Siegfried Kaltenecker

Self-Organising Enterprises

Management and Coaching in the Agile World

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To my daughters Selina & Stella

Contents

Introduction

"My role is that of a catalyst", wrote Ricardo Semler in *Maverick*, "I try to create an environment in which others make decisions"[1]. Semler's statement may appear simplistic when considering the deep changes that turned the Brazilian machine manufacturer *Semco* into a **pioneer of entrepreneurial self-organisation**: from decreasing the number of management roles, to empowering local decision makers, and the transparency of all relevant business data up through employee profit sharing.

For me, *Semco´s* evolution is one of the most spectacular examples in the history of self-organisation. It seems to be a worthy opening for my new book, which includes many sensational stories. Semler's catalyst statement emphasizes three core elements of self-organising enterprises. First, it emphasizes the **importance of the environment**, or context, in which the work occurs. Second, it emphasizes the **role of decision making** through which we continuously re-organise ourselves. And third, it emphasizes that the **decisions are made by the subject matter experts instead of their superiors**.

The changes in Semler's own role over the course of the company's history are similarly spectacular. After many years as CEO, he withdrew himself from the daily business of *Semco*. "Now I am just another counsellor. But my job hasn't changed. I try to make things happen, like a catalyst."[2]

It's interesting that Semler affiliated his management and counsellor role with the same metaphor. On the one hand, this double metaphor contains, like brackets, an important period in Semco's evolution. On the other hand, Semler himself merges two areas that are the focus of this book. **Management and coaching are seen as essential services for successful business development**.

Both services are necessary for developing a work system that is as agile as possible to respond to the rapidly changing market. I believe self-organisation is the foundation of this kind of entrepreneurial responsivity. If we are not able to create a supportive environment, encourage people to manage themselves within clear boundaries, and trust that they will do their best, achieving success will be extremely difficult.

Many companies **dream of business agility**, but this is **impossible to achieve without self-organisation**. Clever concepts and management rhetoric are not enough. It needs profound understanding, flexible forms of interaction, and enough stamina for the long journey of incremental improvement. Luckily, self-organisation today is no longer rocket science. There are enough enterprises that we can learn from to find our own way. *Semco* is only one example of such an enterprise, and you will learn about many others in this book.

The question remains as to why management and coaching should play an important role in self-organising enterprises. What exactly do managers need to do to create such an enterprise? What should the coaches concentrate on to inspire this creation? And which unique opportunities result from combining leadership and coaching?

I answer these questions in the four parts of this book. Part I deals with a **concept of management that can cope with the challenges of the agile world**. I attempt to dispel some myths about agility and self-organisation. After that, I will refer to several topics from my last book, *Leading Self-Organising Teams* [3], and will show you, among other things, how such teams can continue to grow.

Figure 1 Self-Organisation?

In Part II of this book, I go beyond the individual teams and methods to examine **enterprise-wide self-organisation**. To achieve this, we can refer to eight design principles, and each will be examined in their own chapter:

1. Customer First
2. Visual Work Management
3. Fast Feedback Loops
4. Customized Decisions
5. Bold Experiments
6. Lean Organisational Structure
7. Distributed Management
8. Continuous Training

A broad spectrum of practical examples from various industries, contexts and countries should help you to pursue your own change initiative without having to rely on standardized frameworks.

Part III of the book explains why I view **coaching as a core skill** for such initiatives. First, I will give a solid definition of coaching:

What is coaching? What distinguishes this kind of professional help from other forms of support? And what does it have to do with self-organisation? In addition, I introduce four types of support that now belong to the daily business of self-organising enterprises: peer consulting, peer feedback, and coaching managers as well as managers as coaches. Real-life examples help to convey a practical understanding of these concepts.

In Part IV, I focus on the idea presented at the beginning of this foreword from Ricardo Semler. I have even dared to create a **short manifesto for self-organising leadership** in which I propose that management and coaching should go hand in hand. With regards to this special partnership, I outline a different way of leading and share some personal experiences.

Who can benefit from these four parts? The subtitle of the book, "Management and Coaching in the Agile World", focuses on two target groups. The first target group is line managers who want to create an agile enterprise and know, or at least have an idea, that they need self-organisation and a fresh understanding of management. The second target group is coaches who support such a transformation by using their specific subject matter expertise and process knowledge. It would be even better when a coach reads the management part of this book, just as a manager might dig deeper into the coaching part. Managers are playing an increased role as internal coaches and mentors, and the concept of a sparring partnership between managers and external coaches encourages out-of-the-box thinking.

