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Best Practices of Mentor Programmes in Belgium

Our society today is based on the principle of life long learning on which employment and career opportunities depend. The concept of 'learning' implies two different modes: formal and informal learning. Formal learning takes place at school, in vocational training or at university. Informal learning is most common: We learn by experiences, at the coffee table, from discussions, by 'role models' etc.

Personal contact and networking are an important basis for learning as well as for a professional career. Traditionally, there are different ways within our culture for male managers to meet in a formal or informal context. In 'old boys networks' the exchange of experiences result in a coaching or mentoring process by the senior participants.

For women these support structures are rare. Up to now, female management has not been a common thing. The lack of an older generation of 'role models' and a strong network have been important reasons. Research has shown that the promotion of women in middle and top management, in the profit as well as in the non-profit sector, still falls behind the male colleagues. The percentage of women in political and decision-making functions is also much lower. In the financial respect, leading positions for women are underestimated regarding to equal functions occupied by men.

The Social Economic Institute (SEIN) of the Limburg University in Belgium is a partner within the European project *Preparing Women to Lead*. During the successful participation in this mentor programme, SEIN developed additional mentor and management programmes which combine the stimulation of life long learning with the promotion of leading positions for women in the profit and non-profit sector and in politics.

I. The SEIN Programmes for Women - Method and tools

The mentor programmes of SEIN aim to optimise and broaden the professional development of women in management and politics by theoretical input, by training of personal and professional qualities, by personal coaching via mentoring and by offering a broad network. The projects can be seen as an important instrument in a professional training and coaching system for Human Resource Management. The method used for these programmes is based on four 'tools':

Mentoring

Mentoring can be a 'one to one' coaching relationship or the relationship between a mentor and a small group of participants or the combination of these two forms. In professional life, mentoring is used more and more as a specific training method. An experienced manager or a top politician shares experiences with 'mentees'. In most cases, formal education systems for politicians, members of Trade Unions or managers do not exist. The exchange of information and experiences available by observing a 'role model' (the mentor) is therefore of ultimate importance.

The mentor and the mentee meet on a regular basis organised and prepared by a co-ordinator. The meetings are structured on the basis of a checklist and prepared with a strategy and a thesis which the mentors will discuss with the mentees. In addition, mentor and mentee give frequent evaluations to the co-ordinator so that she/he can follow the process of the meetings. Outside the meetings, the participants can contact the mentors or the co-ordinator for advice and support.

Train the Trainer

An experienced manager is not automatically a good mentor. She/he can be prepared for the role of a mentor by training. In addition, a manager will not spend time and energy with one or more mentees if there is for her/him no win-win situation. Therefore an interesting training programme will be presented to the mentors.

Mentoring gives the mentor interesting reflections on her/his own career and work field. Furthermore she/he will create a relationship based on trust with the mentees because professional and personal items will be discussed. The preparation course 'train the trainer' will deal with these aspects as well as with 'women and management' and 'best practices' of mentoring.

Education and Training

The education within the mentor projects includes both informal and formal learning. The programmes contain interactive training sessions based on the demands of the participants. During the programme a continuous evaluation of the learning goals and a coaching of the trainers and mentors takes place. Topics related to the position of a manager or a politician are presented. Examples can be communication, motivation of personnel, time-management and quality management. The mentors here have an active

role because they manage the groups and assist them in solving and discussing specific topics.

Networking

Together with training and mentoring, functional networks will be created. On the one hand the mentors and the trainers open their networks for the participants. On the other hand new networks are created within the group of participants. The network and group process is of great importance for the discussions and exchange of experiences during the training sessions. Furthermore the network provides a platform of colleagues who are on a certain position in their career and carrying out their ambitions.



The Belgian political scientist Caroline Jansen, mentee 2000, in the preparatory seminar. Her mentor was Anne van Lancker, Member of the European Parliament.

II. The SEIN Programmes

Besides *Preparing Women to Lead* SEIN promotes and co-ordinates the following mentor programmes:

SOFIA Management 1999 and 2000

This is a one year mentor and training programme for women in management positions in profit and some non-profit organizations in the Limburg province. The programme is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), the Limburg Fund and fees of the participants.

The fact that all participants finished the programme proves that it was successful and appreciated by the participants.

All the mentees wanted to continue the programme. Even the local newspapers and the province of Limburg were interested in the project. Therefore the ESF and the Limburg Funds sponsored a follow-up of six months. In 2000 a new SOFIA management programme has started which is more or less the same. Besides the ESF and the Limburg Fund, the department Equal Opportunities of the province is a partner in this project. Four mentors guide the group. Two new mentors, who were participating last year, are now promoting as a mentor. The flow of mentors through these groups is an important aspect of networking and recruiting mentors.

SOFIA Politica

SOFIA Politica is a mentoring and training programme for politicians. It prepares young women who will participate as a candidate for the elections in October 2000 for the provinces and the councils. The project is a partnership between Equal Opportunities of Limburg and SEIN. The mentors are active women of the main four political parties (SP-socialists, VLD-Liberals, Agalev-Greens, Volksunie-Flemish party).

Each mentor guides a group of mentees of their party. The evening meetings once a month based on: structures of the councils and provinces, gender and equal opportunities, women in politics, challenges for the Limburg county and mind mapping. The results of the evaluations are very positive and the local and national press published on this project.

The women are very enthusiastic about the programme because it is a unique programme in which women of different parties can meet and exchange experiences crossing the party borders. In addition they have asked for a continuation of this programme. A proposal will be worked out after the election in October 2000 and a programme will be presented for the women when they have achieved a mandate.

VIVA - Women in Trade Unions

VIVA (Vrouwen in Vakbonden) started in January 2000 as a mentor and management programme for women who are active in the trade unions in Limburg. The difference with the SOFIA programmes is the background of the women. Most of the participants are workers and have a lower education. The presented topics are communication, negotiation, assertiveness and human resources (from employer's and employee's point of view). Mentoring and networking are introduced for the first time within the different trade unions and here too the crossing borders between them is a unique project in Belgium. Until now the evaluations are very positive.

SOFIA Summer University

In September 2000, a two weeks management training and internship will be organised for young women in higher education. Most of the higher education and universities in Belgium do not offer management programmes or traineeships for students. In this respect SEIN wants to organise training for young women who are interested in leadership positions and who want to meet a woman working in a management position. The training consists of women in management, leadership, communication and presentation techniques and teamwork. Most of the mentors for SOFIA Summer University are mentors in the SOFIA

management project. So again, a flow-through of mentors in the programmes is visible.

New Programmes

We know that a great demand exists for programmes that combine informal and formal learning. The positive reactions of the actual programmes have proven that the mentoring projects fulfil these needs. Therefore SEIN will continue its work by exploring new programmes for women in specific sectors. Mentor projects that will be worked out are: women in ICT, women in the social sector, women in the police and women/girls in techniques.