcript

Brendan 00:05

- Welcome to "That's Understandable." I'm your host, Brendan McEvoy, and I'm AstraZeneca's US head of External Communications. Why? Because I like communicating. I think the more we do that, the better we can understand a whole slew of complicated topics and the better we can understand each other. And there might be nothing more important than that. But before we dig into any one topic, I want to use this episode to help you understand more about our leadership, their view of the current state of the company, and where things might be going. To do so, we'll be hearing from Joris Silon, US President of the BioPharmaceuticals Business Unit, or in layman terms, a big decision maker. That conversation starts now. Joris, welcome to "That's Understandable", as our very first guest ever.

Joris Silon 01:02

- Hey, Brendan, and thanks for having me, it's very exciting, I'm really happy to be here.

Brendan 01:06

- Yeah, thank you. And to kick it off, I don't want to start with work stuff. I think I want the audience to learn more about you, the person, so I'm going to ask you some questions that have nothing to do with AstraZeneca, this is all about you. Are you ready?

Joris Silon 01:21

- (laughing) I'm ready, let's do this.

Brendan 01:23

- All right, so let's jump right in. Given we've just entered a new year, I have to start with the obvious question, what is your New Year's resolution?

Joris Silon 01:31

- Into the new year, I really want to try to be better at balancing my professional life, building a thriving social life, and keeping myself fit to go about the challenges that face us every day, those would be the three.

Brendan 01:45

- Great, and maybe the next question here might contradict one of those resolutions, but I'll ask it anyways. If you could only eat one meal or item for the rest of your life, what would it be and why?

Joris Silon 01:55

- (laughing) That's a good question. Actually, my wife is influencing me to become more and more vegetarian, and I kind of enjoy it, so I think I'll be trying to follow that path more and more into the next year. It's good for health, it's good for the planet, so, yep, that will be the one I pick.

Brendan 02:11

- Yeah, that's a great one. I probably would've gone with something more junk food-wise, (laughing) but I appreciate that you've got more intentional in what your choice is. So where is your personal happy place?

Joris Silon 02:23

- We just bought a house here in Westchester, which has a little bit of a garden. And when work is a bit stressful and I need some time to think or some me time, I like to be in the garden, just do some weeding and sort some plants. That gives me peace of mind, that's what I would pick.

Brendan 02:37

- Are you pretty good at gardening or?

Joris Silon 02:39

- Oh, no, I'm a complete. No. - (laughing) I'm trying to figure out what I need to do. But it's just hands in the ground and the peacefulness of being outside in nature is very helpful.

Brenda 02:50

- Yeah, good. Well, you got to start somewhere, right?

Joris Silon 02:52

- Exactly.

Brendan 02:53

- So this might actually go into the next question then, so what's your favorite hobby?

Joris Silon 02:57

- It's a bit like you were saying, Brendan, you're an active person, and I try to stay active as well, so it's around sports. I like to ski, as it's wintertime, I like to go for a run, that's easy when I'm traveling, it just takes half an hour, 45 minutes to get a good workout in, or you would find me on my mountain bike doing some of the trails around here.

Brendan 03:16

- Hmm, and the last one, and my favorite, is if you could have any superpower, which would you choose and why?

Joris Silon 03:23

- I don't know if any superhero has that power, but I'd love to be able to look into the future. We're facing an environment, both professionally, privately, societally, that is quite volatile, so being able to look into the future so we can get better prepared would be a very welcome superpower.

Brendan 03:39

- No, that's a great one. I always think about things like seeing through walls or flying, but.

Joris Silon 03:48

I'm not sure it's always great to know what's coming around the corner, to be honest.

Brendan 03:50

I've never gone to a psychic or fortune teller for that exact reason, whether it's true or not, (laughing) not sure I wanna know.

Joris Silon 03:55

not sure it's completely always positive, but on some parts, it would be great to understand better how the future will form itself.

Brendan 04:02

- No, unfortunately we can't tell the future, but we can look into the past to better understand how we got to where we are today. So what is Joris' past, what path led him to this podcast, to this life?

Brendan 04:17

What drew you to a career in healthcare and how did you land at AstraZeneca?

