

Women for Leadership Positions (mentoring fff)/Frauen für Führungs- positionen (fff) at the Zürcher Fachhochschule (ZFH)

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It has been recognised widely that organisations profit from mixed gender representation in all areas of responsibility and on all levels. At the Zürcher Fachhochschule (ZFH) and its affiliate schools – the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH), and the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) – the fact is reflected well in the increasing number of women holding positions in middle management. In top leadership positions, however, women have to date remained a scarce minority – the ZHAW, the largest of the three affiliate universities,¹ being no exception with its nine male members of the board, including the chair, the managing director, and seven deans, only one of whom is female and one further female dean designate to replace a male dean who was set to retire by the end of 2010.

In 2009 Prof. Dr Werner Inderbitzin, Director of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), therefore initiated Women for Leadership (mentoring fff/Frauen für Führungspositionen – fff) to motivate and consequently bring more women into the top leadership positions of

1 The ZHAW consists of eight departments: Architecture, Design, and Civil Engineering; Health Professions; Applied Linguistics; Engineering; Management and Law, Life Sciences and Facility Management; Social Work; Applied Psychology.

the ZHAW.² Appreciating the initiative, the other affiliate universities of the ZFH have readily agreed to participate in the project.

Thus the board of the ZFH and boards of all the affiliate universities have acknowledged the advantages of mixed gender representation in leadership, and, even without explicitly acclaiming gender-integrated management, the ZFH board wants to impart these benefits to the school, which may – as would be hoped – eventually result in a cultural change. It is therefore a special challenge for the project leader to create enough momentum for the project to have just that effect, since, after ten years of untiring, yet not unequivocally rewarded efforts at integrating gender management at the ZFH, the board has decided to promote women in leadership with a mentoring project.³

The project

Mentees and mentors

The programme Women for Leadership Positions (mentoring fff) is aimed at mentoring women with a professional or academic degree, or a similar qualification, who have had some years of professional and possibly leadership experience within the ZFH or another organisation.

Mentors, on the other hand – in addition to showing self- and social competence – must consequently have at least the same qualification and a higher leadership position than their mentees. Furthermore, mentors cannot be the direct superiors of mentees and the mentoring exchange must be prevented from reproducing patriarchal patterns based on gender-biased role stereotypes within what is still a male-dominated leadership culture.

2 'Women for Leadership Position fffs' is a project of the Zürcher Fachhochschule ZFH with a funding contribution of the Bundesprogramm für die Chancengleichheit von Frauen und Männern an Fachhochschulen of the Gender and Diversity Office of the ZHAW (Zurich University of Applied Sciences). It is also supported by swissnex Boston, swissnex: Network of the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs dedicated to fostering closer ties and exchange of knowledge in academia, industry, and society.

3 Prof. Ursula Bollen-Schaffner, project leader, mentoring fff, head of the equality office at the ZFH, 1994 to 2009, board member of the Federal Programme for the Equality of Women and Men at Universities of Applied Sciences (Bundesprogramm Chancengleichheit von Frauen und Männern an den Fachhochschulen), and lecturer at the ZHAW.

The contents of the project

The aim of mentoring fff is to introduce mentees to leadership and organisational cultures within the ZFH in particular and to leadership and management theories in general as well as to help them profit from each other's experience and knowledge and be coached in the active planning of their careers.

Hence mentoring fff includes seminars, workshops, lectures, and networking, and it is based on two mentoring phases of six months each with a different mentor for every mentee in each phase. In the first mentoring phase mentor and mentee are from the same school or department within the ZFH, whereas in the second, cross-mentoring – in which mentee and mentor are from different schools or departments of the ZFH – will give the mentee the opportunity to get an insight into the leadership culture of another department or school than her own.

Including at plenary events, mentee and mentor should have contact at least five times within each six-month period of the programme. They sign a mutual agreement that they will adhere to the basics of the programme as well as approved standards of confidentiality. Mentees and mentors are offered the opportunity to suggest a match or refuse the project leader's matching proposal and ask for a new matching.

Mentoring fff starts and is concluded with a plenary meeting which includes a keynote address and panel combined with an open discussion on one particular aspect of leadership. The opening event also features a workshop on the nature and aims of mentoring.

In addition, as part of the programme the mentees attend a seminar on the assessment procedures customary in the application process for higher leadership positions. Women are known to have worse results than their male colleagues in assessments⁴ and whereas one variable – the design of the process, which may or may not be based on male aspects of biography and career – cannot be influenced by fff in the short run, the other – the women's preparation for an assessment – will certainly be improved by the fff seminar.

4 Prof. Dr Christof Baitsch, as exemplified in his lecture at the School of Engineering, Kadertagung, August 2004; see also Fried, Wetzel, and Baitsch (2000).

Furthermore it quickly became evident that the participants are so highly qualified that the exchange of experience among them can be partly formalised, with mentees giving lectures to their peers on a topic of their expertise such as gender-specific aspects of communication or leadership strategies.

The highlight of the programme, however, is a seminar and conference at Simmons College School of Management in Boston on women in leadership, which focuses on the assessment, exploration, and development of the mentees' individual leadership potential and leadership brand. In addition there will be visits to other women's colleges, for example Wellesley College, the famous Harvard University and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and other points of interest in and around Boston, as well as a networking reception at swissnex Boston. Mentors are invited to participate in the Boston programme.

Thus, besides being a mentoring programme, fff rather resembles a higher education management seminar. It will be evaluated at mid-term – after the first six-month phase – so that obvious flaws may be corrected before the first round ends. A final evaluation will be carried out after the first round has been completed and results will be incorporated into the second round of mentoring fff.

