

MENTORING PRACTICES IN THE ROMANIAN BANKING INDUSTRY – A CASE STUDY

Cristina Gabriela Mihailescu³⁰²

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Abstract: *The paper elaborates on the current state of the mentoring practices within the Romanian banking industry and elaborates on the gaps to use them to build a competitive advantage. The analysis focuses on the particular situation defined by traditionalist and conservationist approaches of facts, and their relation with the new coaching and mentoring methods that need to be developed by banking institutions to get the competitive advantage (Ilies & Metz, 2017).*

The results of the case study presented show that mentors and mentees valued the opportunity to participate in such programs and the relationship (Raabe & Beehr, 2003) developed inside the “team”; nevertheless, the final results are still in suffering as there are major expectations that have not been satisfied. The loss is quite important as the linked to a large area from the program methodology to the outcome of the programs.

The findings, based on a personal interpretation of facts, documentation and respondents’ answers, suggest that properly implemented and used, the activity of mentoring could become a powerful tool for the companies in their attempt to turn out to be more competitive; the contribution could be significant to increasing the staff potential, building loyalty, ensuring engagement and reducing the costs.

Keywords: *banking; mentoring; career development; competitiveness; competitive advantage*

Introduction

Mentoring practices are modern tools that just started to become lively in the Romanian banking sector. According to the *Society for Human Resources Management*, the surveys developed during the decade in the USA companies show that 25% implemented internal formal mentoring programs (Chun *et al*, 2010), while in Romania, things moved faster in the highly dynamic ITC and consulting industries and businesses, while in the banking sector they are still at dawn.

Traditionalist by mentality and approaches, the banking industry has locally used other forms to improve their employees skills and attitude, of which the most common ones were the trainings and, by some extent nowadays, coaching. Usually, as the National Bank of Romanian (NBR) Report on Financial Stability mentions (2017), the trainings addressed subjects like banking products, financial analysis, risk management, legislation for lending or for anti-money laundry, sales, etc. (therefore - jobs related necessitates knowledge, management skills, ethics and personal development). While there is supposed to be a certain direct influence of the level of knowledge-related staff development and bank’s profitability, the perception is that the same statement is not valid anymore if trying to establish a relationship between the trainings and the job satisfaction level of their beneficiaries (with its consequent engagement level, turnover rate, etc.).

³⁰² Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Piața Romană 6, București 010374, Romania

Although the statistics may seem encouraging - 47% of the banks staff have stayed with the same employer for seven years, compared to four years in other industries (Ilies & Metz, 2017), and that the average gross salary in banking is higher than in 90% of the rest of the industries and double (6851 lei) than the average national wage (3257 lei) (Romanian Banking Association), still the turnover rate is at 19%, or, differently said, one out of five employees decides to leave the bank. If during the *boom* of the banking system (2007, 2008) the employees were leaving one bank for the other, then they added financial non-banking institutions on the list of potential employers, and currently they tend to leave for consultancy services, software companies, telecommunications, as full time employees or, more and more often, for project-based assignments. Banks come to realize that they are facing probably a paradigm shift in staff expectations and that, therefore, they should address differently staff needs. Banks' need to redefine themselves in the eyes of the employees and on the labor market has led to embracing more innovative development tools (Kraiger *et al.*, 2018).

One of these was the use of Mentoring, usually combining the two approaches described below:

- 1) Firstly, Mentoring addressing the needs of the large public, *social mentoring* through programs that were aiming to develop targeted audiences. Some focused on students (Romanian Bank for Development - *BRD Mindcraft Academy*), entrepreneurs (Banca Transilvania – “*Bucurestiul Intreprinzator*”), medium to large companies (Raiffeisen Bank – “*Catalizator*”), or on the people who do not use banking services (persons with low income, those who are planning to become entrepreneurs, social organizations (Erste Group – BCR (Romanian Commercial Bank)).
- 2) Secondly, formal mentoring programs, targeting Bank' own staff and focusing on developing, for example, leadership skills.

