



Haldor Topsøe

Haldor Topsøe (1913–2013)

Dr. Haldor Topsøe, founder and Chairman of the Board of Haldor Topsøe A/S, passed away on May 21, 2013, only four days before his one-hundredth birthday. His legacy will live on.

Haldor Topsøe created a unique company which today is world-leading in several areas of heterogeneous catalysis. His achievements, however, have had a more extensive reach. Through his perseverance and dedication, as well as his technological and scientific contributions toward solving key global challenges related to energy, food, and the environment, he has contributed significantly to the global community.

Topsøe was a researcher, an entrepreneur, and a businessman. He was also an idealist, and a humanist very much engaged in the global balance. In his own words, “The corporate world in itself means nothing unless it improves the lives of people and the conditions in poor countries.” Topsøe often told the story of the driving force behind these insights and achievements:

Haldor Topsøe was born in 1913 into a world recovering from a world war and degenerating into recession. As a young man studying in Copenhagen, he saw the lines of people queuing for jobs, queuing for a free meal; he vowed to himself that he would make a difference, that he would use his knowledge and privileged position to contribute to making the world a better place.

Haldor Topsøe studied under, among others, Niels Bohr, the Danish physicist and Nobel Prize winner. When Hitler’s troops invaded Denmark on April 9, 1940, Haldor Topsøe had already made a name for himself. A plane was ready to take him and his family to the United States where he had been offered a job, but the departure was impossible, as two of Haldor Topsøe’s children were hospitalized. Topsøe’s wife, Inger Topsøe, turned to him and said, “Now that we cannot leave, you must make something which will be useful after the war.”

Early on, Haldor Topsøe had seen that catalysis held high potential, and he was correct in this prediction. Today, most of the world’s chemical production is based on catalytic processes.

Topsøe’s work was based in the natural sciences, and his years with Niels Bohr were formative ones. Haldor Topsøe based his company on the strong belief that a fundamental understanding of the processes and mechanisms underlying the products would enable the company’s employees to create products with a competitive edge, products which were best in class. His thought was that only in that way could they provide customers with the best solutions. Therefore, Topsøe’s policy was understandably to invest significantly in research—in manpower as well as in equipment, research instruments, bench-scale test units, and pilot-scale units.

Topsøe likewise based the company on the conviction that research and wild ideas were vital in order to stay competitive—even research which may not contribute directly to the bottom line. Ideas which seemed unrealistic 20 or 30 years ago have developed into technologies which contribute greatly to the business today. And Haldor Topsøe allowed and encouraged these ideas to grow. Through his own scientific understanding and visionary insights, he inspired the people around him, acting as a catalyst for the company he created.

Topsøe was driven by the determination to make a difference. The roots of this determination lie in the depression of the 1930s—and in Topsøe’s opportunity to contribute to both technological and social change. Put simply, his mandate was that if you have the ability and the means to contribute to the world around you, you also have the obligation to do so. He advocated that a company has an obligation to contribute to solving key global challenges and to the communities in which it operates. Over the years, he contributed funds for schools and financial support for programs serving street children.

Topsøe held many influential posts during his lifetime. His knowledge of and insight into sociopolitical megatrends benefited the world, for example, when he served on the Population Council in the 1970s. He had a knack for networking, which brought him into contact with many influential people: politicians, world leaders—from Nelson Mandela to Mahatma Gandhi. On such occasions, Topsøe used his talent for dialogue to bring across his sociopolitical points of view to the benefit of mankind. These views have also been publicized in several books dealing with the global social and economic situation.

Numerous awards and medals have been given to him, among them the Hoover Medal, which he received in 1991. To Topsøe, one award in particular stood out: In 1999, the Danish Society of Engineers named him “the Engineer of the Century.” The title was given because of his technical achievements within catalysis. He was also honored because of his social commitment.

Haldor Topsøe’s social engagement, his passion for science, his ambition, and his determination created a successful company which made a significant difference in the world. His strong contribution to the catalysis community and to the world at large, and his belief that we all have an obligation to contribute, remain his legacy.

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