

TRANSFORMERS: A ROAD TO SELF-MANAGEMENT

SEMCO STYLE STORIES

Transform teams and how they operate and help people flourish in their work: this is the purpose of PTHR (People and Transformational HR) – a UK-based consulting firm. They describe themselves as a connected, collaborative enterprise of conscious business activists with audacious dreams framed by their mission: “Better business for a better world.”

Perry Timms, Founder and Chief Energy Officer of PTHR, shares his inspirational journey of exploration and how they successfully implemented self-management. Though there were moments of “failing forward” during this exploration, the insights gained from these experiences paved the way for Perry’s unique take on self-management, significantly contributing to PTHR’s success. Today, PTHR is a Certified B-Corporation, Certified WorldBlu Freedom Centered Organization, Ecologi Climate Action Workforce, 4DayWeek Employer, and Accredited with the Living Wage Foundation. All achievements that Perry attributes to their journey towards self-management.

The Genesis

Perry recalls the earlier years when the discovery of self-management was still “a thing,” and companies had just begun to scratch the surface of the social era. For Perry, it all started with inspiration from Ricardo Semler’s book *Maverick* and others, such as *Reinventing Organizations* by Frederic Laloux and *Freedom, INC.* by Brian Carney and Isaac Getz.

Reading these books sparked a journey of discovery, various experiments, early realizations, and some early failures. Perry remembers the resentment, confusion, and lack of belief in better working methods and the dedication it took to stay on course with his ideas.

But those early days also brought insights and laid the foundation for a new way of thinking. Initially, the system he introduced was naive, messy, and unclear, despite his best attempts to make it emergent and co-created. People became frustrated because they couldn’t see the big picture – ultimately, they just wanted to get on with the work. With this in mind, they found comfort when they implemented Agile working methods. This led to some initial successes, bringing adaptable rituals and processes that were a more palatable version of self-management. People could start experimenting with alternative approaches while giving them time and space to adapt old habits.

“JUST BECAUSE YOU THINK IT’S LIBERATING DOES NOT MEAN OTHERS THINK SO TOO!”

“You can’t inflict self-management on people - Don’t expect them to be as enthusiastic about it as you are. Just because you think it’s liberating does not mean others think so too!”

Perry grew confident in the possibility of a new future. Just because some ideas were not adopted does not mean it doesn’t work or will not ever work – perhaps it’s just not the best time or approach – maybe the people need to become more receptive to innovative perspectives. Introducing an alternative system hinges on aligning the circumstances with the right timing.

Learning Point #1: Keep the Faith. Self-management is challenging because many of us are conditioned to work in hierarchical systems. Yet, we are more naturally dispositioned to self-management than we realize, and Agile as the frame du jour can be your “trojan mouse” to self-management.

From knowing it to doing it

The quest to discover the rule-breakers and shape-shifters went on from 2012 to 2018. Perry characterizes these early years as “1+ friends” – one person doing lots of research about self-managed enterprises and belonging to various communities to learn, discover, and connect to other like-minded individuals, making friends along the way. This built an intellectual and spiritual understanding of self-management. The mission was all about *knowing it!*

Come 2019, things started to change, and they were suddenly *doing it* – living by one rule: “Self-crafted self-management is non-negotiable – this is how we will be!” PTHR grew as an organization, and Perry was surrounded by a team who believed in the same future. Perry and Kirsten Buck (Chief Futures Officer of PTHR) completed the Semco Style Certified Expert training. The course validated what they already knew and gave a structured language to take their approach to the next level. Having focused time to re-align and envision a new future significantly contributed to the PTHR vessel of knowledge and brought them to a new community of self-managed believers.

They realized the conditions that gave rise to a self-managed evolution. As Perry aptly names it, *Working in Perpetual Beta* – constant experimentation to create insight and better understanding. They respectfully challenged the status quo, writing, erasing, and rewriting the rules. *Organizational Adaptability* remained a continuous focus and critical condition during this process. They had to stay fluid and agile, creating more density and power through versatility.

Two other conditions also speak significantly of the leaders’ ability to *Match states of Entropy*, being responsive to challenges and opportunities and consciously *Navigating Paradoxes*, balancing the seemingly conflicting demands and tensions. Ultimately, a shift in thinking from the extreme terms of “either-or” to a desirable middle-ground in terms of “and” – realizing how extremes can co-exist, contribute, and include, rather than exclude and stand in the way of progress.

