

LAVINIA RAȘCĂ

The Leadership Professor

LAVINIA RAȘCĂ is, above all, a dedicated and beloved professor who has kindled and inspired generations of students. She is also a consultant, manager and entrepreneur, Board Director of the training company EXEC-EDU, where she was General Manager for more than 15 years, Board Member of ASEBUSS Business School, and member in the Advisory Board of the ASEBUSS Foundation. However diverse these roles may seem, they all converge toward training and mentoring. This main activity was dedicated to a vast network of managers, entrepreneurs and consultants who are now transferring competencies to their communities and to society in general.

For her dedication and achievements, Lavinia received many awards. She was included in The Encyclopedia of Romanian Personalities - Who is who in business, in TOP 1000 experts– ZF, TOP 200 Powerful Women in Business – Business Magazine, Top 100 Successful Women – Capital, TOP 50 Successful Women – Forbes, Forbes 30 for 30, the silver medal as a trainer, and at The Learning Network Awards in 2019. Lavinia talks with such passion about her work, her projects, and her amazing team, that it is hard to believe students wouldn't fall in love with her every word. Her story is about finding the right partners to embark on the journey, about teamwork, about leadership and vision. It also illustrates the fact that business is, first of all, about the values that are passed on to future generations.

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How did your journey start?

My journey began on a Saturday, in the fall of 1990, with a phone call (a landline, at the time) that I almost missed, being at the door, ready to leave. I stopped to answer. A university colleague informed me that a contest for an assistant professor job was going to be organized in The Academy of Economic Studies (ASE) and asked whether I wanted to apply. I was ready to say a determined NO because, while being a student, I had decided that I would never teach. However, instead of saying NO, I asked for time to think until the next Monday. I reconsidered my decision, I participated in the contest, and I got the job. That is how my beautiful and diverse professional adventure started, with more roles performed in parallel. In 1990, a program financed by USAID was launched in ASE, and Americans from top US business schools worked for some years to specialize Romanian professors in teaching and consulting. I attended the program, worked very hard, and besides teaching and consulting skills at Western standards, I gained self-confidence and the will to aim high. I got scholarships and attended programs for professors and consultants at Harvard Business School, IESE Barcelona, Washington State University, AOTS Osaka. I got my PhD with a thesis in Entrepreneurship, in The Academy of Economic Studies. In 1993, I was part of the team of Romanians and Americans who founded the first Executive MBA Program at American standards in Central and Eastern Europe, that later became ASEBUSS Business School. In 1994, I was hired as the assistant editor in chief of the first magazine for entrepreneurs, *Idei de Afaceri* (Business Ideas). In 1998, I became the head of The Continuing Education Department of ASEBUSS, and in 2005, when ASEBUSS founding members decided to outsource the training activity in a separate company, EXEC-EDU, I became the CEO. I stated its mission - to provide the widest range of programs for those who want to become better managers, leaders, and entrepreneurs, and its vision - to become the leader in executive education, in Romania.

Is EXEC-EDU the accomplishment you are most proud of?

My son, Mihnea, makes me most proud. Also, I am happy that my activity allows me to accomplish my mission and to live my values. I have a beautiful family, good friends, a wonderful team at work, a broad network of successful managers and entrepreneurs, with whom I worked in courses and in consulting, who contribute to Romania's wellbeing, and who, above all, are good people.

I love everything I have done: teaching Strategy, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, Management; consulting with very many entrepreneurs and advising them to launch and grow their businesses; training trainers and consultants; researching and writing articles and books published in Romania and abroad; participating in business TV, radio, and online talks; and managing.

I am extremely proud of the team of experts that are trainers, consultants, coaches, and mentors in EXEX-EDU. They are active and accomplished top managers and consultants, meanwhile talented in sharing business practices, passionate to interact with the managers who attend EXEC-EDU's open and customized programs.

In my opinion, EXEC-EDU achieved the vision set in 2005. In 2019, it received the gold medal for its activity at the Learning Network Awards, and three of its 40+ trainers were also awarded gold, silver, and bronze medals. After being among the top 10 training companies for years, in 2020 it became the third biggest training company in terms of revenue, and the most important executive education company in Romania. So, I passed on my executive position to a younger, and very competent CEO, who will lead towards a bolder vision. I am still President of the board, I am in charge with strategy, I am still teaching and consulting, so I am part of the team.

Was this your vision from the start?

Yes, back in early '90s, my colleagues and I envisioned a different education system for a different kind of managers. Our graduates are optimistic and energetic, competent, and active in getting and maintaining competitive advantage. They do not expect anything from anyone, take faith into their own hands, love, and respect the people they work with.

Why did you choose this career path? Why teaching/consulting?

