

# **Ritva Nyberg, Women's Enterprise Agency in Helsinki**

## **SUCCESS THROUGH MENTORING**

### **An entrepreneur is the best support to another entrepreneur**

The word mentoring has its roots in Greek mythology. The story tells that when Odysseus went off to the War of Troy he asked his trusted friend Mentor to bring up his son Telemakhos as his advisor and friend. For future generations the tale of Odysseus left the model of mentoring which means support and guidance of an experienced professional to a new beginner. Similar examples exist even in later ages – especially the pattern in the craftsman's trade of learning a profession from apprentice to master – is well known and appreciated.

Mentoring came to Finland from the United States of America at the beginning of the 1990ties and it has been successfully applied in big companies. The Women's Enterprise Agency has been among the first to develop mentoring. Since 1996 when the association was founded, the cornerstone of all activities has been "An entrepreneur helps another entrepreneur – the one with more experience helps a new beginner" and this means both in training as well as when giving information to a starting entrepreneur. An operations model for entrepreneur mentoring developed from this line of action means that an experienced entrepreneur -mentor- offers the new beginner –mentee - her know-how, support to develop her enterprise, contact network as well as her spiritual support without compensation in money. A pilot project with 15 pairs was carried out in 1998. Since then the model has become a product and 20 mentoring projects have been carried out in different parts of Finland and in some other countries as well. At the moment almost 500 companies have participated in mentoring. In 2002 the model received the "Best practises" – mark from the European Commission and since then it has attracted a lot of attention even internationally.

### **Purposeful development**

The entrepreneur mentoring process usually lasts about a year – a year and a half. At the regular meetings between mentor and mentee, they discuss the mentee's business. Clear goals have been set from the beginning so that the development of the mentee's business can be followed. The mentor's job is to guide the mentee in the light of her own experience, to ask, question and above all to listen. The mentee herself is always responsible for making the decisions and to put them into action.

### **Trust is the basis for everything**

In order to create as fruitful a relationship as possible for the interaction between mentor and mentee, the mentoring relationship should be based on mutual sincerity and trust. In the model of the Women's Enterprise Agency the pairs for mentoring are chosen with care so that the persons suit each other as well as possible. Sometimes we also use psychological tests. For successful interaction the most important thing is that the persons' characters suit each other, their chemistry works. Age is of no significance, the mentor is always more experienced in her career as an entrepreneur, even if she were younger.

### **Rewarding commitment**

Mentoring always requires a strong commitment to the process of the mentee and mentor. The mentee should have the will and ability to improve herself both as an entrepreneur and a person together with the mentor. The mentor should be able to share her time, experience and network with the

mentee. At the same time the mentor gets new ideas and contacts even for her own entrepreneurship. At its best the mentee and mentor may even find some business synergy. Both of them get new experiences and connections also from exchanging ideas with other mentoring pairs. In most cases there are 12 to 15 pairs participating in a mentoring project.

### **Role of the coordinator is central**

A coordinator is responsible for a mentoring project and usually she is an entrepreneur herself. The Women's Enterprise Agency trains the coordinator for her job. The concept includes e.g. a "Coordinator's handbook" which is a tool during the process. The coordinator is responsible for matching the pairs and she keeps in touch with them during the whole process, carries out monitoring of the goals and supports the working in pairs in every way. She also organizes training for the mentors and mentees.

### **New model – group mentoring**

The Women's Enterprise Agency has further developed the mentoring model together with entrepreneurs. Group mentoring was tested for the first time in the year 2000 and now it has also become a product and an operating model. The fourth one year long project has just started in the region of Uusimaa. The actors are entrepreneurs having had a business less than three years and they will form groups with four persons in each one. The idea is that the mentees support and encourage each other. Each group will have an instructor according to their wishes – an experienced entrepreneur, who gives the group support and a course of action. The groups set themselves the goals to strive for together with the instructor. The group may consist of entrepreneurs from very different fields. The main thing is that the persons are able to work together and to set common goals. Thorough preparatory work with interviews will be carried out before forming the groups. Even in group mentoring the role of the coordinator is central.

### **Encouraging experiences**

Here is the story of one group after the project: "We, different women joined the group mentoring because of various different reasons. However, much to our surprise we immediately saw eye to eye with each other. At the beginning of the project we set ourselves and the group goals that were related to our business activities. Our instructor helped us to formulate our goals and suggested some measures how to reach them. And we reached our goal! Sharing ideas and experiences gave us strength to carry on. We also learned to become aware of the risks and to endure insecurity. Our self confidence increased in the interaction with each other. We received more information about lucrative businesses and started to believe in the success our own businesses.

### **Export model**

People have become interested in the mentoring model of the Women's Enterprise Agency also outside Finland.

The first international mentoring project was carried out between Finland and Lithuania in the year 2000. Since then it has been used in the Kaliningrad-Lithuania – project and at the moment there is a mentoring of Latvian women entrepreneurs going on with 15 pairs from all over Latvia. There is also a pilot project at the starting point in Mozambique, Africa. Even in the Ukraine and Poland there have been discussions about the matter.