Joris Silon 04:21

- From an academic point of view, I'm a master in science in sports and exercise, and then I did marketing in postgraduate. So that combination between how to keep people healthy and how the science is evolving in that space, and then together with that, that more business-orientedness with that, and how then to make science a business or business as a science, that combination drew me to healthcare. And I'm just enjoying every day to think about what we can do more to keep people healthy, prevent disease, and if needed, treat the disease and hopefully cure it one day.

Brendan 04:54

- Mm-hmm, was there something in particular that, I know you sort of have been in various pharmaceutical companies over your career, but have been with AstraZeneca for, I believe it's well over 20 years?

Joris Silon 05:06

- That's right.

Brendan 05:07

- What is it about AstraZeneca that keeps you here, inspires you to get up every day and do what you do?

Joris Silon 05:13

- With no doubt, the first thing is the people. I'm just so lucky to be able to work with talented people every day, very smart people, very dedicated people that are all inspired by science, by innovation, by improving patient outcomes. And it just puts me on the top of my toes every day. It makes me want to be a better person, both professionally and privately, and that gets me out of bed every day with a lot of motivation.

Brendan 05:38

- Mm, that's great, yeah, I can totally echo that sentiment. I mean, the people here, incredible. Definitely, I know that's what gets me out of bed this morning is not only just the great people we get to work with, but then the combined purpose and shared interest in doing something that's really meaningful in the world.

Joris Silon 05:54

- Yeah, I think as well, Brendan, the world of science is evolving so fast as we speak. So other than the people, the innovation that is striving and all the immersive technology changes that we are having, both from a scientific, biologic point of view and how we can target more and more diseases, but also from a digital, technological point of view and how those two are converging and hopefully being able to cure or treat much more diseases in the future is very inspiring. I think this is the years of science, and at that time, working in a company like AstraZeneca, where that puts science at the heart of everything we do, is just fantastic.

Brendan 06:36

- Yeah, absolutely. Joris, you came into your current role in 2022, so just a little less than a year ago, what are your reflections over the past year?

Joris Silon 06:45

- Yeah, I joined in this role, I think it was March of last year. So my reflections are, first, there's such an opportunity in this role to improve US people's lives. We have a great pipeline, we have a great set of medicines. As an organization, we're really focusing not only on medicines, but on improving outcomes of patients and everything you need to do, including medicines, but not only providing great medicines to get there. Like how can we increase diagnosis of patients with chronic kidney disease or COPD, or how can we identify lupus much earlier and treat lupus in a much better way? All in context of improving US people's lives. And I think the opportunity we have with that merit, with the people that we have in the business and the talents that we have in the business that is going out every day and working with healthcare systems to get that done is just tremendous, and it's very inspiring to be part of that momentum.

Brendan 07:44

- Mm-hmm, and I imagine, if we're now sort of turned to look ahead, so at this year in front of us, I imagine many of those same reflections are sort of jumping-off points for what gets you excited about this year, but do you wanna expand upon, is there one or two things about 2023 that are really top of mind, really have you energized this year?

Joris Silon 08:04

- Yeah, I think it's a continuation of what I've been saying, but can add to that, seeing our progressing pipeline, we're preparing for a couple of new launches, especially for patients with asthmatic disease. We're also moving in into specific areas of cardiomyopathy, which is a certain support for patients that present themselves as heart failure but have a different origin of the disease, which is very exciting. I'm really looking forward to start to work in those new areas so we can bring those great medicines to patients further down the line. Obviously, it's not only about opportunities, there's dynamic forces and challenges that we will need to withstand as well and build a resilient business to continue to thrive. We might face an economic downturn, inflation is raging, and yeah, in some countries, national debt will be increasing at the back of COVID, so we'll need to require some business resilience to meet those economic uncertainties as well. So yeah, those are probably the two sides of the coin into next year.

Brendan 09:07

- A lot has changed in the past 20 years since Joris first joined AstraZeneca. Just think about what life was like in 2003, do you even remember what life was like before the iPhone? That said, there might not be any change as significant as the COVID-19 pandemic we're in right now. And just like every other aspect of life, the workplace was greatly affected.

Brendan 09:29

How have you seen us adapt since the arrival of the pandemic in early 2020?