As I was saying, I didn't set out to follow this path. All I did was to decide quickly to make a change, and embrace it with dedication and curiosity, to see if I really liked it. I fell in love with it. For almost 30 years, I have been in the service of those who want to become better managers, leaders and entrepreneurs. I had thousands and thousands of people in my classroom, and lately on ZOOM, most of them managers and entrepreneurs. ASEBUSS has more than 1,500 graduates, EXEC-EDU almost 20,000.

What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?

Entrepreneurship gives me the freedom to do what I like, where I like, how I like and with whom I like and to be useful – things that I always wanted in life. It allows me to make quick decisions and to follow them through into practice, to be responsible for the results of my work and in direct contact with them. I can experiment, make mistakes, learn from them, and evolve.

I didn't search for opportunities; they came my way. I always paid attention around me, to instantly observe the ones that I considered to be appropriate, so, I was fast in taking advantage of them. I always acted with my team and my clients in mind. All the choices I made were aligned to my values, which subsequently became those of EXEC-EDU: passion, performance, progress, partnership.

These opportunities, how do we train to see them, to take advantage of them?

You must always be curious, stay alert, understand what you want, be optimistic, energetic, resilient, always do your job very well, be reliable and good to people. The better you are, the more opportunities come your way. Be always willing to unlearn outdated things and to learn new ones. Continuous learning is mandatory! Never say never and be ready to change. Get rid of your ego, don't think that you are always right, ask questions instead of having all the answers. Be modest, however happy, and grateful for the good things you did, have self-respect and self-confidence. Have achievements and let the others see them. Don't be a perfectionist, be ready to act quickly even if you make mistakes, to learn from them, and to fix them.

I believe that what Tony Robbins said is crucial: "You are the most important person in your life!" This means that you must take care of yourself first, this is only way you can take care of others. Also, you must be aware that all the things that happen to you, good or bad, are the result of your own decisions, so you are responsible for them.

Which skills/abilities do you believe were essential for your success?

How did you develop them?

Right now, I can say that what helped me fulfil my goals were the passion for what I do, and my love for my colleagues, my clients, and for people in general. This nurtured imagination to develop useful programs, perseverance to implement them and desire to evolve. I was lucky to be surrounded by very competent specialists, who were also very special human beings. We succeeded to create our team by gathering people who resonated with each other. That is how we have built a family atmosphere which helped us overcome the toughest situations and to grow beautifully.

Of course, the fact that I could learn business directly from real titans like Porter, Stevenson, Christensen, or Kotter, to name only the most well-known of my wonderful professors, helped me be a better professor, and a better manager. I learned good business practices from these people that I could transfer on to my students and to my colleagues.

Which skills do you think are essential for an entrepreneur?

You know, I like to say what I observed that was applicable in my life and in the lives of others: the best resources in business are luck and relationships. "Luck comes when opportunities meet preparation," according to Seneca. Relationships depend on who you know, but most of all on who knows and trusts you.

To succeed, an entrepreneur must be competent, confident, committed, and credible.

Key questions when considering which opportunity to choose, and what business to start: What do I like? What do I know and what else do I have to learn? Who do I know? Who knows me? Others would be: Will the business be interesting for many customers, for long enough? Will it be profitable?

The entrepreneur needs clarity in answering the questions: what company do I want to create in time, what role do I want to play in it in years, whom should I bring in the business and when, and how will I harvest it? The business model must be mastered.

Business growth requires vision, mission, values, and strategy, clearly stated and inspiring so that the right people are motivated to come and to stay. If they are treated right, they will treat customers right, so a proper people management is mandatory. Leadership skills are crucial. Having the sense of figures and financial skills are extremely important for entrepreneurial success. Excellent execution is key, also.

Who were your role models? How important was it to see other women succeed?

Oh, there are a lot of people that I admire and that I have followed, one way or another. The spectrum is vast, beginning with my parents, who loved each other, loved me, and who showed me what it's like to do the right things right, and ending with the younger generation. First of all, my son, who learned to play chess when he was a child and developed a strategic mind, precision in analysis and in decision making. He has a special common sense that for me is a landmark – he has always been the voice my conscience takes advice from. Then Oana Scarlat, to whom I passed on my CEO mandate at EXEC-EDU. My mother, who was very good at describing people in few words, called her a "warm soul." Indeed, she is a combination of empathy and tenacity that is hard to find. She has a delicacy and a diplomacy that I admire, combined with a strong will to achieve goals. I am not good though at always following role models, because I am attached to my way of being, if this doesn't hurt people. I respect and I team up with people who complement me.

I am also grateful for the examples that fall into the DON'T category. I paid attention to them, without rancor, trying to do things differently.

Who were your mentors? How did they influence you? What did you learn from them?

