



What does fulfillment at work really look like?

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By Polly LaBarre

(TheMIX) -- There is tremendous goodwill, not to mention countless exciting experiments, around making the world of work more human -- designed to promote more freedom, equity, engagement, and passion. Why, then, can those words sound so cheap when we hear them repeated over and over by leaders of all stripes? Probably because these words are uttered much more often than they are ever enacted.

That's why it's so refreshing to spend time with a leader who is relentlessly inventive and effective as a champion of this cause. We aim too low, says Ricardo Semler, the irrepensible force behind Brazil's Semco Group. "We constantly talk about passion -- serving customers passionately, filling in forms passionately -- but what if we created the conditions for people to feel exhilaration, to get involved to the point they shout 'yes!' and give each other high fives because they did it their way and it worked?"

What if, instead of assuming passion will just show up when we invoke it, we focused on designing organizations to unleash it?

For the last 30 years, Semco has operated as a kind of lab for experimenting on what it takes to build working lives characterized by exhilaration and fulfillment. From its founding as a manufacturer of centrifuges for the vegetable oils industry, Semco has grown into a collection of companies -- from real estate to inventory services to industrial equipment and document management -- held together less by what business they are in than how they go about doing their business.

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Since the mid-80s, when Semler arrived on the scene, that has translated into an ever-evolving experiment in upending the organizational status quo: no organizational chart, no fixed offices or working hours, no fixed CEO, no HR department, no five-year plan (or two- or one-year-plan), no job descriptions or permanent positions, no approvals necessary. And the company has an endless array of clever practices and initiatives geared to increase individual autonomy.

The result? Market success -- Semco is private but Semler reports average annual revenue growth at 40% and profitability. But probably just as telling is the human impact. Leaders from all over the world have flocked to Semco's door for the past 20 years to learn from its unconventional approach (nearly 80 universities have published Semco case studies and Semler's own book, *Maverick*, has sold over a million copies).

I caught up with Semler during his three-month sojourn with his family at his beach house in northwestern Brazil, appropriate for a man whose second book is titled *The Seven-Day Weekend*. One of Semler's more recent leadership innovations has been to kick himself out of the day-to-day management of Semco in order to focus on an array of pursuits including [reinventing primary education](#) and disrupting the legal industry with a [21st-century take on legal services](#). We talked to the sound of jungle birds and waves (alas, via Skype, not in person) and he offered some lessons learned when it comes to turning work into what he calls "a seven-day weekend of fulfillment." [More](#)



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