

Article

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Year End Read

I find that most articles and books about employee empowerment induce somnolence. However, if you have not encountered the Brazilian company Semco, and its owner Ricardo Semler, you should. Semco is a company that exhibits participatory management on steroids. This manufacturer of industrial machinery has 3,000 employees, and 20 years of impressive growth and profitability. Two principles emerge from Semler's philosophy—getting everyone committed to the goals of the organization and assuming that people will act like adults in the pursuit of success.

It's the day-to-day behaviors that put the theory to the test. Employees decide on a daily basis to do different jobs; workers set their own hours and pay levels: employees hire their bosses and choose the corporate leaders. There are no org charts, no policy manuals, no values statements nor a dress code. Nobody has an office—not even cubicles—just round tables with computer workstations. Anyone can choose to attend a meeting on any subject involving anybody.

Sounds like anarchy? Apparently not. In fact people can be very business focused and tough. During a difficult economic period in Brazil, the company could not avoid layoffs. The difference was that the employees decided who would go. Semler has written and lectured extensively on the Semco story. There seems to be no conventional wisdoms that he has adhered to, but he has facilitated the creation of a productive work culture.

For a provocative read I suggest his most recent book, *The Seven Day Weekend: Changing the Way Work Works* (Penguin/Portfolio, 2004)