Joris Silon 09:34

- That's a great question, Brendan, because as you say, the pandemic has been hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime event for us personally, but also for organizations like ours, and our culture, the way we behave has definitely adapted since that event. I would allude to two pieces of that. One is that we've learned through our efforts in helping humanity out of this situation through a vaccine or through biologic monoclonal antibody that protects immunocompromised patients, that the speed at which we can provide these solutions is unprecedented. And we're taking some learnings out of that behavior that we had with that pandemic mindset

and that urgency to save people's lives, how can we use some of that thinking into our normal programs and therefore accelerate them and bring them to patients faster? So that's definitely been one big element of that. One other piece of the pandemic learning is how we can work in public-private relationship in a very effective way. We have been collaborating with the government very intensively over the last couple of years, and that has helped us to understand how public and private coming together can be a force of good for society at large. And we've learned a lot out of that and we wanna continue doing that going forward. And maybe the third one I'll allude to is just different ways of working, both ourselves, but also our customers. And the stakeholders have learned to embrace digital in a more meaningful and forceful way during the pandemic because there was no way to do it face-to-face. And we have learned a lot in terms of what is possible in embracing digital technology, digital ways of communicating, and we're continuing to benefit from that going forward. Those would be the three ones, Brendan.

Brendan 11:18

- Yeah, no, I appreciate that. I think it is, there's definitely a digital influence or thread sort of through everything. I mean, even if you think about prior to 2020, how often I did a video call or anything like that, it was just very rare, and now we're seeing this ability to connect with folks in so many different ways, and in many ways, I'd say even improving the interactions that we're having. So as hard as it is to have gone through COVID, it's nice to at least be able to reflect on some positives that have come out as a result of it, just given how significant the impact was from a negative standpoint.

Joris Silon 11:50

- Absolutely.
(bright music)

Brendan 11:52

- Even aside from the pandemic, we're living in a time of major uncertainty and doubt, there's no telling what the year will bring. This is where someone like Joris has to fully understand the global picture as he evaluates the potential landmines around the healthcare industry heading into 2023.

Joris Silon 12:09

- Yeah, I alluded to the potential economic downturn, let's see how that plays out across the globe, but that might put some pressure and require us to be more resilient from a business point of view to meet those economic uncertainties, so that's one. The other one, there is greater geopolitical conflict ongoing in the world. So not going into details there, but hopefully that's not gonna have a greater impact than it has already, but it does influence, for example, global supply chain and how that is disrupted, it was already disrupted after COVID, and it continues to be quite a bit of an issue on certain parts of the global supply chain. So those are more overall trends. Maybe a last one, and we know that, is that climate change is continuing to speed up and the rapid rise of global temperatures that we see due to too much greenhouse gas is putting the sustainability of the planet at risk. So those are kind of more holistic trends that will be shaping AstraZeneca's future. And a little bit closer to home is the Inflation Reduction Act that went through Congress over summertime last year. We're working very diligently in understanding how that will impact our portfolio of today, but also our pipeline for the future. Not everything is a negative in there, I think the government is trying to protect patients and patients' copay with a cap of \$2,000 in the party redesign, which we've been very positive about, and I think that's a very good thing for patients.

However, there's other parts where the government will be going into price negotiations,

which ultimately will lead to less lifespan of medicines in the US market, which then could hamper the innovation for patients. And we're working with stakeholders to see how we can avoid some of these unintended impacts of the Inflation Reduction Act on innovation and on patient outcomes going forward.

Brendan 14:05

- Mm, yeah, there are quite a few factors out there, and it'll be interesting to see, as the year progresses, how we react and respond to them, and like you said, how we continue to partner with the various stakeholders within the healthcare environment to ultimately do what's best, what's best for patients.

Joris Silon 14:24

- Mm, absolutely. But I think, back to our previous conversation, Brendan, innovation and bringing value to society, I think will always be applauded by the stakeholders, and that's what we're focusing on as an organization. We follow the science, we follow the innovation, and we try to come out with solutions that help improve patient outcomes. And I think if we focus on that, we will be okay.

Brendan 14:51

- Mm-hmm, absolutely. Yep, keeping our North Star always in mind.

Joris Silon 14:55

- Absolutely.