“WE DON’T HAVE A WORK-OR-LIFE-SWITCH; WE ARE BOTH.”

“Is having a Work-Life balance still ideal? How can you have Wholeness as an organization when you can’t be a big part of helping people with their entire lives? What’s outside of work affects the inside, and vice-versa. We don’t have a work-or-life-switch; we are BOTH.”

Reimagine: An unbundled business model!

Trial and error, critical thinking, and learning from experiments laid the foundation for a thriving people-centric culture and drove the evolution of self-management. But there was still a business to manage and results to achieve, and suddenly, a new challenge arose. The old way of managing targets and performance needed to be updated, calling for a wholly reimagined approach.

Learning Point #2: Use stuff that’s lying around. Wittingly or unwittingly, people are leaving things about for you to pick up that will shape your self-managed systems and practices. You don’t have to invent everything, but you have to make it your own - the Ikea effect - what we build, we love!

One such practice was reimagining the business model as a stack, which Perry accredits to Professor Ivan Bofarull from Esade Business School (Barcelona). This approach brought a new way of thinking to PTHR, and they were able to reimagine their business model into Pillars and Stacks.

The three main Pillars are defined as People, Operations, and Principles and are detailed with nine Stacks of Strategy, Capital, Connections, Services, Impact and intelligence, Communities, Innovation, Sustainability, and Science.

Along with a reimagined business model comes the need for planning, task management, control, execution, and evaluation – but, as can be imagined, not in the traditional sense. PTHR’s approach is centered around people and rooted in self-management, and so are the systems they use to support the core of their business.

Communication is crucial, and to enable asynchronous workflow and keep everyone in the loop with what is happening, they effectively use Slack for all communication. Discussion channels are aligned to their business model’s Pillars and Stack and complemented with ad-hoc channels for focused projects and efforts.

Having the correct documentation available enables information transparency and ensures it is open to everyone when needed. An organized shared Google Drive gives access to all team members, and folders are again structured according to the Pillars and Stacks, aligning it with the Slack channels for an integrated approach.

Overall, tasks and workflows are managed with Asana, allowing the team to visualize the status of all activities and actions and bring in some creativity with relevant images, to-do lists, tracking, and much more! Asana boards are also organized based on the Pillars and Stacks of the business model, completing the alignment of communication.

Learning Point #3: Congruent systems are crucial. Communication, information, workflow, ownership - clarity is king in a contextual kingdom. Ownership is not symbolic; it’s actualized accountability.

Living self-management: The PTHR Way

Looking back over the last ten years, the core of PTHR can still be recognized, but they are also vastly different – the sum of all its parts and the embodiment of continuously improving, learning, failing, and succeeding forward!

One rule remains constant – it’s still all about self-management, but more specifically, maturing self-management into something uniquely PTHR. Influenced by Semco Style Practices, the team keeps an open mind and remains eager to try new things that give a real sense of invigoration. They practice deliberate diversification when inviting individuals to “come and play with them” – their unique name for a recruitment process that invites people into the team with openness, transparency, and a feeling of psychological safety from the get-go. As a result, PTHR has received various accolades for its approach to people, amongst others, a Top 50 position on the EMEA Inspiring Workplaces list.

“YOUR ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS SHAPE EVERYTHING!”

“Your culture, systems, and impact are everything. Your attitudes and behaviors shape everything!”

Perry leads with kindness and openness and is always ready to support and coach. Tongue in cheek, he often reminds the team, “Don’t make me the boss!” It is a way of saying that if needed, he will gladly step in, take the reins, and deal with a situation, but also a strong acknowledgment that he does not see the need for it – trust and capability are entirely within the team. Although they sometimes would like “the boss” to step in, as far as possible, he simply refuses!

Learning Point #4: A Vision & evolution keep you stimulated. Knowing your collective destiny and the quest to discover how your systems, behaviors, and approaches will need to shift to achieve that. Agitation energy and emerging possibilities that keep you in a restless state of more, better, sharper, smarter - “quantum drivers” being both stable and fluid.