Traditionally, mentoring takes the form of a relationship between a more experienced (the mentor) and a less experienced person (the mentee). The mentee (*protégée*) is seen sometimes as a new comer in the organization, a young one or simply as a subordinated employee (Gisbert-Trejo *et al.*, 2018). Other more modern mentoring relationships are formed between peers (Allen, *et al.*, 1997), or “reversely”, the mentor being in this case the “rooker”, the inexperienced of the two (Wiseman, 2014). Irrespective of the relationships between the mentor and the mentee, researchers of the subject are unanimously identifying two major forms in which mentoring appears: an unstructured but more intense mentoring, i.e. the informal one (Janssen *et al.*, 2016), or the structured, organizational, programmed mentoring, the formal one.

Companies organize formal mentoring programs having multiple purposes, like an increase in the employees (both mentors and mentees)' engagement, strengthening the organizational culture and spreading its values and, very often, nurturing talents, growing the next generation of managers or leaders of the organization (Chun. *et al.*, 2010), improving the communication inside the company or implementing generational transition (Gilbert-Trejo *et al.*, 2018). All actors of the game, not only the companies, also the mentors and the mentees benefit from the relationship (if successful). Researches show that generally mentors enter the relationship wanting to give back (Raabe & Beehr, 2003), something that they have at their turn received from a mentor; or by the desire to see other person growing under their eyes. It is, for mentors, also a “rejuvenation treatment”, as they become more aware of how new generations understand business, work environment, how they perceive managerial styles and how these affect them (Kram, 1985). The mentee usually expects better career opportunities (Scandura, 1992), career sponsorship (Kram, 1985), self-awareness, increased visibility or inclusion (Forret, 1996).

Regarding the pairing between mentors and mentees, while in the informal mentoring this is done “by chemistry”, the dyad being naturally formed and mostly generated by the mere desire to enter together in the relationship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999), in the structured program there is a third party involved (the organization) and the pairing may come in more forms (Sullivan, 1993): either by random selection, by using “profile sheets” (Forret, 1996), or by matching personality similarities like being open to new experiences or the degree of conscientiousness (Menges, 2016). Apparently, the similarities between persons make them like to be together and work better together even under a structured scenario. Similarities do not necessarily have to be real, it is enough being *perceived* (the tendency to copy a characteristic that you like, to make it yours, to appear similar to the one admired); on the opposite, persons having different personalities, different way to position themselves towards the job or life important aspects tends to generate an unfavorable interaction (Menges, op. cit.).

This study intends to evaluate whether the implementation of the program in the analyzed Romanian Banks was done in a proper way, addressed correctly the targeted audience, how was the entire program perceived and if the expectations with which each party entered the program have been met.

Research Methodology

Two of the banks where a mentoring program has been undergone during the last 4 years have been selected. The stakeholders identified in both cases are the company (represented by the HR departments), the mentors and the mentees; the total number of stakeholders identified and targeted in the present research is nearly 200.

By applying qualitative analysis, this paper aims to explore the perceptions of the three types of stakeholders of the project regarding its set-up, methods and results. The novelty of this endeavor comes from its purpose: to help the banking industry fine-tune the approach of mentoring (seen as a modern and only newly utilized personnel development tool) and to transform it into an efficient and competitive tool for further actions meant to contribute to competitiveness.

The current approach consists in building a survey to be addressed to the 200 subjects; for testing its clarity and comprehensiveness, it has been piloted on a number of 30 persons (10 mentors and 20 mentees), representing 15% of the total stakeholders. Interviews have also been conducted, with the intention of grasping details on the perceptions.

