



# People are the key

Lenka Mrázová ACCA explains how people and communication have been key in her career, and how the challenges you meet along the way make you stronger

**For Lenka Mrázová ACCA, the human dimension has been a thread running through her professional career. 'I believe work is all about people and communication,' says the Czech accountant and tax adviser, who is also involved in mentoring and helping others to work to their best ability. She is a mentor and coach with LMENTIO, a Prague-based consultancy. Her work involves helping people, mostly women, with their personal development, and business mentoring.**

'What I have learned in my career but didn't know earlier on is that people remembered their first meetings with me,' she explains. 'They reminded me, for example, that I always stressed the importance of being properly prepared, especially if they were having meetings with partners or directors.'

The advice Mrázová gives is based on experience gained over a 25-year career. After completing her studies at the University of Economics in Prague in 1991, she began her working life as an accountant

at Proxy, a Prague-based audit and tax advisory firm, where she stayed eight years. She then moved to a Big Four firm, where she rose through the ranks to become tax director.

Her people skills were tested to their full extent in the late 1990s when an error was made in the submission of corporate tax returns for a new client, a medium-sized German firm. The company was entitled to include 10% of the acquisition value of machinery as a tax-deductible item in its return. A colleague of Mrázová's prepared the spreadsheets and everything was in place – or so it appeared.

'[It turned out that] there was an error in the calculation and 1% was deducted instead of 10%, so a deduction of eight million Czech koruna was entered in the spreadsheet as only 800,000 koruna,' she recalls. As a result, the client had overpaid three million koruna in tax.

## To err is human

The problem was only discovered a year later and Mrázová had to flag up the error. 'Imagine you have to go to the executive of the company and say, "Sorry, I made a mistake and you have overpaid by a large amount!"' she says.

'But I knew I had to own up and be honest with my colleagues. It would have been easy to pass the buck,

but in the end I didn't say that the mistake was my colleague's problem. I treated it as my own, because I was the "second pair of eyes", although he made the error.'

Fortunately, the client accepted the mistake and was understanding. Mrázová naturally offered to do everything possible to rectify the problem. However, the deduction was optional, and it was not clear whether it could actually be reclaimed.

'We approached the local tax authority to rectify the problem, but it refused to cooperate. So we took the case to the local administrative court, which ruled in our favour. But the tax authority still refused to return the overpayment. We continued the fight and took the case to the highest level, to the supreme administrative court of the Czech Republic. It ruled in our favour too, but the tax office still refused to return the money,' she recalls.

The firm appealed to the supreme administrative court again and won. But still the tax authority was unwilling to cooperate. 'In the end, it relented and the money was returned to our client, but after a long time. We had spent almost 10 years going backwards and forwards. The tax authority said nothing, thinking that we had forgotten about the case.'

Mrázová learned valuable lessons from the wrangle over the deduction, not least the importance of persistence. 'I saw the importance of teamwork and how willing my colleagues were to help me. The partners were also very

supportive, as were the tax assistants and our lawyers,' she explains. I realised that if you make a mistake, you can survive and people around you will help. I always do my best, but errors happen and they are not a life and death issue,' she says, adding that in a career that has involved filing hundreds of tax returns over the years, it was the only such error she had to resolve.

Mrázová argues that honesty and openness were crucial in dealing with this incident. 'I didn't hide the mistake, and it became clear to me that there would always be some inherent risk in accounting,' she says. Her colleague, meanwhile, was very apologetic and felt guilty, but Mrázová was fair in her approach; she is still in touch with him today. 'He is fine and is doing well in his career,' she says.

## Girl power

Mrázová faced another people-related challenge in 2004 when she returned to Prague after a 14-month assignment leading the tax team in Brno, the Czech Republic's second city. At the time of her return, several people from a corporate tax compliance team left simultaneously. She took on responsibility for this team and, six years later, had grown it to 17 people. 'It was one of my achievements,' Mrázová says.

Building the team was not easy, particularly in the beginning. The busy season was approaching and half of the staff had left. 'We had to find new people immediately. I came up with the idea of »

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- \* Be aware of what you're good at, admit what you're not good at, and always be honest if you don't know what to do.
- \* Consider things from a long-term perspective. Encourage staff to think about their client work right now in the wider context.
- \* You should make sure that you encourage your team members and give them the space to find their path to personal development.
- \* Turnover of staff in the large accounting firms is high, but you should never regret your investment in people. It pays off over time, but the benefits may not be seen immediately.
- \* Think about how you treat people. I am now focusing on human development, and I meet staff I used to work with and they remember what I was like to work with. For example, I remember my ex-secretary, who said that she sometimes worried about what was waiting for her on the table. But she told me that I was fair and that she learned a lot. That gives me a sense of satisfaction.
- \* Trust your intuition. If you feel that there is something weird, you should always ask follow-up questions. Usually, you will be right.



asking women who were on maternity leave to come back and work for us – it was the quickest solution to finding reliable staff who were trained to the firm's standards. In the following few years, we took on five members in this way. It also stopped us from having to turn to an agency.'

The first woman on maternity leave who Mrázová worked with was a senior manager who needed to be based at home, but was keen to be re-connected with the office, in cooperation with a senior manager based outside Prague and a woman in the Brno tax compliance team. There was no need to have face-to-face meetings with clients. 'We all communicated by fax or email, which sounds perfectly normal now, but back then working from home was much more of an issue. We didn't have a working-from-home culture, and our computers didn't have shared drives,' she recalls.

This project was the first of its kind, but the arrangement worked so well that it continued for another six years until the women involved returned to the Prague office. 'It was new at the firm and successful. You have to remember that back then, we were used to working either at our own office or going to the client's. Our work with the first women on maternity leave was so successful that I was able to negotiate individually with others to do the same. We ended up with a stable pool of staff and could plan ahead.'

### Leading by example

The success of the project inviting female employees back to work was an example to other managers. It also showed that women at that stage of their careers could have a long-term future at the same company. 'But they had to be responsible and deliver everything on time.

Time management, providing immediate information about potential delays and taking personal responsibility for assigned tasks were a must,' Mrázová comments.

### Better understanding

She became an expert in onboarding of women returning from maternity leave. 'As a result, I have gained a better understanding of the issues they face when returning to a highly demanding professional environment, and the mental barriers they encounter.'

Mrázová left the Big Four firm at the end of 2012, and although she continues to do tax and accounting work, she spends much of her time these days on her advisory work.

She notes that women are sometimes less courageous in their actions and may at first need encouragement and support to achieve great things. 'Part of my focus is to help them shine and blossom. I inspire them to simplify their lives mentally and to use their time more efficiently,' she explains.

'As a qualified accountant, I have become a passionate professional, and I automatically seek connections with professionals in all other areas of life. I am very happy when people share my passion and love their jobs 120%. But I feel frustrated if this is not the case everywhere,' she says.

Mrázová encounters people outside the accounting world all the time and finds that many are less satisfied with their work. 'I have found fulfilment in my career at the Big Four firm and Proxy, and in working with other ACCA professional accountants. In my coaching role I hope I can help others to overcome this problem and become more satisfied with their careers.' ■

David Creighton, journalist