

Free Style

By Heather Hudson

When Patrick Storto has a problem at work, he doesn't go to management. In his office, there's no such thing as managers – or hierarchy of any kind.

That's because Avema, a telecom consulting firm based in Toronto, introduced self-management, a system that focuses on a distributed management infrastructure.

Here's how it works:

As a group, the 20 Avema employees brainstormed what the company stands for and developed a mission statement for the company and each department. Each employee was then responsible for outlining his or her responsibilities in a document

called a Colleague Letter of Understanding (CLOU). Other colleagues reviewed and approved the documents.

"Basically, every aspect of the company is included in someone's CLOU," said Storto, who works in accounting at Avema. "If I need something, I can look at my colleagues' CLOUs and know where to retrieve that information. I don't have to go to management to find out who's responsible for it."

Storto says the system empowers every colleague to take responsibility for his or her work.

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COMPANIES ARE EMBRACING SELF-MANAGEMENT PRACTICES WITH GREAT SUCCESS

accountable for everything we do, individually and as a group."

Self-management is a trend initiated by the Morning Star Company of Sacramento, Calif., a tomato ingredient processing company. Though it's gaining traction across North America now, self-management has humble beginnings.

Doug Kirkpatrick, an organizational change consultant, executive coach, writer and educator, is one of the original stakeholders in the self-management movement. In 1990, he was Morning Star's financial comptroller and was part of a meeting in a construction trailer with Chris Rufer and 23 other employees.



workforce management

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“Chris passed around a draft of the Morning Star Guiding Colleague Principles,” said Kirkpatrick. “One: Human beings should not use force or coercion against other human beings. Two: People should honour the commitments they make to each other in the workplace.

“We banded this about for a couple of hours and couldn’t think of any reason not to adopt these principles. Basically, the vision was that we’d have an organization that would have happiness and prosperity to the degree we lived up to these principles.”

Twenty-four years later, Morning Star is a multi-million dollar company that still employs the self-management concept: all colleagues are considered equal, from the manufacturing floor to the administrative functions.

“That’s how we work in the rest of our lives, so aligning organizational life with the way people operate just makes sense,” said Kirkpatrick.

Kirkpatrick has since written the book on self-management, *Beyond Empowerment: The Age of the Self-Managed Organization*, and offers seminars through the Morning Star Self-Management Institute (SMI) to advise other companies to “co-create the future of management.”

After taking a few SMI seminars, Avema CEO Roger Yang invited his employees to learn the concept and bring it back to the office in Toronto.

Within months, the small office had fully adapted the self-management style. And one year in, Storto says communication and satisfaction is much improved.

“If anyone has an issue with another colleague, we bring it to that person instead of to a manager,” he said. “There are no rumours. We settle things directly.”

Avema colleagues (they’re no longer called employees) conduct quarterly peer reviews to offer and receive constructive criticism. After three rounds, Storto says

everyone is becoming more comfortable with the process.

“We always have debates and clashing opinions on new ideas on how to improve the company, save money or make money,” he said. “We’re not all ‘yes-men.’ Everyone has input and we come to decisions much more collaboratively.”

Kirkpatrick says the system could be incorporated into any type of organization – he’s found pockets of self-management in the Canadian military – but start-up and tech companies in particular are most open to it so far. He acknowledges that legacy companies and those with entrenched layers of hierarchy would have a more difficult time making the transition.

“It’s partly a matter of change in individual mindset,” said Kirkpatrick. “If managers have risen up through ranks and obtained positions by climbing up the corporate ladder, they may not be willing to abandon those positions. That would have to be thought through very carefully.”

And what happens to HR departments in a self-managed organization?

“I can assure HR professionals that there is still a need for HR talent and expertise in a self-managed enterprise,” said Kirkpatrick. “It would look less like an airport control tower and more like members of a soccer team out on the field with their fellow colleagues facilitating, coaching, guiding and consulting. It would be trying to drive better or more effective self management whatever way possible through communication, negotiation and mediation.”

At Avema, that’s the way it’s playing out. Storto says the benefits far outweigh the growing pains associated with the system.

“Everybody enjoys coming to work here,” said Storto. “Nobody’s watching over anyone. I decide a time that works for me to come in today, what I’ll work on and how I’ll do it. I have the power to make decisions and I don’t have to wait for approval or permission from managers.”

This kind of shared leadership has also resulted in a tighter-knit community within the office.

“Colleague relationships have strengthened. We’re constantly giving feedback and having discussions. It’s a very open environment,” said Storto. “I’ve never been at a company with such high morale.” ■

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