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Book Review

The Seven-Day Weekend: Changing the Way Work Works by Ricardo Semler

Reviewed by Peter A. Maresco

This book is unlike any business book you have ever read, perhaps with the exception of Ricardo Semler's first book, *Maverick: The Success Story Behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace*, originally published in 1993.

According to Semler:

We have to find a better way for work to work. The seven-day workweek is shaping up as a personal, societal, and business disaster. It robs people of passion and pleasure, destroys family and community

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stability, and sets up business organizations to ultimately fail once they've burned out their employees and burned through ever more manipulative and oppressive strategies (Semler, 2004: ix)

Background

In 1993, Ricardo Semler, CEO (self-proclaimed chief enzyme officer) of the \$212 million Brazilian company Semco, wrote *Maverick: The Success Story Behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace*. This book, which has since sold 1.1 million copies worldwide, in many ways challenged and at the same time redefined the way in which employee empowerment could be used to change the popular conception of the workplace. Semco consists of a number of units that are referred to as a federation. These include the industrial machinery unit, SemcoBAC; a partnership with

Baltimore Air Coil, Cushman & Wakefield Semco; Semco Johnson Controls, ERM, a partnership with Environmental Resources Management; Semco Ventures, which includes Internet and high-tech ventures; SemcoHR, which manages outsourcing of HR activities; and Semco RGIS, an inventory control firm (Semler, 2004: 15).

At Semco workers set their own production quotas and arrive at work anytime between 7:00 A.M. and 9:00 A.M. The company has no organizational chart. Each division sets its own salary structure. All financial information is discussed openly. The company employs no receptionists, secretaries, or personal assistants. No one has a personalized parking spaces or a dress codes. At Semco, the standard policy is to have no policy. Today, Semco employs 3,000 people in three countries working in manufacturing, professional services, and high-tech

software. Staff turnover is virtually nonexistent.

The Seven Day Weekend

When I first heard that Ricardo Semler had written a second book I was actually excited. Not in the way someone would be excited about a month long vacation or a job promotion, but because his first book was in so many ways a revolutionary way to look at how organizational culture can change, I could not wait to read the second. The problem was that the book was originally only available in Europe. When the later book finally arrived, I knew that *The Seven-day Weekend: Changing the Way Work Works* was worth the wait by simply looking at the table of contents. Immediately after the acknowledgements and the forward were the nine chapter titles, each one named for a day of the week, beginning with "Any Day," then moving through each day of the week, and ending with "Every Day."

With the exception of the chapters on Friday and Saturday, Monday is the only chapter in the entire book that actually speaks to the point of reinventing the workweek in terms of setting your own work schedule.

Drop the traditional notions of a workweek and a weekend, and divide the seven days among

company time, personal time, and idleness (free time). Rearrange your schedule to work when most other people don't. Arrange a workweek to sleep according to biorhythms rather than a time clock, and enjoy a sunny Monday on the beach after working through a chilly Sunday" (Semler, 2004: 24).

Semler points out that "we no longer grasp the difference between leisure time and being idle" (Semler, 2004: 22). He uses the example of going to the beach. Even at the beach most people are pre-occupied with reading, tanning, looking for shells, walking, swimming, and watching children. Where is the true idleness? Just doing absolutely NOTHING! Even on the weekends we find ourselves doing tasks instead of doing NOTHING. Tasks must be done because no time to do them can be found during the regular workweek. Technology that was predicted to make work less demanding has, in fact, made finding leisure time almost impossible. Once, all you had to do to become invisible was to simply not list your phone number. Today, with cell phones, e-mail, and fax machines we are on-call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. "In 1990, only 4 million people telecommuted from home or somewhere else

in the United States. By 2000, there were 23.6 million telecommuters" (Semler, 2004: 30).

The Workweek

How many Sunday evenings have workers dreaded the prospect of going to work the next day especially if they have a long drive ahead of them and a boring job waiting for them? What if you were able to take Monday off, every Monday and do with it anything you choose to do, except work. Here is a simple solution for worker apathy—put people in jobs they want to do, not in jobs they have grown tired of and bored with.

Here's a counter-intuitive idea for you: For a company to excel, employees must be reassured that self-interest, not the company's, is their foremost priority (Semler, 2004: 41).