Because this book advocates **leadership at all levels**, it has something to offer to many other members of the organisation as well— whether they be technicians, product managers, project leaders or human resources specialists. The distribution of management responsibilities that characterizes a self-organising enterprise, the delegation of decision-making authority, or the peer coaching and feedback are practices that everyone can benefit from.

Why should you keep reading? What do you get out of it? Essentially, you will learn how to **take better care of your customers, give your employees a more satisfying work life and at the same time make a respectable profit**. Not a bad deal, if you ask me. Specifically, I will describe:

- How you, **as a manager**, can concentrate on the design of a work system that will be fit for the future. I'll show you how to establish such a system so autonomy is gradually expanded. To achieve this, you will need decision-making policies, fast feedback loops and a smart distribution of traditional management responsibilities.
- How you, **as a coach**, can help cultivate self-organisation by providing helpful impulses. A careful balance between expert and process coaching is as important as the ability to support, as well as challenge, the managers. For me, one of the obvious consequences of agile transformation is that managers themselves gain more coaching competencies.
- How you **as a subject matter expert** can create an open atmosphere with your colleagues, but also with management, and take full responsibility for those work areas for which you are accountable.

These three value propositions reinforce my argument that **self-organising enterprises are a catalyst for leadership capabilities**. However, not all employees are equal in a self-organising environment. If anything, the business value of self-organisation lies in the ability of not only respecting, but also deliberately utilising, the employees´ differences in experience, skill levels and personality. The agile coordination of these differences comprises the lifeblood of self-organisation.

Maybe all of this sounds familiar to you. If that is the case, I hope that insight (and not the devil) lies in the details. Even more, I hope the details in this book will help you with your own organisational design..

It won't surprise you that I didn't invent self-organisation. There are several pioneers that this book refers to. I would like to specifically mention the inspiring work of Brian M. Carney, Isaac Getz, Gary Hamel, Dominik Hammer, Stefan Kaduk, Frederic Laloux, Dirk Osmetz, Hans A. Wüthrich, and the *Corporate Rebels* Joost Minnaar and Pim de Morree.

Inspiration is also the keyword for the insights I got from the books of practitioners like Hermann Arnold, Corinna Baldauf, Timo Capriuoli, Alexander Gysinn, Klaus Hoppmann, Bodo Janssen, Detlef and Ulrich Lohmann, Tim Mois, Lee Ozley, Ricardo Semler, Rich Teerlink and Götz Werner.

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I would also like to thank these brave people who worked through several versions of this book and significantly influenced it: my brother in agile arms Klaus Leopold, my editor Christa Preisendanz, my translator Jennifer Minnich, my dear friend and intellectual companion Georg Tillner, and last but not least Sabine Eybl, my business partner and love of my life.

I dedicate this book to our two daughters — with the hope that they´ll find more opportunities and less restrictions both in society in general and in the business environment in particular.

Part II Scaling Self-Organisation

"What do you mean with scaling?" my younger daughter wanted to know as she was glancing at the preliminary table of contents. "It means expanding the concept of self-organisation, ideally to all areas of an enterprise", I answered. "That means there are just more employees and teams that decide for themselves what they do?" "Well, yes and no", I responded, "what you say is true, but it also isn't that simple."

The blank look my daughter gave me at the end of this fleeting visit was what I would call a typical reaction. **The topic of scaling can easily cause confusion**. It is complex, has a tendency to bewilder us, and eliminates simple cookie-cutter solutions such as "double the number of teams", "install Holacracy" or "implement Agile methods in all departments". Despite all the flexibility that goes along with self-organisation, it is not a mix-and-match collection that you can combine however you like. Self-organisation is, and remains, challenging. A supporting context, clear boundaries, a good mixture of diverse people, and an open exchange between them are essential factors for its success.

These fundamentals remain the guiding principles if we talk about self-organisation across the entire enterprise. But what is needed to develop the existing potential within the organisation? Where do we begin if we want to combine the capabilities of all employees in the best way possible? And which methods have proven themselves

worthwhile?

Just like at the team level, **certain myths at the organisational level** distort the more reasonable answers:

- The myth that an agile enterprise automatically results from the sum of all agile teams.
- The misconception that we can use methods for agile software development in every department.
- The assumption that we can anchor self-organisation within the enterprise by using a blueprint model fresh off the drawing board.
- The illusion that agility can be ensured by assigning special roles to employees.

Figure II-1 Scaling with a Light at the End of the Tunnel

What is scaling about?

In economics, scaling refers to the expandability and growth of a business model. The Italian word *scala*, meaning ladder or stair, gives us a hint: It's going about gradual progression. Such progression has been intensely discussed in the agile field for many years. How can enterprises ensure business agility at all levels? What must they do to achieve the competitive advantage of lean practices across the entire enterprise? What measures are necessary to encourage growth without losing flexibility and the ability to respond quickly?