The preliminary findings supported by these mixed methods suggest that the program in itself (i.e. the mentoring as a practice, as a concept) has a highly positive impact on one part of the stakeholders (human resources department, the mentors and the mentees). Still, the opinion of the direct participants was that their peers (mentees not involved in the program or the direct line managers of the mentees) were not in favor of the program, because they considered it “a loss of time” or “avoiding daily responsibility to spend time for less important matters”. Still, even without the initial support of a part of the managerial team to this HRD program, the rest of the management (i.e. the mentors) met the HR halfway, understanding that mentoring may be the key for a better cooperation among business lines, for a better use of their resources or for wisdom spreading. (Egan, 2011)

The program has been perceived as contributing, among others, to an increased sense of inclusion of the members to a community, or to a wider perspective on problems faced and a

wider range of alternative solutions. Higher levels of trust have also been noted, together with less reluctance to cooperate with others. On the other side, though, the official project purpose, its reason for existence (i.e., in our cases, the increase of the leadership abilities of the selected mentees) did not have the same result, for reasons that will be detailed later on.

The number of mentoring programs and persons surveyed and interviewed is very limited. Other limitations refer to the sample, which has been randomly composed, without trying to ensure equilibrium in gender, age, experience or other criteria (Sullivan, 1993). Therefore, this research and its results should be seen as a pilot, as the basis for further, deeper and wider research.

Analysis of the Mentoring Practices (program, project)

Of the Romanian banks that have run a mentoring program dedicated to the development of their employees, two banks have been selected, based on the similarities found between their approaches (Maghbouli *et al*, 2017), consisting in the following:

| Program Characteristics | Program Description |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Led by external consultants | The same consultancy company has been hired; the role of the consultant is to create the framework, to explain it to the mentors and mentees, and to provide guidance, by request The HR departments are seen (Toastmasters International, 2012) as the project managers representing the organization and facilitating the meetings between the mentors, mentees and consultant, if needed |
| Program subject | Leadership (DOP, 2008) |
| Program objective | Developing the leadership skills of the mentees |
| Program duration | 1,5 to 2 years |
| Targeted personnel | Staff identified as “talent” or “high potential” |
| Selected mentors | Divisions directors or Senior managers |
| Selection process | Voluntary participation of the selected mentors/mentees |
| Matching process | Round tables for getting to know each other and speak about themselves; list of preferred mentors made by mentees; final matching based on mentors acceptance of the request and on the availability No direct subordination allowed between mentor and mentee At least one managerial level distance between mentor and mentee |
| Results measuring tool | Comparison tests on leadership skills, from before and after the program |

The research outlines the stakeholders’ perceptions about the program, survey’s design, flow, together with its capacity to reach stakeholders expectations and goals.

The Process of the Mentors and Mentees’ Selection

The following, directly involved parties have been identified: 1) the companies, represented by the HR Departments; 2) the mentors – directors of the divisions or senior managers (60, in both banks); 3) the mentees – nominated as “talented” or “high potential” employees from their

direct line managers (approximately 120 mentees in the two banks). Out of these, on 30 persons (10 mentors, 20 mentees) a pilot survey has been conducted.