The project structure

In its implementation the project follows the hierarchical structures of the organisation. In showing the commitment of the school directors at every stage of the project, this strategy thus endows it with the necessary prestige. Communication of the project, too, therefore strictly follows the channels of other directives of the board of the ZFH and the boards of the schools. Consequently the selection of mentees and recruitment of mentors is also a hierarchical process.

Thus involving the board at all steps of the programme was a special concern of the project leader in planning fff, as experience shows that gender projects are often handed over to the gender agents of the schools, who are not given the structural means to achieve their successful realisation.

Furthermore a steering group comprising representatives of the boards of the different schools of the ZFH, the board of directors of the ZFH, and the mentees and mentors has been formed as an intermediary between these bodies and groups and the project leader and also as an authority to which the mentees and mentors can appeal if need be. At the same time, it releases the project leader from having sole responsibility for the success of the programme.

Nomination – participation

Mentees

With the heads of the organisational units being responsible for the appointment of candidates for mentoring fff, the nomination process also adheres to hierarchical structures. Candidates are therefore appointed by their immediate superiors. To preclude bias in nomination candidates can also be appointed by their second next superior or – as the programme became generally known – apply for nomination to the director of their school or department directly. The directors of the schools or departments then hand in the nominations to the project leader, who can suggest further candidates. Finally, the steering committee confirms the nominations.

Due to these selection procedures, being given the opportunity to participate in mentoring fff gains the quality of a reward rather than being one of several available options.

Mentors

To provide enough highly qualified mentors for the targeted group of mentees the project virtually relies on being positioned with the directors of the schools involved. The fact that those in higher leadership positions normally have a full agenda and avoid additional responsibilities considerably limits the number of people available for the mentoring task. However, as mentoring fff is an integral part of their leadership role, the directors are themselves asked to participate and appoint further mentors in a top-down process; this ensures that all mentoring teams are endowed appropriately. Mentors also receive adequate compensation.

First experiences

Participation

The response to the project was beyond any expectation and consequently the school directors had to be asked for priority nominations. The steering committee then selected eighteen mentees from a total of thirty-four applications, increasing the original number of placements in the first run of the project by three. Regarding the number of applications, a second round with a new call, where the surplus candidates of the first must be confirmed by the directors of their schools or departments and new ones may be nominated, has already been announced by the steering committee.

Due to the affiliations of the mentors participating in the programme, the idea of forming teams in which mentee and mentor were from the same school or department in the first mentoring phase had to be abandoned, so that teams of mentors and mentees in both phases are now based on cross-mentoring. In the first and with minor alterations in the second phase all matchings have been approved and the second teams by now are well established.

Contents

Mentoring fff started with the opening event on 14 June 2010, scheduled from 4pm to 8pm.

A highly acclaimed keynote speech by Prof. Dr Caroline Bruesch, Zurich University of Applied Sciences/School of Management and Law, on the 'Specific Aspects of Public Management' led into a first discussion on what questions and challenges might arise in leadership at the ZFH. The second part of the opening event included a workshop by Dr Pamela Alean Kirkpatrick in which mentees and mentors, first as separate groups, then as individual teams of mentee and mentor, discussed what they expected from mentoring fff and what they understood to be their individual engagement in the programme. The session concluded with the signing of an agreement by both parties to adhere to the mentoring fff programme. In addition, the opening event gave everyone involved in mentoring fff – mentees, mentors, members of the steering group – an opportunity for informal networking and socialising.

In chronological order on 8 November 2010 the first of the peer to peer series of lectures on 'Language as an Instrument of Governance in Organisations – Gender Differences in Communication', by Prof. Dr Sylvia Manchen Sporri of the Linguistics Department, ZHAW, set another milestone in the mentoring fff agenda. The second peer to peer lecture is planned for March 2011.

The assessment training with Christof Baitsch, s.a., took place in two groups and met with the unanimous approval of the mentees.

Expectations with regard to the conference and workshop at Simmons College School of Management, Boston, are high and the details of what will hopefully be a successful programme are being negotiated.

Mentors and mentees were also asked to participate in a mid-term evaluation of the programme. The answers to the different sets of questions for each group show that mentoring fff is highly appreciated by mentees as well as mentors. Cross-mentoring was particularly well received and, in fact, for reasons of possible interference with relations at work – loyalties, bias – were stated as a necessary condition for the success of a mentoring team; a requirement that dovetails so well with the aforementioned affiliations of the given group of mentors can thus easily be met in the second mentoring phase.

The comments of the mentees revealed a serious desideratum with regard to coaching and leadership training. However, by definition mentoring is not formal education, so the mentees have to be referred to the Boston workshop, which is meant to satisfy at least part of the need, and offers of further study programmes on leadership beyond mentoring fff.

Conclusion

At this early stage of mentoring fff no definite statement as to the effect of the programme can be made. As with most of the programmes promoting women, with mentoring fff, too, success in terms of achieving total or near total gender equity within an organisation is a medium- if not long-term goal.

However, although the first run of mentoring fff has not been completed, firstly the commitment of the board of directors, implying the implementation of the project according to hierarchical structures, and secondly the project design as a combination of classic mentoring and leadership seminar have proved to be of utmost importance for a successful beginning. Although mentoring is never a guarantee of a position within the organisation, women participating in mentoring fff will be taken notice of in the further development of leadership in all the ZFH and potentially increase mixed gender representation in all areas of responsibility and on all levels. Thus, there is every chance that what started in order to develop an instrument to recruit women for leadership positions might well have initiated a change in leadership culture at the ZFH.

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