Brendan 15:00

- Did you hear him mention climate change back there? It's an overwhelming topic and it can almost feel impossible to make a difference. While each of us collectively can make progress, it will take large and small companies prioritizing action to make a significant impact. So I wanted to know where Joris sees AstraZeneca fitting in with the climate change conversation. I'd love actually for you to provide some perspective around AstraZeneca's focus around climate change, around environmental protection, sort of our broader sustainability efforts.

Joris Silon 15:36

- Yeah, absolutely, it's a very important topic, and maybe people underestimate the polluting effect of the overall healthcare system and environment. It's pretty high, especially when you think about hospitals and the bigger healthcare systems in terms of how they use carbon and how they emit carbon, it does add to the burden of the global greenhouse emissions. So as we are part of that ecosystem, I think we do have a role and a leading role to play to get into a better place. The other part why it's so important is that, fundamentally, we are here to improve US or global people's lives, and you can only do that when you live on a healthy planet. And that's why we kind of say, "A healthy planet and a healthy society, ultimately, helps us to reach our North Star as an organization, which is healthy people." That's why we're quite passionate about making sure we do what we can do to lead the charge in improving greenhouse emissions and helping the planet be in a better place. Some of the things that we are doing there are quite exciting, and I know people have heard about the Sustainable Markets Initiative, which our CEO is leading and was present at COP27 very recently. And where, as an industry, we have come together with seven biopharmaceutical companies, together with stakeholders, like university, governments, et cetera, to try to see what healthcare can do to help solve the problem. One of the streams that I've been involved in, for example, is how can we reduce the carbon emission along a patient's journey? And we've come up with a couple of key initiatives that you can do along a patient journey to ensure that carbon emission is reduced whilst we improve the patient outcomes. It was very

exciting to see how, again, public-private comes together and try to solve some of these issues. Other elements of the Sustainable Market Initiative is about the supply chain and what can we do to reduce carbon emission out of our supply chains in producing biopharmaceuticals? And a third one is around clinical trials and how can digital help to reduce the emissions that are produced whilst doing clinical trials? So it's very inspiring work.

Brendan 17:44

- Now, these are some lofty ambitions, and it's not something only the healthcare sector is dealing with, obviously. From fashion, to consumer packaged goods, to motor vehicles, the whole world is trying to figure out how to save the planet while still pursuing our ambitions, and it's just one of a multitude of problems AstraZeneca is focused on. Something that maybe is a bit more specific to the healthcare industry is health equity, the concept of equal access to care, regardless of socioeconomic factors, our company has an obligation to be a part of that solution. So I asked Joris what AstraZeneca was doing in pursuit of health equity.

Joris Silon 18:25

- Absolutely, this inequality is present and it persists, and I think we need to be honest that the public discontent around that is, rightly so, on the rise. So I do think we have a role to play to make sure that we strive for health equality and make sure that our medicines and our solutions overall reach all patients that can benefit for it. And we're doing multiple initiatives in AstraZeneca to try to reach that. I don't know if people noticed that, but on the market access index, which is an independent index that gauges how various companies are doing efforts to get medicines to people who really need it, including underserved populations or people in emerging markets, et cetera, and we took quite a jump in that ranking to number three in the pharma industry, which I'm very proud about. Just underpins how we're doing efforts in focusing on that part, we're definitely not where we need to be.

Brendan 19:16

And to pick your thought around digital, I think there's so many good things about digital means of reaching out to people, getting them diagnosed whilst they're at home or participating in a clinical trial whilst they're at home through digital means, rather than needing to go through centers where they usually not go to, et cetera, is a big opportunity for us to continue to increase our diversity in our clinical trials, for example.

Joris Silon 09:39

- Mm-hmm, yeah, it's a very important topic, and one that I know we're deeply connected to.

Brendan 19:45

So I'm gonna shift gears a bit, and really, before we close, and I'll give you an opportunity in a moment to discuss anything else that's sort of burning on your mind or, I know maybe there's a topic that's still lingering. But having had the opportunity to get to know you more closely and from a professional standpoint over the past year working together, there are two things that stick out in my mind that we have to discuss before we end. The first is your leadership mantra, "Move mountains through people with integrity," what does it mean to you and how did you land on it?

