

BUILDING A SELF-DIRECTED COMPANY



“Having just a compass or a map will not bring you towards self-direction. You need both,” said Joël van den Doel, Vibber’s creative director, while talking about his connection with Semco Style. Consultancy company, Vibber, has made large strides towards becoming self-directed with the practical guidance of Semco Style. In its journey, the organization has found the balance between the ambition to grow and the need to protect its culture of empowering employees.

Baby Steps Towards Change

For many, letting your employees decide important elements in your business, such as pay, number of holidays and certain investments, sounds like utopia. On the flipside, encouraging your employees to take more responsibility and creating a sense of ownership in the company sounds like music to many entrepreneurs.

“WHEN EMPLOYEES FEEL RESPONSIBLE, THEY’RE MORE INVESTED IN THE ORGANIZATION”

Paradoxically, one cannot exist without the other. When employees feel responsible, they’re more invested in the organization and are much more likely to positively impact bigger decisions.

These are big ideas, and Joël understood that it would take time and that they must make small, incremental changes over time. To start, they chose changes that weren’t likely to impact the continuity of the business and built momentum for sustained impact over time.

The first change they brought in was to the number of holidays employees had – they made it unlimited. Again, for many people, this might sound utopic and make them worry employees would exploit it. However, Vibber underscored the privilege with the expectation that work doesn’t suffer.

According to Guido van der Spek, one of Vibber’s division leaders, this new policy freed up people to decide how many hours they spent at work. “If they managed to reach their goals within 70% of the time, they could take 30% of the time off,” he says. That translates to about 3.5 working days a week!

“However, in reality, people take less time off,” Guido explains. “Time is not really a factor people discuss anymore, because getting work done is a priority.” To prevent people from becoming overworked, leaders at Vibber prioritize personal interactions and setting clear boundaries.

The Vibber Decision Group

After successfully implementing smaller decisions regarding division of time and paid time-off, Vibber has begun delving into larger decisions that could be distributed to employees.

As the organization grew, the founders realized they were too often working in the operation, instead of working on developing the business. This wasn’t a

surprise, since they were heavily involved in everything at the beginning.

However, once Vibber grew to employing 30 employees, the founders and leaders needed to focus on increasing the quality of the work, and not so much on being involved in the execution of the work itself. This meant finding qualitatively better organizations to partner with, fitting systems and inspiring others within and outside of the organization.

Joël initiated the Vibber Decision Group to make decisions that maintained the collective engagement of employees. Every quarter, all employees were invited to Vibber Decides, a two-hour meeting where decisions on the most pressing issues were made collectively. The meeting is run by a facilitator and two group chairpersons (who are neither the founders nor division leaders). This kind of a set up prevented leaders assuming all responsibility.

During those two hours, the people that show up delve into challenges such as the division of bonuses, opening of new offices and salary indexation.

The impact of these meetings were immediately visible. After a session of Vibber Decides, the process of implementation of the decisions starts immediately. It made people get the feeling their voice is heard and see that their voice has an impact.

DNA Over Growth

Vibber’s DNA focused on being people-centric, transparent, fun, persistent and passionate. They realized that when they grew in terms of employees, quality or impact, it made them compromise on that organizational DNA. “When you’re growing, it’s easy to hire employees based on competency – especially if you’re not going to interact a lot with them,” says Joël.

“IT’S ABOUT HIRING PEOPLE WITH THE SKILLS CRITICAL TO THE ROLE AND AN ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET.”

To maintain the DNA that they put together while founding the company, Vibber began the practice of employees hiring new employees. People are invited to participate in the hiring process depending on how interconnected their job is to the new position. That



way, employees who will be working a lot together have a strong voice in who joins their team next. And this allows Vibber to maintain a fair, people-first process in their growth model.

However, such a model poses a threat to the level of diversity and entrepreneurship within the company because people tend to select others who resemble themselves leading to homogeneity. To counter this effect, Vibber clearly outlines that the right candidate is not someone with the same expertise or qualities as the hiring group. Instead, it’s about hiring people with the skills critical to the role and an entrepreneurial mindset.

And just as employees are involved in hiring decisions, they are also involved in the termination of non-functioning employees. This comes full circle with employees owning the entire employee life cycle – hiring, onboarding, integration, development and termination (when required).

Semco Style as a Practical Guide

With employees taking ownership of certain responsibilities, Vibber began to accumulate homegrown examples of self-organization. When organizations transition from being a traditional set-up towards self-organization and, eventually, self-direction, the people involved tend to gravitate towards certain principles that are foundational to self-organization.

With the Semco Style Framework, Joël found a form of guidance that kept the focus on building a culture of trust and happiness. These two elements focus on how individuals perceive an organization and the degree of engagement and motivation they have for their work. Ultimately, it comes down to whether people can maintain ownership and stay accountable when they’re provided with a high degree of trust and autonomy.

Entrepreneurship Within the Organization

Vibber started off as a small group of entrepreneurs, who dreamt of creating a large group of entrepreneurs in the future – people who are emotionally intelligent and take ownership. At Guido’s arrival, in the summer of 2022, after being an entrepreneur for 20 years, he doubted whether he could maintain that entrepreneurial feeling working as an employee again. Almost a year has passed now, and the entrepreneurial spirit is still there: “At Vibber, I truly feel that I can be entrepreneurial without management stepping in and limiting my vision”.



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