

# MAGDA MANEA

## *The Curious Leader*

With more than 30 years of experience in finance, **MAGDALENA MANEA** has explored all the corners of the industry, being recognized as an influencer and a role model for the new generations of women in finance and banking. Her rich professional background is proof of her curiosity to try new paths and her ambition to learn new things.

A strong sense of justice and fairness has consistently guided her on her journey, while her will to constantly improve has motivated and inspired her to always try out fresh avenues and new ways of being exceptional. Magda's story is that of a very luminous person, who passionately shares the secrets of her trade with the younger peers, thus passing on experienced advice and timeless values. She also tells a story about tremendous respect for people, for cultural heritage and for history.

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### How did your journey begin?

I was lucky because I graduated from university in '89, so I didn't have to last too long in the former regime. Right after 1990, job openings began to appear in Bucharest and, because I graduated from Finance and Accounting – what is now Finance and Banking – I set out to work in a bank and I entered the exam for what was then the Romanian National Bank (BNR) Sector 2. At the time, the National Bank didn't have the span of a central bank, it was a commercial bank with a monetary function. That is how, less than a year after graduating, and after a hard commute to Oltenița, where I was placed at the shipyard, I became an inspector for BNR Sector 2, working on the industrial platform in Pipera.

However, before I got to checking credit documents, because I had a very smart induction program, I went through all the stages one needs to cover if they haven't worked in a bank before. I did everything, from the cashier's office, primary accounting, front office, stamping documents, all of it. I covered all the steps, from the ground up, including the basement archives, ground floor and, only after that, the top floor. This seldom happens today, the induction program talks you through all the departments, you don't get to have hands on experience. For me, this took about two months, and I became a junior inspector, with a supervisor to teach me this job. Only after another two months of supervision, was I left on my own. That was induction, old school.

In the winter of 1990, the Commercial Bank (BCR) was created and we were all given the opportunity to choose. And, since I am very curious, I asked: what will each bank do? Well, BCR was to keep doing what I had been doing until then, and BNR will do... basically everything necessary. No one had a precise answer to that, but things were about to happen. Naturally, I chose the latter. Without knowing much of what was there to be done, I went to the Central Bank's Treasury – it was called International Relations at the time. In order to get the job at the new National Bank, I was interviewed by all three vice-governors. That was the selection process at BNR in the beginning. That was my chance.

In all my 10 years at the Central Bank, I did exactly as predicted... everything - from opening the foreign exchange market, the monetary market, to foreign debt issuing and portfolio investments. From the smallest deals to the sovereign transactions, they all went through us. We negotiated with rating agencies, mandates with global banks, handled transactions from private placements to Eurobonds and hedging strategies. After you go through everything there is to be done in your area of competence, you feel the need to change; from there things can only go into a routine.

That is when I went into the private sector. I left the Central Bank, where I was administering sums larger than the total assets of any Romanian bank at the time, and went into a commercial bank's treasury for a short while before moving into financial institutions. I swapped the trading area, where you are hooked up to real time trading for your own balance sheet, to corporate banking, where you overview someone else's balance sheet and decide on the transactions the bank can take on. It was a horizontal step and, then from financial institutions to commercial corporate banking, I began to build a diverse portfolio of competencies.

I didn't have a linear journey and I advise this, don't stick to one thing all your life, test yourself, try something new and start over! Even if you want a linear career, you will still need to start over with new employers, new markets, from paper to digital, from brick and mortar to tech areas, you will still have to relearn. Test yourself no matter what the market wants, see if you can do something else, diversify!

**There is a pressure to keep walking the road you chose, a fear to start over.**

I don't think I was born to be accountant, I think we were born to find out what it is we can truly do, to test our limits. This happened to me from the start, maybe I'm just curious or it was luck, but this happened to me, and I am grateful.



I could never keep still, never could stay in a warm place. I don't know what it's like in the comfort zone, it sounds like a very annoying place.

I am grateful that everything that happened to me aligned with my curiosity and my desire to learn and to test myself. It was clear to me after graduating that I wasn't ready for a world dominated by liberalism. Therefore, about 10 years after graduation I returned to school. Why ASEBUSS? Because it was a program in collaboration with the Americans. At the time, ASEBUSS had its first program where we had mixed teams in a digital environment. We had a cooperation convention for the teams who were writing their graduation theses in the digital environment. Later, 10 years after ASEBUSS, I started over again. How do I diversify? I went to INSEAD, a school for independent directors and one that prepared me to break the glass ceiling. And, because they say never let a good crisis go to waste, what did I do during the pandemic? Just stare at the walls or did I try something new? As an independent board member, you almost always end up in the internal audit committee, so, I specialized in internal audit and, since last year, I am a Certified Internal Auditor. This is another important advice, always go back to school!