Scrum of Scrums, *Scaled Agile Framework*, *Large-Scale Scrum* or *Disciplined Agile Delivery* provide well-known answers to these questions. Despite how different the answers to these individual questions can be, the way I see it, they have two things in common. First, they follow a team approach to address all organisational questions regarding its expansion. Second, they are dealing with a normative model. The solution to the respective business problem is prescribed in a more or less detailed framework.

It shouldn't surprise you that in a book about self-organisation, I propose a different approach.

Without question, **business agility** is a hot topic at the moment. Faster, more lightweight, more flexible is the creed for all companies who want to respond to the current challenges. If even the CEOs of industry giants such as *Deutsche Telekom* are concerned about agility, they appear to have set the course for a better future. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that applying agile means nothing more than local initiatives in many cases. Software Development increases their output while the chaos in the rest of the company worsens. Production drastically reduces their cycle time, but the total time to market remains unchanged due to

the overall coordination issues between departments. There are innovative ideas, but the fast feedback loops of *design thinking* are limited to a few experts. At the end of the day, none of our agile ideas changes anything for the customer at least not for the better. They may even have to wait longer for the promised products and services.

There appears to be an **invisible barrier in many enterprises** that reminds me of something written by Austrian poet Johann Nestroy: Thoughts are free—as long as they remain in the mind. Isn't it also true that agile initiatives remain free only as long as the initiative remains at the team level? Is it just a coincidence that agile initiatives remind us of Gallic villages where magicians are mobilized, but the enterprise remains firmly in the hands of the Roman empire?

Fact is enterprises are not made up of teams alone. More importantly, successful self-organisers apply more than one approach rather than believing there is a one-size-fits-all method that can deal with every challenge. Very few of the companies I looked at work with ready-made frameworks that just need to be correctly implemented in the problem area. Even fewer of these companies attempt to ensure agility through an alternative organisational structure. Which raises the question about what action can be recommended if we want to **see self-organisation grow within our enterprise**. What must we do if we want to customize our system rather than applying scaling templates? Which elements encourage an organisational design that is fit for the future? And how can we use the entrepreneurial spirit throughout the organisation for this?

It makes sense to answer these questions not just theoretically, but with **practical examples**. Fortunately, finding such examples is no longer like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. There is an abundance of sources with specific examples from which we can gather information. Thus, I have collected, from the gamut of available resources, insights from business literature, interviews with practitioners, as well as my personal coaching and consulting

experiences. I am not concerned with providing an encyclopaedia-like overview, nor about giving anecdotal case studies. Instead, I would like to explore the variety of entrepreneurial self-organisa-tion in order to find out the best practices. What works well? Which design elements are used again and again? How do the various companies proceed? And how can they recognize if this approach is worthwhile?

Table II-1 documents the **different contexts**, **industries and countries** where enterprise-wide self-organisation is used.

Company	Industry	Country	Employees
AES	Energy	USA	21.000
AllsafeJUNGFALK	Load Restraint	Germany	200
AutoScout24	Online Car Sales	Germany	400
AVIS	Car Rental	USA	30.000
Buurtzorg	Nursing	Netherlands	10.000
bwin	Online Gaming	Gibraltar	3.000
Compax	Software Dev	Austria	140
Computest	Software Test	Netherlands	120
dm	Drugstore	Germany	38.000
eSailors	Online Lottery	Germany	130
Finext	Finance	Netherlands	140
FAVI	Metal Processing	France	400
Gore	Clothing	USA	10.000
Handelsbanken	Finance	Sweden	11.000
Harley-Davidson	Motorcycles	USA	5.900
Haufe-umantis	Software Dev	Switzerland	130
hhpberlin	Fire Safety	Germany	160
Hoppmann Auto	Car Sales	Germany	460
IDEO	Design	USA	600
ImmobilienScout24	Online Platform	Germany	600
Incentro	Software Dev	Netherlands	285
InVision	Software Dev	Germany	150
Jimdo	Software Dev	Germany	200
LIIP	Software Dev	Switzerland	150
Morning Star	Tomato Products	USA	600
Menlo Innovation	Software Dev	USA	180

Company	Industry	Country	Employees
Patagonia	Outdoor Clothing	USA	1.100
PKE Electronics	Software Dev	Austria	1.100
Richards Group	Marketing	USA	680
Semco	Manufacturing	Brazil	1.000
sipgate	Telecommunication	Germany	120
SOL	Cleaning	Finland	11.000
Spotify	Music Streaming	Sweden	2.500
Stämpfli	Communications	Switzerland	410
Synaxon	Networking	Germany	130
Swiss Railways	Travel	Switzerland	29.000
TELE Haase	Relays	Austria	85
Traum-Ferien	Travel	Germany	120
Toyota	Automotive	Japan	300.000
Upstalsboom	Travel	Germany	680
USAA	Finance	USA	26.000
Volksbank Heilbr	Finance	Germany	320
Whole Foods	Supermarket	USA	40.000
Zappos	Online Shopping	USA	1.500

