

100 Early Warning Europe Mentors Supporting Polish Entrepreneurs in Peril.

Press Release, Poznan/Warsaw, December 18th 2018

The 100th person has just joined the Early Warning Europe’s mentors network that helps the entrepreneurs who got into business trouble. However, this is not the only Polish success achieved within the framework of this transnational initiative (the whole project is present, simultaneously, here in Poland, but also in Greece, in Spain and in Italy as well). Poland is a leader when it comes to the number of entrepreneurs who submitted their applications to participate in the program. Up until now, 531 small and medium enterprises have received relevant support from the consultants. 160 of those entities have already received the unique assistance of a mentor, often another entrepreneur. The mentor development system in Poland, placed within the scope of responsibilities of the Polish Family Businesses Foundation, has also become an inspiration for other countries.

Early Warning Europe is a pilot program that tests solutions developed in Denmark, within the scope of supporting the entrepreneurs who got into business trouble. The initiative has been concomitantly launched in four European countries and has been going on for 2 years now. Throughout that period a far-reaching network, involving consultants and mentors hailing from places all around Poland, has been created. Furthermore, a system for continuous perfecting and developing of know-how, designed for all persons involved in provision of support for the troubled entrepreneurs, has been launched. At the moment the Early Warning Europe mentors are based in 29 cities within 11 voivodeships which means that they can reach virtually any entrepreneur in Poland who may be in need of support.

Careful Selection of Mentors – Discrete Support for the Entrepreneurs

The entrepreneurs feeling that trouble may reach them soon, once they apply for the program, get in touch with the program’s consultants and mentors via a covert request submission system established online, on the project partners’ websites: the Polish Family Businesses Foundation (Fundacja Firmy Rodzinne - FFR) and the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP). The fact that a submission has been made is only known to the consultant receiving the request and to the person who needs the support. If the request makes it to the further stage, no more than 2 persons who are going to help the company in trouble get to know the circumstances of the given case. Here we are referring to the consultant and/or the mentor.

– Currently there are 130 mentoring processes in progress, while each of the mentors was working, on average, with two entities in need of help. The record holder helped 8 entrepreneurs in transition through the process of change, however there are many mentors who supported 5 or 6 entities up to date– said Eleni Tzoka-Stecka, FFR’s coordinator for mentor development.

Before the entrepreneur is sent to his mentor, he or she has to pass a complicated selection process, within the scope of the company needs and competency profile of the mentor. Mentor’s availability and geographical location are also taken into account here.

– The final test, that makes it possible to establish whether cooperation by and between the mentor and the mentee, is the first meeting of the parties involved. If no “support chemistry” is seen between the parties involved, the selection process starts from square one. If a good line of communications is established, then the mentor and the mentee work together for 3 to 6 months – explained Eleni Tzoka-Stecka.

Where did the Mentors Come From?

- The mentors are usually found within the group of active entrepreneurs who remain close to the FFR Foundation (Fundacja Firmy Rodzinne, Polish for: Family Businesses Foundation). It was the Foundation's intent to direct the energy of the incumbent entrepreneurs towards social action and to create some space for the next generations to come in Polish businesses. This is well embedded within our mission. The activities also involve successors who, in a fantastic manner, share their skills and experiences. Mentors are open-minded. They are eager to face unapparent and new challenges – said Katarzyna Gierczak Grupińska, the President of the Foundation.

The adepts go through two intensive two-days long training sessions. Then, once a quarter, they take part in supervision-networking meetings. During those meetings the mentors share their experience with the mentees. The individual events are, anonymously, analyzed and thoroughly discussed.

– Our approach towards mentor education has been highly appreciated by the Early Warning Europe international supervising partners, and at the moment we're also providing training to similar organizations that manage the project in other countries – said Eleni Tzoka Stecka.

Psychological support for the troubled entrepreneurs, and provision of education within that scope for the mentors was unique within the project. This is also the case when the Polish initiative is compared to the prerequisite projects that had been implemented earlier on, in Denmark and Belgium, and that are viewed as inspiration for the Early Warning Europe project.

Thanks to this approach towards training, the mentors learn how to step out of their current role (entrepreneur, consultant, adviser), in order to become a companion in change. The extensive experience, including own failures, helps here very much. However, as many mentors admit, restraining oneself from advising and judging is a major challenge.

Plans for 2019

FFR Foundation has made some ambitious plans for the upcoming year, with regards to the Early Warning Europe project. According to the adopted assumptions, more than 340 companies are still to receive assistance, while at least half of them is going to receive mentor support.

The consultants are waiting for the troubled entrepreneurs to submit their applications. This concerns the entrepreneurs who are in trouble, or those who feel that trouble may come soon. As stressed by the persons involved in implementation of the program, the problems may vary. One should not consider them solely from a financial standpoint. The risk related to loss of financial fluidity is a visible symptom of trouble. However, numerous symptoms of an upcoming crisis may be noticed much earlier.

It is worth to take note of difficulties that may lead eventually towards insolvency. The program's participants have already been asking for help related to problems such as a sudden drop of number of orders, need to get in line with the new legislation, troubles in recruiting new loyal employees, internal personal conflicts, the matter of succession (requiring a lot of attention) and many other issues. Each of the aforesaid concerns may lead towards trouble that could be much more serious, trouble that may have consequences reaching out beyond the sphere of finances.

The program's name is "Early Warning", not the "Last Warning". This point is being brought up quite frequently by the foreign experts who train the Polish mentors. One should never wait until it is too late. Preventative measures are less stressful to implement, and also, the process may show solutions to the entrepreneur he/she would have never thought of.

More information and submission link may be found on the Foundation's website: ffr.pl/ewe; and on the website of the Polish PARP Agency: parp.gov.pl/earlywarning

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About the Polish Family Businesses Foundation:

FFR (Fundacja Firm Rodzinne, Family Businesses Foundation) has been founded in 2011. The foundation is a non-profit organization which has set a mission for itself to support family businesses selflessly and to represent them.

The foundation has been established in the spirit of mutual cooperation and support dedicated for family businesses, in line with the values as follows: tradition, honesty, responsibility spanning across generations.

The objective adopted by the foundation is to take care of the shared interest of business families through integration and promotion of the activities undertaken by them. Thanks to the activities undertaken by the foundation, one gets a chance to use help, knowledge and experience possessed by other family-owned companies, during the mentoring meetings at the family businesses. “Family Business Tree”, the symbol of the family businesses shared by the foundation free of charge, with the family businesses, has been used, until now, by more than 800 Polish entrepreneurs, all around Poland.

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Do you want to know more? Contact us:

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