Abroad, people don't envision professional life without lifelong learning. I don't think we do the same, because, in my case, every time I went back to school, people asked me what do I need it for. "You have a position, a career, you are known, why do you need to go to school?" I needed it, not for a position, I needed to see if I can do it or not. Without this, in the dynamic world we live in, with top internet speeds and AI, how prepared are we to understand and adapt? And how convinced are we that the jobs we performed will mean something in a few years? So, what do we do, are we waiting for retirement?

#### Why did you choose finance?

I didn't want to study finance. I graduated a math-physics profiled high school, one that produces Olympic laureates, but that wasn't my passion at the time.

I wanted something in the area of social science, but my family was in this field, so, I didn't have much choice. I was modelled for it, despite fighting back. For two years I used to leave home to study at the library and read everything I found useful there, from philosophy to ancient history, existentialism, great Russians... for two years. So, I missed all the entries until Finance and Accounting, but this was the best period before university. In the west, it is custom, before going to university, to take a year to travel, work and know more of the world. For me, these 2 years were my sabbatical before university, before starting out my career.

#### What was it like as a woman in finance?

I never felt discriminated for being a woman. In banking this was the norm. At the time, the Economic Academy (ASE) was usually a place for girls, they were aiming to become accountants. Few boys enrolled there, if you were a boy you were meant to become an engineer, as a girl, you were going for accounting. When I became aware that I needed to build a career, my peers were already mainly women. There were a lot of women in banking in general and that is why being appointed in a senior position, like chief dealer in the central bank, did not surprise anyone.

My break was that I started out in a period without preconceptions, when people were used to seeing women in finance, so, it was never an issue to choose between a man and a woman based on their competencies. It is true, though, that once you reach top level, preferences begin to appear. Who decides? The decision maker is seldom a woman, the decision is mostly made by a boys' club. However, the customs and dynamics of boards are changing, moving from groupthink – like your college gang or your golfing friends – toward diversity, various competencies and gender diversity.

### What is the greatest lesson of your career?

There was always a lesson. I have a long history so there are many lessons and starting overs. The international experience, and this is another piece of advice: if you have the chance, or you really want to see what you are made of, get out of your comfort zone. And the most comfortable comfort zone is your own home. Leave your home, move abroad, start over or apply for an international position. This was not something that I was thinking of when it happened, but it helped me overcome many of my insecurities. I didn't really apply for an international job, I wanted to move from working on financial institutions, where I stopped seeing the upside, to a new bank and a new position. I was in the middle of a big negotiation for Raiffeisen when I told them I am leaving and they stopped me. In two hours, they came up with an offer to move to Vienna. I was shocked! They didn't offer me this position because I was a woman and they needed diversity, but because I did a very good job, I was a really good negotiator with a lot of experience, after years in the Central Bank working on complicated international transactions. All my aces were my curiosity and the desire to learn new things, which helped me become a good negotiator.

At the same time, failure counts, that's where the lesson is born, and you will inevitably fail at some point in your life or your career. You can make a wrong turn or a bad decision, I had jobs that didn't represent me. Those were real lessons? Not pursuing money or titles, but good projects and fine people with a strategy you can trust. I did make mistakes and learned the hard way, but they didn't scar me. I took my lesson, recognized and internalized it, and I reinvented myself. You need to be aware that mistakes can happen, sometimes it's not even your fault. And companies should decriminalize, to some extent, mistakes. There are many companies now that encourage people to take initiative, emulating creativity in the entire organization. The mantra of "fail fast, learn fast" brought P&G to even fund a "heroic failure award", accepting that mistakes are part of life, a company's strategy and of the evolution of the community. If you are afraid of making a mistake, you should never take on the responsibility.



### Are women better negotiators?

Yes, because we have empathy. We are able to conceive a solution that is useful to the other side as well.

### What makes women good negotiators?

Care, we have it, not just as an inherited quality, but from years of history. If men are hunters, then women are kindling the fire, so, they need to care for others. If you want to negotiate, you can't hold your ground until the other side leaves the table. I don't think I've said this more than a few times: "this condition is a dealbreaker". I can't say what someone else should do, there is a recipe for everyone, but, for me, it was important to know the other's agenda, to understand what they want from a transaction and how, without me or the organization giving in too much, I could generate a solution that fitted the needs of both sides.

This isn't a compromise, this means negotiation. These two notions are often mistaken for each other. Maybe for someone used to the "command and control" mode, which is the obsolete leadership model, this might mean that you surrender. If you can't force your solution, it means you surrendered. For me, if I can't impose my own solution, I will find a better one that fits each side. That is good negotiation. This is how I succeeded in first time deals - the first transaction, the biggest, the most complex – with curiosity and perseverance, pursuing a common goal.