This table is comprised of pioneers such as *AVIS*, *Gore* and *Semco*, trendsetters like *Patagonia*, *Morning Star*, *Upstalsboom* and *Spotify*, as well as aspiring newcomers such as *sipgate*, *Computest* and *Haufe-umantis*. It lists enterprises with anywhere from around one hundred up to several thousand employees where self-organisation has been implemented to varying degrees. It contains companies with **spectacular success stories**, but also examples such as *FAVI* or *Jimdo*, where freedom and autonomy are now history. Self-organising enterprises are not protected from fundamental changes — whether it be changes in ownership structure, new top management or hard cuts and turnarounds. For example, energy company *AES*, a self-organising pioneer since the 1980s with over 40.000 employees, experienced such a turnaround in the 2000s.

The more companies I looked at, the more intrigued I became in what I was seeing. Self-organisation was like a kaleidoscope where colourful pieces were continually creating new images. However,

a few characteristic patterns repeatedly emerged. As different as these examples may appear, they are very similar in their approach. When comparing the various enterprises, I discovered a **surprisingly consistent set of principles and practices** had been implemented. Following is a brief summary of the principles and practices, which will be explored in depth later.

1. **Customer First**. In any company where self-organisation was successfully scaled, the customer has been the focal point. The customers' perspectives, interests and needs are the centre of business. This is reflected in the framework of an enterprise, whether it be a powerful mission statement, strategic direction or guiding principles for a long-term company vision. It is also reflected in the way things are done when having a customer-oriented portfolio.

2. **Transparent Work Flow Management**. Smoothly running processes are necessary to best serve the customers. We want to create value rather than just keep ourselves busy. Value can only be created if all essential activities are properly coordinated. However, this coordination has less to do with organisational structure and more to do with work flow, from the first input up to customer satisfaction. Transparency of this flow and its ongoing management not only provides the best quality, but also a high degree of reliability for the customer.

3. **Fast Feedback Loops**. The quality of decisions is directly related to the quality of feedback we receive. Without accurate feedback, our management efforts are doomed to failure. Managing complex work can seem like pinning the tail on the donkey. Self-organising enterprises use a proficient system of meetings, metrics, and personal feedback to make this task easier.

4. **Customized Decisions**. Managing the value stream can only succeed if we make the right decisions. To go back to my boat metaphor: Only if the wind and sea conditions are favourable,

the sails are let out and the rudder is correctly set, is it possible for the enterprise ship to set sail. In order to pool our strengths, new decisions have to be made repeatedly in many areas. In a self-organising enterprise, the necessary authority for these decisions is delegated to those persons with the highest subject matter expertise and situational knowledge. The hierarchical position is no longer crucial, but rather the proximity to the work that is affected by the decision.

5. **Bold Experiments**. Agility does not mean than we are safe from failure. Quite the contrary: Incremental improvements, just like breakthrough innovations, require trial and error. Not only do you need good feedback, you also need a culture for dealing with failure that supports experimentation. And there needs to be a learning culture that constructively deals with any tension or conflict that arises.

6. **Lean Organisational Structure**: Self-organising enterprises thrive on the autonomy of their business units. Loosely coupling these units empowers them and facilitates flexibility. This is why many enterprises are set up according to customer needs, with flat hierarchies and minimal staff functions.

7. **Distributed Management**. There are at least two consequences from the points discussed so far. One, traditional management responsibilities in self-organising enterprises are distributed amongst many people. Second, the responsibilities of line management change. The difference between working on the system versus working in the system is quite eye-opening. Subject matter experts in the subsystems enjoy wide-ranging autonomy, while line managers ensure clear boundaries, a supportive context and appropriate coordination.

8. **Continuous Training**. Self-organisation did not develop on its own in any of the companies listed in the table. Miracles only happen in fairly tales. The reality is that self-organisation needs profound information (keyword: transparency), consistent empowerment (keyword: skill building) and dis-

ciplined practice (keyword: routine) in order to master new challenges.

As mentioned, I discuss each of these design areas in greater detail in the following chapters. Along with a detailed discussion of each **design area**, I describe the **management tools** used in various companies. Specific examples will illustrate how these tools are applied and give you a better idea how you could use them for your own business.

Figure II-2 Design Areas

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