As indicated by the pilot survey, the criteria considered that had been used order for the selection of the mentors and the mentees are the following: for the mentors (DOP, 2008): experience (30%), time with the employer (10%), number of subordinated persons (20%); hierarchy level (40%), other (0%). The mentees are thought to be chosen by: “talent” or “high potential” label associated to them by their direct line managers (10%); time in Bank (30%); number of projects in which they had previously been involved (10%); their role as a team coordinators (40%); it was mentors’ decision (5%), other (5%). The project documentation, as received from the project coordinators, show that the selection of the participants was based on the following principles: for choosing the mentors, all the Directors (the head of divisions) were invited to participate in the project; those who accepted became the program’s mentors. Therefore, the only official criterion taken into consideration was the level in the hierarchy. In what regards the mentees, the only criterion used was the label “talented” or “high-performance” employee; out of the listed persons, only those willing to participate in the program have become mentees. The nomination of Banks’ employees as “talented” or “high performance” was done by the first line manager and approved by the Director of the division. This belonged to a program developed years before the mentoring started, and had as a purpose the identification of the personnel who can become the “next generation” of managers of the Bank, or who are not considered potential managers, but excellent specialists and their potential needs to be cultivated. From the interviews held, the representatives of the HR departments confirmed that “in the process of identifying the persons to become mentees, we were confronted with several problems, due to the fact that the selection of talented or high performance employees has taken place years ago: many of the selected persons were no longer employees of the Bank; or have (been) moved to other departments where they were no longer considered top employees”. So why so diverse the perceptions compared to the reality? The mentees asked in the interviews what do they consider to be the main reason for being considered as “high performance” or “talented” stated that they “did not know that they were considered either way”. Verified with HR, the statement confirmed: the program during which the employees of the Banks have been categorized as talented or high performance was taken place in a period where the economic environment was so turbulent that any staff classification might have created suspicions among employees regarding the real rationale behind. On the other hand, one mentor from the interviewed ones, stated that “cannot see any reason why one of the two paired mentees was included in the leadership program, as the person does not seem to have any inclination or desire to become a leader, irrespective whether formal or informal. On the contrary, this person is in a continuous seeking of guidance of all types, from technical to personal. He is not a talent at all”. Another mentor, on the other side, states that one of the mentee with who forms a pair is “by far more experienced than I am in terms of leadership competencies and beyond. I am definitely the one who benefits most from our meetings and, even if for me it is a constant challenge, for my mentee may certainly be a disappointment”.

What appears to be obvious from the pilot survey and for the interviews is that the selection process of the mentors and of the mentees was not communicated to all the parties involved and is seen more as a compromise or best solution during time constraints and lack of experience with such a project than as the ideal choice.

Project's Objective

Both analyzed projects targeted leadership. They are named “*Mentoring on Leadership*” (Bank A) and “*We build value together*” (Bank B). The goal of the mentoring program was to increase the leadership skills of the mentees with the help of the mentors’ guidance. The tool used for the measurement was, in both Banks, the use of a professional tool (Harisson Assessment) that tested the leadership skills of the mentees before and after the participation in the program. The Test is usually used by companies in order to assess whether a person is suited for a job; specific skills and competencies are selected for the job and the potential employee is evaluated versus the chosen skills. For the selection of the mentees, the companies have adapted the test selecting a number of skills considered representative not for a job in itself, but for Leadership. These are: “takes initiative”; “likes challenges”, “collaborates”, “has authority”, “enthusiast”, “perseverant”, oriented to self-development”, analytical, invites to cooperation, oriented to new things, optimistic, influencer, ethical in action, autonomous, empathic, assertive, etc. Once tested, the mentees had to choose several traits where they feel that they need guidance for improving them. The sum of the personal goals achievement is considered by the company to represent also the success of the overall program.

There was no assessment on the mentors’ skills in assuming their responsibility. Mentors and mentees’ evaluation of the goal setting and the goal reaching process indicate that 40% of the persons on which we piloted the questionnaire consider the goal setting process satisfactory, 6.6%-very satisfactory, 10% totally disappointing, 10% unsatisfactory and 33.3% good and bad as well. The answers to the questionnaire show that the positive attitude is given, in 57% of the cases, by the fact that mentees altogether with the mentors had the opportunity to choose their own goal (versus a goal imposed by the company). The second best reason for the positive attitude (28%) is the use of the Harisson assessment tool that provides a list of desired leadership skills. On the negative side, the unsatisfied persons or the ones considering that the process was equally good and bad, indicate Harisson as their main source of discomfort: “unclear skills”, “poorly explained test results”; “too many skills to choose from”; “too little time to improve so many leadership aspects” are all answers grasped from the interviews.