Joris Silon 20:16

- Ah, I'm happy (laughing) you remember that, Brendan. How did I get to it is pretty straightforward, it's just through the years sitting back and think about what defines my leadership, what gets me excited, what gets me out of bed, and I landed on these three different aspects. Moving mountains means I'm getting excited by something that is bold,

that is ambitious, that changes the needle, that can do something big and great for society and patients, then my heartbeat goes up and I get twinkles in my eyes and I get very excited to do that. The second piece is very much related to that, I also understood throughout my career that if you wanna move a mountain, you can push hard yourself, but it's not gonna move. So you need a group of people and you need to build a strong team with the right capability, skillset, but also the right attitude to all push in the same direction. And if you do that, you can really move bigger mountains than you ever thought was possible. And then the third one, integrity is just something very close to, I think, who I am. I try to be authentic, I appreciate openness and transparency in the way we're working. Pharmaceuticals, as such, the healthcare industry, society at large is very complex and fragmented, and we're just dealing with, sometimes, very difficult and complex business issues. So having the right conversations and having people that, or build an environment where people are happy to speak their minds and bring their best selves to the table and not hold back, I think, brings out the better solutions.

Brendan 21:52

- I've seen Joris live this mantra consistently, and I admire it. Who doesn't wanna change the world, to move mountains? I think, deep inside, most of us would like to be remembered for trying to make a positive impact, and that doesn't have to be on some gigantic scale with a huge corporation, that can be with your kids, or your coworkers, or a friend, or your dog, but for me, it is related to my job. And I know Joris feels that too, but I also happen to know that this man is not all work and no play. Specifically, I know he can tread the dance floor. You see, when Joris was growing up in Belgium, techno music was thriving and making its way into the mainstream, and that music tends to make you move.

Brendan 22:36

Turning to a lighter note, I think it's only fair to fill the listeners in on your secret, or perhaps not-so-secret talent, and that is dancing. So I have to ask, where does the rhythm come from, the skill and the love of dance?

Joris Silon 22:50

- (laughing) That's a surprise you come up with that. I don't know, it's just, I've loved music since I was little and I was growing up, when I was going to university, I think I followed one dance course with like rock and roll, which I had fun with. And I just, probably close to who I am, I don't like just to stand at the sidelines and watch things, I am somebody that jumps in and wants to participate and be part of it rather than watching it. So if there is a party or we have something to celebrate and there is a dance floor, you will find me on the dance floor, not on the sidelines watching it.

Brendan 23:26

- Well, I can't think of a better note to end on than that, but I did promise to give you the final word. So are there any other burning topics, anything that is still sitting in your mind that you'd like to share with the listeners before we end?

Joris Silon 23:39

- I think we covered a lot of ground, Brendan. I just would like to say that, I mean, we've spoke about that I think the best is yet to come. I've been working in this industry for over 20 years, but what we currently see in terms of what is possible through science targets that we never thought were ever be druggable, as they say, which then leads to a treatable disease, that's just going up. Every week, you see a new platform, a new technology boiling up that could address some of the highest unmet needs that are still out there in the world. So it's just such an exciting time to work in a biopharmaceutical company like AstraZeneca. And truly

believe the best is yet to come, I can't wait to see how we can help patients improve outcomes even more in the next decade.

Brendan 24:24

- Amazing, thank you for joining me. Thanks for your openness, and helping not only me, but our listeners understand you a little bit better.

Joris Silon 24:32

- Sure, Brendan, it's my pleasure, and really, thank you for having me.

Brendan 24:39

- Have you ever interviewed your boss? (laughing) It's kind of sweat-inducing, but I love coming to work every day for someone so passionate about helping people and creating a healthier world and a healthier planet. That's what drives me. Hopefully hearing from Joris helps you understand a little bit more about what we're trying to do here at AstraZeneca. That was a wide-ranging conversation, but on our next episode, we're going to hone it in. We'll be trying to understand the state of health equity in America right now, because, honestly, we've got work to do. And to help me break that issue down, I'll be speaking with Christie Bloomquist, AstraZeneca's VP for US corporate and government affairs. So join me, because there's so much more to talk about. Until then, be well, be healthy, be understanding.