Inspired by Lumiar’s Mosaic approach, PTHR developed its internal learning mosaic highlighting aspects of *Generic Business Strategy Skills and Practices*, *Sustainable Business and Corporate Practices*, *Professional Skills and Practices*, and *Next Stage Organization Evolution Skills*. It also indicates where knowledge sharing is in progress, actual skills or capabilities acquired, and where there are still areas for development.

Learning Point #5: Always be happy about being in a learning deficit situation. Learn from each other; in the flow of culture; bring expertise you don’t have; hard-wire learning time. You’ll never learn enough, but never cease your quest for more.

PTHR also wholly revised the old hierarchical structure in proper self-management form, aligning it with its reimagined business model’s Pillars and Stacks. Perry delightfully shares their “Leaderful Circle” – aptly named because they no longer have one leader – everyone is a leader! The Pillars of People, Operations, Processes, and Strategy are all integrated and aligned to core focus areas of Sustainability, People Development, Vision, Source and essence, Systems, and Self-management.

Around this are all the transformers – the individuals taking the responsibility and being the leader on demand.

Learning Point #6: Everyone leads. Leaderful over leaderless. Clear but permeable lines across lead responsibilities. Constantly stress-test what leading is and in a one-for-all, all-for-one mindset.

Being Semco Style Certified Experts, Perry and Kirsten took their learning from the program and aligned it to the needs of PTHR. From the 100+ practices of Semco Style, they identified 12 focused practices with high-impact potential. After discussions with the team, the chosen practices were put on a 12-month roll-out plan, each considered an experiment. They would play around with the practice to see what it could do for the company and how it could benefit them. Some had immediate business benefits, and others put them on a creative thinking path to discover hidden truths about their business and the team.

The practice *Are you out of your mind* started with a central question: “If you could follow a passion and create a side hustle... What would it be?” They went wild and discovered over 30 crazy ideas – the best part was that a few of these found their way into the business and brought inspiration to areas that could potentially enhance the company.

Co-creating Your Social Contract was a practice that had direct and immediate benefits. It gave a structure to bring the voice of all employees into the conversation around keeping each other accountable for commitments, respecting each other’s time, celebrating achievements, treating each other with kindness and respect, having difficult conversations, and increasing the company’s reach. It is now a living document that they work and improve on continuously.

The practice, *Boundaries for Self-management*, was aligned to the social contract – it gave an approach to the team to not restrict each other but rather provide a sense of security in the freedoms allowed in the team. Boundaries around Performance, Quality outputs, Behaviors, and compliance with critical Systems and Regulations were discussed. It gave clarity to the team on expectations and, when a boundary condition has been struck, to reach out to fellow team members for support.

Another practice that started as a fun experiment was the *Rush Hour MBA* – an alternative to being irritated when stuck in traffic or bored on public transport. This suddenly changed into a co-created list of podcasts on topics the team found interesting and relevant to business improvement and led to stimulating discussions when the team got together. This was also supported by experimenting with *Reverse Mentoring*, where mentorship was not coupled to a coupling of “senior to junior” or “older to younger” but opened so that anyone could be the mentor on a topic where they had expertise.

Looking towards the future, they also started experimenting with *Let Us Learn the Numbers*. In this practice, information is made available and adequately discussed to clarify where data comes from and how it should be interpreted. In spending time on this practice, their future goal is to challenge the team for self-set salaries and full employee ownership – which can be achieved only if everyone understands how the business operates and how to collate and interpret the relevant information.

Towards the future: A constant evolution

PTHR is Transparent, Energized, and Connected; most importantly, they are Self-managed. From the early genesis and evolution of Perry Timms’ thinking, through all the experiments, failures, and successes, to establishing a stable foundation, PTHR has come a long way, but they are not done! Some would say they have just scratched the surface – they have great goals for the future and a team committed to making it happen. If it does not occur as planned, they have an adaptable learning mindset that enables them to remain flexible and adaptable to future changes.

Being incredibly proud of their story, PTHR is always willing to share their learning with others. They frequently host their one-hour online Culture Tours, where anyone can attend and hear the latest edition of their evolving story. Each time, it is hosted by a VIP (Very Interesting Person) from the PTHR team and offered for free, with all donations going to charity.



Watch the full episode of this Semco Style Stories with PTHR here!

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