The perception of the mentees about reaching the goal set at the beginning of the process has been measured also through the pilot questionnaire and the results show the following distribution of answers: “yes, entirely” - 15%, “yes, approximately” – 40%, “not really” – 30%, “not at all” - 15%. Detailing the perception, the positive answers reveal that the persons who considered that the goal was reached referred mostly to the value added of the process and not necessarily to the goal in itself (like, for example, improving the communication skills), while those who considered that the goal was not reached complained in fact about the lack of opportunities to test the skills in practice. One of the interviewed mentees said: “My goal was to improve my presentation skills – but there was never the chance to test whether I improved them or not, I was not asked to make any presentation. I could have tested this in an informal way, but I did not succeed in setting up any audience willing to hear me out”.

The pairing process: how mentors and mentees get together

The pairing method was organized in four steps: a personal presentation letter of both mentors and mentees, shortly presenting the personal and professional achievements and the interest in

the mentoring program; a meeting where mentees interacted 10 to 15 minutes with each mentor; listing the preferences – where mentees made a list with their top 3 preferred mentors; the pairing – based on the preferences and mentor's availability (only 2-3 mentees per mentor). For the cases where the mentor was indicated by more than two mentees as the first choice, the mentor is asked to choose the mentees; for the mentees whose first choice was unavailable, the process repeats with the second, then the third choice. If no preference is available, the mentee is randomly paired with a free mentor.

Asked about the pairing process, the feedback of the mentors (M) and of the mentees (m) is the following: a) perfect pairing, I could not hope for any better one (10% M, 10% m), b) good, constructive pairing (70% M, 40% m), c) challenging pairing, but still on the positive side (10% M, 30% m); d) difficult pairing, did not like the mentoring sessions (10% M, 15% m) e) unconstructive pairing, I could not find any communication bridge (0% M, 5% m). The interviews revealed that the mentors generally valued the interaction and did not find any difficulties in adapting to different mentalities, or background, interest, even personalities, while some mentees, paired with mentors whom they did not know and whose personality was very different than theirs, faced a more difficult time in adapting to the relationship, in building trust or even in feeling comfortable presenting their concerns. One of the mentees, who evaluated the pairing process as unconstructive, explained that “for mentoring relationship to work, the mentee has to value and respect the mentor as a whole, not only professionally, but also personally, to see him/her as a model (Nicholson *et al.*, 2017). For this to happen, the mentee must understand the mentor, or at least to accept him. When none is possible, the relationship isn't working either”. The interviews revealed also that there were several mentees who had been paired with the mentors who were their second or third choice, or even with mentors whom they did not choose, but this was not considered a factor influencing the mentorship relationship.

Conclusions and Directions

The general perception of the piloted participants in mentoring programs shows that mentors and mentees selection must very carefully take into consideration more criteria; hierarchy level appears to be one of the most riskier criteria, as it can indicate the mentors' professional success, but alone, it does not say enough about the mentor's being fit or not to mentor someone.

Again, even a set of criteria is not enough if these are not specific to the program itself, if they are not assessed and applied taken into consideration the context of the program and the program objectives. In our case study, mentees have been chosen from those considered “talented and “high performers” years before, and for a different reason and purpose than the identification of the leaders-to-be. Especially for the developments of skills of such a nature than the leadership, a certain inclination towards leadership, the existence of a context in which the mentee has already proved leadership abilities and received recognition of the others, must pre-exist.

Any company could expect to see the skills improved through leadership put in action, in a given future. In terms of leadership, some informal displays can appear; being self-directed or addressed to peers, but usually leadership appears in direct correlation with formal managerial responsibilities. A mentee included in an official program that targets the improvement of leadership skills will most probably expect a context where to practice and show the

improvements. Even undeclared there is a high probability of frustration associated to the inability to do so, or, differently said, the objectives may seem unrealistic. Therefore, a probably better choice for the analyzed banks would have been including in the mentoring program employees already having team coordination responsibilities (team leaders, junior managers) or who are included in a career advancement plan, which are proposed to take over managerial responsibilities soon.

In what regards the pairing method, the piloted participants suggest through their answers that a winning solution should combine objective matching (education, areas of expertise, interests, etc.) with subjective matching – “chemistry”, for the ease of the communication and the desire to meet the other party.

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