

SELF-MANAGEMENT IN A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION



Can a non-profit organization run successfully in a self-managed way of working? In this Semco Style Story, we discover the powerful secrets of self-management with Holly Penalver, the founder and previous CEO of Indigo Volunteers. This remarkable charity has significantly impacted the lives of refugees along the European migratory route. Indigo partners with 48 charities that provide essential aid, healthcare, education, skills workshops, and vital services to thousands of refugees.

Indigo Volunteers was founded in 2012 to challenge the exploitative practices of for-profit volunteering agencies. They want to ensure that volunteering remains true to its core humanitarian purpose: people helping people. That's why they partner with grassroots, non-profit charities that are positively dedicated to supporting displaced communities.

Indigo Volunteers came to be in response to the steep fees, dubious marketing practices, and questionable projects Holly had encountered while volunteering abroad. She was keen to find a more ethical way to get involved.

No Business Training Required

From the outset, Indigo Volunteers charted a unique path. Holly, with no formal business or organizational training and a background as a pediatric nurse, was fueled by a desire to improve the human condition. Armed with passion and mission, Holly jumped in and created a matchmaking organization, ensuring that aid reached those who needed it most while maintaining ethical practices.

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“Not having a business background was the advantage – never being taught the “right” (or rather wrong?) way! I had less to unlearn, and it felt natural to involve people, being democratic and not dictating anything.”

The 2015 refugee crisis caused a sudden growth spurt and change in focus, yielding an unprecedented demand for immediate independent emergency aid on European soil. Indigo has been on the ground since placing over 4000 volunteers in over 80 partner projects along the European refugee route. In certain aspects, Holly's lack of business experience proved advantageous, as it positively disrupted traditional approaches to leadership and management.

Along with this new way of matchmaking within the volunteer industry, the organization was run differently. The team was exposed early to Holly's alternative way because she followed her intuition and created a more democratic and participative working environment. There were no management philosophies or models to distract them from solving a significant problem and doing it in a way that made the most sense.

From the beginning, Indigo Volunteers were rewriting the rules of organizing, leading, and facilitating the matchmaking of volunteers because they relied on their common sense rather than prescriptive rules.

Common Sense

As the team focused on getting things done and making the world better, they opted for a few practices they deemed the simplest. There were no big words or theories, just common sense.

“JUST START SOMEWHERE.”

“Just do what is needed and works for your organization – just start somewhere.”

For instance, they naturally collaborated on the strategic focus guided by Holly's facilitative style. They decided on goals together instead of a top-down approach and managed their leave periods. This aligned well with a more natural approach to performance discussions, happening more frequently rather than limiting it to an annual or bi-annual event. It was based on relationships and collaboration to help one another be the best they can be for the world. This organic approach created a space for challenging conversations where people could air their differences and struggles, cultivating a supportive and evolving environment.

“It requires lots of openness to experimentation – try and fail often, but learning and failing forward is critical!”

The team continued with common sense – the most practical way of doing things, without specific training, methodology, or a standardized business language for the transformation. They made mistakes and learned from them. It was not perfect, but this was the beauty. There was no authoritative leader with a specific agenda other than to create an organization that served society. The rest was in service of this greater purpose and, therefore, toned down to what was functional and based on common sense.

Adding the Language

As Holly progressed on her journey as a leader, she was guided by her curiosity and relationships in finding better ways of organizing and executing. She came across the work of Ricardo Semler and Semco Style Institute (SSI) and realized that there was a language, framework, and tools that supported her intuitive leadership style.

She soon found herself applying to the 18-week Expert Program that SSI offered. In the program, she found like-minded individuals who were just as ‘crazy’ as she was, a place to belong, learn, and grow as a leader within this alternative way of leading.

Holly made explicit links between their current work practices and the terminology from the SSI Expert Program. Their Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) working group is linked directly to *Safeguarding Diversity* from Semco Style, and they took a very open-minded approach. From the onset, they made it clear that they did not know everything

and were there to improve. The result was wonderful and challenging conversations, which led directly to changes and improvements. They diversified where job openings were posted and openly discussed different ways in which everyone likes to work and would accommodate these where possible.

Ultimately, we not only respected diversity but celebrated it, acknowledging that this is what makes us a stronger team.

Unfiltered Transparency was implemented in their efforts to make reviews more open and create a space for difficult conversations and sharing struggles. The way that Indigo looked after their team and built them from within is linked to the practice of *Succession Planning*. As the program progressed, Holly was inspired to keep implementing more of the practices she encountered as she felt validated in her approach and better equipped to lead in an uncertain world.

“WHAT WAS SEEN AS THE NEW WAY IS NOW JUST OUR NEW NORMAL.”

Looking to the Future

From the beginning, Indigo Volunteers has been a different organization regarding its purpose, culture, and leadership. Adding insights and practices from the SSI Expert Program increased their self-management, self-direction, and self-organization. This sets them up well for the future.

The team has identified some gaps they would like to work on. One of the most critical practices they would like to implement is *Boundaries for Self-*



“Having the certification gives the confidence and credibility to speak on this topic – having a clear and concise language to move the organization forward.”

Holly started the Semco Style practice of *Be on the Board Once* by including team members in senior meetings to gain their perspective and empower them. Some of the other practices they have employed are:

- *Participative Recruitment* – Employees should have a say in who they work with.
- *Bottom-up Operational Review Meetings* – Get problems solved by including feedback from those who deal with the issues (can be challenging to implement).
- *CEO Rotation* – Holly and the team took it upon themselves to identify the next CEO from within while Holly stayed as an advisor and board member.

There have been several critical insights for Holly because of attending the SSI Expert Program, apart from expanding her language and implementing new practices at Indigo Volunteers. In her own words:

- When you empower people and give them responsibilities, magical things happen!
- Responsibility is a much bigger motivator than following orders.
- The team has evolved from being employees to becoming intrapreneurs.
- Change must come from leadership – be the Brave Leader.
- Leaders must provide clarity on what self-management means and where it fits in.
- The journey is always customizable – make it your own and bring your team on this journey with you!

“What was seen as the new way is now just our new normal, and it seems bonkers that you would not do things this way. Now, loyalty is at an all-time high.”

management. This should guide further implementation of additional practices to empower the team, such as *Choose Your Own Salary* and tweaking the reward system to include practices such as *Reward Results* and *Rewarding Good Ideas*.

In Holly's own words, she explains where she currently finds herself:

“SSI has given me the confidence to recognize that I can consider myself a brave leader and that I have an instinct for this! When people find out that I have handed over my role as CEO, the general response is, ‘Oh wow, I bet that has been hard.’ The honest answer is that it hasn't been. I feel this is because I trust the person I have handed over to. I trust her in her capabilities and that she wants the best for the charity. But mostly, I trust that when she gets something wrong (because, of course, she will!), she will learn from it and improve. It has then, instead, been a beautiful process to hand over.”

I also hear many people tell their colleagues of their departure while handing in their notice. Given our openness and transparency, that also didn't sit right with me. So, I told the team at the beginning of the year that I felt, at some point in 2023, it was time for me to move on. This gave us a lot of time for succession planning and handing over. It was really a great experience and transition phase.”

“The brave leader is a person that is comfortable with taking (calculated) risks – knowing you have to risk things to evolve and adapt, but also being comfortable with the failure and the knowledge that you can grow from failure.”

Observing the growth and evolution of the Indigo team as they embark on a journey of self-organization will be intriguing, especially in seeing how they personalize this process. Additionally, it will be fascinating to see how Holly applies the principles of self-management and self-organization in her endeavors wherever she goes.



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