

THE CHANCE AND CHALLENGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY



With this new edition of Semco Style Stories, we take you on a journey to Australia. The telecommunication company 'Australian Radio Towers' (ART) shared their path towards becoming Semco Style. As a former family-owned business, ART has been no stranger to flat organizational structures since its inception in 1973. With Andrew Price taking over the family business in 2009, it has grown into a large organization that's experienced many different organizational structures over time.

In this article, you will read about their journey of implementing Semco Style, the challenges they faced, the opportunities that emerged from that, and their personal experiences from diversifying the organization.

First, let's introduce all guest speakers who collectively shared the story of ART. As the nephew of the founder of ART, Andrew Price has long been affiliated with the company before taking over in 2009. Driven by his entrepreneurial nature, he has been at the core of all the changes that ART underwent over the years. The business support team is complemented by his partners Kirra Kellie and Philip van Collier. Both Philip and Kirra participated in the Semco Style Expert training program in order to prepare themselves to lead and facilitate the transformations that Andrew kickstarted. In fact, Andrew has made substantial changes to the organization, moving continuously between different organizational structures and pyramids before finally embracing and embarking on the Semco Style journey in 2020.

Being the Center of All and the 100-hour Workweek
Before the involvement of Semco Style, Andrew describes ART as a small, but steadily growing organization that he and another individual managed. Departments of one person characterized the organization, in which Andrew more often than not did most of the work. A sense of responsibility, needed to run these segments, resulted in him doing the accounting, design, packing, and construction of products, all while flying across the country to install them. 100-hour workweeks, in part, initiated the thought that things had to change.

Parallel to the growth of the organization, Andrew started to learn how to let go. It was a challenging process to realize that teaching others must go hand-in-hand with trusting others. At first, hiring new employees and managers in order to create a more natural form of risk management obviously entails teaching them the ways of the organizations.

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But then trusting them to move accordingly is the scary, but necessary, second step. Otherwise, your organization will not move towards a more decentralized form of control with responsible individuals.

This is exactly what happened at ART, which Andrew described saying, *“I was still at the center of it all.”* It had repercussions for the agility of the business, since it had become quite reactive instead of pre-planned and proactive. It was at this moment that the idea of changing certain elements within ART started to take shape.

“I WAS STILL AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL”

By diversifying, while maintaining their close bond as a group, ART started to embrace diversity as one of their core strengths, which brought a dynamic and engaged core group to the table. Improving that over is when the Semco Style Institute came into the picture.

Aligning Values in a New Mindset
In their initial days, on the road to becoming self-managed, ART encountered several setbacks that not only showed the challenges of self-management but also their inexperience with it as a concept. Before anything, Andrew and his partners had to do a deep-dive into why they wanted to be self-managed and the purpose of their work. As Andrew puts it: *“I discovered that self-management was actually in line with a core value that I myself embrace, which is being able to share. I wanted to create a company that makes a difference through an engaged workforce.”* By diversifying their core team, ART discovered the strength of the masses. Any successful attempt to diversify, while maintaining the close relationships of the group, meant individuals had to be given the freedom to explore their talents. It meant letting go of control and embracing an environment of trust.

Letting talent flourish by being patient was challenging at first, but it turned out to be crucial for laying a foundation of trust and accountability. And, you can be positively surprised in the process, as Andrew discovered: *“People learn lessons even if you feel like you know the outcome before anyone else. Sometimes the outcome you see is correct, other times it is a variation or change, and you get surprised.”*

With the entrance of Semco Style, facilitated by SSI Australia founder Domenico Pinto, Kirra and Philip learned about the importance of creating a fertile ground within the organization. Creating fertile ground in the organization may seem like a slow process in which results seem to take forever. What it does, however, is create a shift in mindset.

Semco Style teaches an approach that is new to many organizations, which explains why it needs considerable time to be digested by all involved. Only then can the newfound knowledge be transferred to other organizational members in order to be implemented in its entirety.

At ART, this learning process took shape through the creation of focus groups. By sitting down with individual departments and employees and having in-depth discussions, a mutual understanding was created about what the departments were going through and how they could get involved and shape their own process of transformation. In doing so, as Philip mentions, *“We started to address all the holes that were left behind and started dealing with low-hanging fruit”*. By tackling that initial work, ART could now fluently start rolling out the carpet for the other changes to come.

Speeding Up the Process

The slow process of engaging all within a new approach balances itself when elements become more tangible. At ART, this started with the introduction of the Semco Style organizational Selfie. It represented a vital aspect for their organizational reflection, as it gave insights into other models in comparison with the Semco Style principles. In the words of Philip: *“It gave insight into the gaps we had to fill in”*. By means of lots of experiments, retrospectives, and committees, ART created a clear overview of how each ART employee viewed the organization. As such, Learning from their mistakes and from the teams feedback, they engaged more actively with the workforce.

The committees were only one of many new initiatives that guided their Semco Style journey. As part of the internal training process, Philip, Kirra and Andrew started working with frameworks that were vital for internal training methods and individual exploration. A financial framework was implemented as a preparation for understanding the financial information of the organization, in accordance with the 'Let Us Learn the Numbers' practice. Next, a peer-to-peer rating system was introduced in order to stimulate the process of continuous feedback and feedback loops.

As described by Andrew, the importance of these frameworks can be shown by the creation of safe boundaries within the organization that allow employees to explore their talents. It does not specify certain actions or roles, but rather aims at creating a direction which individuals can, then, shape to their preferences. Also, creating these boundaries helps with consolidating the experiences of being a business owner by means of facilitating it through a philosophy, rather than a detailed description of day-to-day or year-to-year activities. Put differently by Philip, *“A framework does not mean more rules. Instead, it's like the dashboard of a car. You need to watch certain elements as you drive the business, otherwise the wheels come off”*.

A True (Semco Style) Collective

At present, ART is implementing ways of self-management in the organization, and does so as a collective. In contrast to their starting phase, they have shown tremendous improvement in understanding that implementation of the self-management philosophy runs parallel to the implementation of a philosophy of accountability. Moving as a collective of diverse individuals meant moving with a mindset of responsible business owners of their own role. Mistakes are okay, considering that not all have the experience of a business owner. *“Learning from all the issues and doing good quality retrospectives is vital,”* according to Kirra, for improvement by means of a deep and clear reflection on all and everything.

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Asking questions proved to be a powerful tool to direct the team towards solutions. As a manager, that means you should not be fixated on solving a problem, and instead focus more so on supporting a solution that comes from within the team. Philip captures this focus on awareness within the team perfectly: *“Semco Style needs to happen within you before it can happen in the business. Every individual needs to have that Semco Style transformation inside of themselves. It is the way they act, react and interact that makes the change, not a model outside of you.”*

Reflecting on the process up until now has seen that ART has created a framework around people – both customers and employees – having an excellent experience. Even though the transformation process has just started, the dot on the horizon is becoming more vibrant. The experiments start to become more fruitful and even the framework comes alive and starts to mature, along with the employees. Condensing 2 to 3 decades of experience being a business owner into a 6-12 month window seemed hard. However, creating a framework that supports an organic learning process and to start behaving as business owners collectively, is a fascinating process to watch, according to Andrew. The right tools, such as the correct mentality and a strong support system that help you aim right at the dot on the horizon create that collective feeling of moving forward. And, that's the art of the business.

We want to thank Andrew, Kirra and Philip for sharing their endeavors within Australian Radio Towers. Let's learn from their inspiring transformation, absorb their wisdom and use it to free the untapped reservoir of talent in our own organizations!



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