My entrepreneurial personality stopped me from pursuing a mentoring process by the book. I did have, over the years, tens of mentors, to whom I went for advice when I needed, or whom I listened to when they offered a piece of wisdom. Some had quite a special impact on me. I gratefully remember two American consultants I worked with at the beginning of the '90: Warner Wong and Katie Reikowski. They taught me that doing the job right is not enough, that self-confidence and self-respect are very important, and that being modest doesn't mean overlooking your accomplishments. I nowadays give this

advice to young people, mostly to young women as many times as I have the opportunity, I really believe that is important.

How do you keep up your enthusiasm and motivation? What inspires you?

The passion for what I do, the sense of purpose and of being useful, the pleasure of working in a team with people I cherish and for people I appreciate. All these make me feel like being on a permanent holiday, even if sometimes, I am working for 12 to 14 hours a day.

What does success really look like for you?

Success comes when you achieve your goals. My professional goals are measured by the accomplishments of those I work with as a professor and consultant. I witnessed the conception of business plans for companies that are now important players. Every day, when I open the Internet or the media, I find out about the latest achievements or awards won by managers and entrepreneurs who are my students, clients, graduates. What can give you more satisfaction?

Moreover, I have the good feeling that I contributed in creating a sustainable company with a good brand awareness and reputation, and that I had a competent successor, prepared to take it over, Oana Scarlat.

I am grateful to all those who wanted to partner and to work with me, for their advice and support, for the things they let me learn from them. The courses I attended, the classes I taught, consulting sessions, interactions with my colleagues, hours spent with my family and friends, were precious lessons for me. I think that I had thousands of professors that helped me become what I am today. I was lucky to be surrounded by outstanding people.

What did you feel as being the greatest challenges/lessons during your career?

How about from an entrepreneur's point of view?

My most important lesson was to never say never! I learned to be open to change and act strong, without prejudice, to handle any situation! I experimented this several times, the latest in March 2020. At the time, I strongly believed that case studies discussions could not take place online so successfully as in the classroom. Being obliged by the lockdown, with intense and positive efforts, and with the support of my young colleagues with very good digital skills, I managed to rethink my *modus operandi* in three days, so that the 20 managers in my first virtual class, isolated in their homes by the unknown virus, would feel the utility of the Zoom lived experience. Now, I really believe that teaching online is as interactive and useful as the classical style, even if it is different.

How has being a woman influenced your professional journey?

Is it harder/easier? Did you get any support from men?

Strictly in my experience, I never felt that the professional world is divided according to genders. And I was never stopped by any obstacle when I wanted to advance in my career. I had the luck to do what I wanted, with whom I wanted and to get where I wanted to be. I never gave it much thought if the support came from men or women, but to receiving a valuable support from the people most adequate to give it. I am extremely grateful for all the help I got and I am trying to pay it forward, one way or another.

What is your advice for women who aspire to have successful careers, especially the ones just starting out?

To try hard to get to like what they do and if they cannot, to change their companies, or careers, to do what makes them happy. To stop

being perfectionists, but to do their best to learn constantly and develop competence, to be agile and useful, to develop relationships based on trust and mutual respect.

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

First, young women leaders need to have performance and impact in the organizations they work for, so we must teach, coach, and mentor them. Then, they need self-confidence and self-respect, empathy, and trust. They need good and constructive relations with colleagues, regardless of gender, being result-oriented and not over-competitive. Networking, sharing experience, learning together, are extremely important for them.

For a long time, I wasn't aware that women were so discriminated against; I had never seen it. In 2010, I was appointed as an expert in a European funded program, so I had the opportunity to talk to 800 women who wanted to become entrepreneurs, in 8 cities. I realized that for many of them the barriers in their professional development were real and high. I would classify these barriers in three main categories. The first category: mental barriers – "I am not as good as my male colleagues" or "I succeeded because others helped." The second category: the family mentality, raised either by parents - who provide the wrong behavioral models through their relationships or through what they teach their children, or by husbands – who were not educated in the spirit of full equality, who have unjustifiable requests, or are jealous of their wives' success. The third category: the barriers within organizations, where the rules of the game were created a long time ago by men, and where still few things have changed, even if at declaratory level everything is inclusive.

When I realized that women needed more support in their career, I decided to join Adina Bigas, Adriana Păun, Bianca Ioan, Carmen David, Cristina Grigorescu, Dana Patrichi, Lucia Căpușan, Sandra Pralong, and Vali Zeller, to be co-founder

of Professional Women's Network Romania, and to get involved in developing this association, as its first president, and then as an active member.

What else do women need to level the playing field and have more opportunities to serve in a leadership role?

The only specific thing I recommend to women is to nurture their femininity, which has a lot of valuable features. Otherwise, my advice is not different from what I would give a man.

What special abilities do women bring to the table?

Better emotional intelligence, better communication skills; the talent to show their vulnerabilities – valuable for people who don't like to be led by angels, but by people like them. Women are more trustworthy, more organized, and caring in crises situations. The result is that women leaders performed better during the pandemic.

How can you characterize yourself in 3-5 words?

Someone who loves people very much.