In other words, do a job you are passionate about doing and not just because it is your job.

At Semco, employees are encouraged to do the job they were hired to do in any way they see fit, not encumbered by company policy or HR job descriptions and organizational charts. The company has no job descriptions. In addition, employees are encouraged to move from job to job within the organization

as their interests may dictate.

Programs have been put into place encouraging employees to manage their pay and plan their retirement around the quality of their health while understanding that

the peak of physical capability is in one's 20's and 30's. The downturn is usually steepest and deepest after the age of 60. Financial independence usually occurs between age 50 and 60, and idle time naturally peaks after 70 (Semler, 2004: 52).

People must, of course, have a talent for what they are doing. Work must be meaningful. Why do companies work so hard at motivating employees? Perhaps they would not have to if they gave employees "the freedom to pursue their ideas" (Semler, 2004: 69). Semler lets his employees find a job they like and lets them do it. It might not even be in their area of expertise. He feels it does not have to be. Revolutionary; sure, but so is everything else in this book. That is one of the wonderful things about it. If nothing else, it gives the reader something to think about. Can you imagine a company allowing a cleaning staff member to attend a board meeting analyzing the company's numbers *and* providing classes to help him or her understand what is going on?

At Semco, efforts are

concentrated on growth that can endure, not just growth for the sake of growth. One way of doing that is to ask end users not the usual questions but those that border on the absurd. Here are some examples:

1. What would you like your car to run on?
2. How would you like to change a flat tire?
3. What food would you like on a airplane?
4. When would you like a big parcel delivered?
5. How would you like to use a phone? (Semler, 2004: 100).

From Semco's perspective it is all about asking the right questions, and the tough questions, not just those that have been asked before.

Most companies have mission statements. So does Semco; however, according to Semler, the most important thing a company can do regarding its mission statement is to tell the truth. No platitudes, no double-speak, just the plain truth and this carries over into the organization as a whole by "trusting workers implicitly, sharing power and information, encouraging dissent, and celebrating true democracy" (Semler, 2004: 114). This is clearly illustrated at Semco where there are no expense accounts because management

simply trusts everyone to do what is right, all the time.

And then the question of sharing information arises. Once again, at Semco, this is not a problem because information is shared freely across all organizational levels.

The only source of power in an organization is information, and withholding, filtering, or retaining information only serves those who want to accumulate power through hoarding (Semler, 2004: 128).

As already mentioned, Semco has no dress code, and, as a result, no stereotyping. The point here is that if there is no dress code there can be no stereotyping and without stereotyping people look toward others in the organization for the contributions they make.

Once upon a time, it was easy to caricature the idiosyncrasies of various tribes in the manufacturing industry. People lived up to the clichés. Engineers went around with plastic, shirt-pocket protectors for their colored pens. The marketing people wore loud yellow shirts and piped music into their section, while controllers favored thick glasses and carried over sized brief cases.

The owner drove a Mercedes. The janitors owned old Ford Galax[ies]. Salesmen sported worn shoes and cars and looked as if they'd just gotten back from a Willy Loman conference (Selman, 2004: 142).

From Semler's perspective it is all about breaking down the stereotype. It is the person who is important. Even those who may come to work unmotivated are looked upon as valuable for what they bring to the organization.

Summary

In his first book, *Maverick: The Success Story Behind*

the World's Most Unusual Workplace, Ricardo Semler took his readers on a journey of discovery into what it takes to change the culture of a company and to totally reinvent the organization. Many of these principles are once again reinforced, and many of the ideas espoused in the first book are simply reworked in *The Seven-Day Weekend*.

If, after having read the first book, you subscribe to his organizational philosophy, then by all means read this book. If however, like me, you were intrigued by the title and were looking for some concrete ways to actually reinvent the workweek then you may, as I was, be somewhat disappointed. With the exception of chapters 1, 7,

and 8 very little here reflects the titles promise of a seven-day workweek other than to go into more detail on what it means to work at Semco. Is it worth reading? I guess that depends on whether you have read the first book and want more of the same.

Reference

Semler, R. (2004). *The Seven-day Weekend: Changing The Way Work Works*. New York: Portfolio Books.