### What does success look like?

I don't know. What is success? For me is the satisfaction that you did something right. Success means hard work. Without hard work, passion and devotion for your work, it's not success, it's fraud, it's imposture. Success isn't confirmed by others, you must feel it yourself. This fast made success is a lie,

it isn't real. Success means years of work, your relief that you overcame the hardest of times with grace and by learning your lessons.

### Where do you find inspiration?

In books, in meditation, in music, in paintings. My very first inspiration is my grandmother, my first role model. I had the luck to find, almost everywhere I went, people who were role models, something in their history or their abilities has turned them into role models who guided me. But the first was my grandmother, who had an extremely complicated life, she was in the generation that survived two world wars. A generation rich in stories and feelings from both ends of the spectrum. They were the most adaptable people and the best role models for a young person. I was really lucky to grow up with such fantastic grandparents. What kind of grandparents are we going to be? How will we acquire the wisdom, the perseverance and the capacity to never give up? To not surrender, first of all, ethically, because the world my grandparents lived was marred by two wars and the communist regime, and this was their greatest challenge – how do you keep your integrity. So, if I am the best version of myself, it is because of my grandmother.

### Did you have any male mentors?

I had male mentors, some of them extremely powerful role models. One of them in particular guided me in my first years and taught me to respect the real history and the people who, in silence and with a lot of devotion, further conveyed this history, without which we wouldn't be who we are today. I had a boss who was also a mentor, and I had different mentors for different stages of my life. I also had two female mentors, who are both brilliant women, but who never resonated with each other. They were proof that opposites attract.



### What can we do to promote the next generation of women leaders?

To level the playing field, we must first take a good look at who decides things. And that is rarely a woman. If you start to count how many women are in leadership positions, it doesn't look good, roughly 10% doesn't look good. In senior positions the situation is more balanced, which shows that promotion to C-level is not equitable. If you have a lot of senior level women and at C-level you count only 11-12%, the imbalance between potential and reality says someone is not choosing from this particular talent pool. And if we keep avoiding this talent pool for the next stage, which will no longer be "command and control," we will lessen the chances of our society to be fit for the new era. We have been talking for a while about humanizing leadership. Why? Because we've had board rooms with groupthink, with golfing buddies or with friends and family. We need to move to a humanized leadership, who cares not just about shareholders, but also about stakeholders.

What could help us see more women in leadership positions? As much as I don't like gender being a criterion, I believe, there must be an administrative decision. If 200 years since the industrial revolution brought us only to a place where women barely take part in the life of the community, they can work, but rarely get selected for leadership, I think we need to have a rule that says: forget your college friends, choose based on seniority and competence, and choose equally from the general talent pool. I don't think we can level the playing field without an administrative decision, because those who decide are still clinging to their positions. And, of course, this should be used as a course correction, after we break the glass ceiling, we won't need the rule.

### What advice would you give to women who are starting their careers?

What is important throughout your career is to be brave but also to be humble. Every time you approach a job, or a project, you need humbleness to better understand what you need to do, and to put in your heart as well as your mind.

Moreover, be humble in relation to the people you work with, no matter their expertise. Some might turn out to be an encyclopedia of information. I was lucky to find at the Central Bank someone who created a landmark for me. He was my colleague, but he was from the old guard, the pre-WWII guard, worked in the Central Bank since 1943, I think. He had a lot of history, was related to the Brătianu and Pillat family. He taught me a lot about the city's great families, about the Central Bank's history, about the Romanian currency before the war. I was lucky. Professionally he wasn't the mentor I needed, but I stayed humbly by his side and listened to what he had to offer me. I did the same with every job I had, I tried to do the best for the project, the client, my colleagues, my company. In the end if you are missing that humbleness you will turn into an impostor, you will get cloyed.

#### Can you describe yourself in a few words?

Curious, ambitious, with a strong sense of justice, I can't tolerate lies. And now, as a board member, I catch on really fast to the people who have private agendas. And if something happens behind the scenes, and it is not what was decided in the board room, I never stay silent. It is toxic and unfair to the honest people that work there, because if you accept something that is wrong, you validate it, and it becomes a model for others to follow. There is an important encouragement to the people in the organization: "speak truth to power!" That is how the position of independent board member fits me, I speak my mind and do it in the interest of the organization. And if some people don't like that, don't be afraid to practice this nonetheless while always keeping the interest of the company in focus. Hold on to your moral compass, never cheat! I once had a boss who used to tell me: "Magda, Braveheart dies at the end of the movie." So, I learned to say the truth in an acceptable, easier to hear manner, but to tell it nonetheless.