Management by Walking Around

The MBWA method is a management concept that has gotten a lot of "buzz" and popularity in the last decade or so because it is part of a business model for cultural change within the enterprise that has proven successful in a lot of businesses. The original concept was created by David Packard during the early days of the Hewlett Packard organization, a Silicon Valley company that was well known for its loyal and highly creative employee base that seemed to achieve levels of productivity and employee satisfaction far beyond the norm.

"The HP Way" which the "management by walking around" method was a part of was based on the concept that employees, particularly the subject matter experts in their fields, are capable of being part of the problem solving process and that a team approach to creating new business ideas and innovate ways to solve problems was far superior to the "top down" approach of management coming up with all the answers and dictating them to a mindless but obedient staff.

Packard was a believer in the open space, no walls and easy access to management corporate culture that MBWA exemplifies. By enabling frequent and unscheduled interactions between employees and between management and staff, new ideas were given maximum opportunity to be birthed and encouragement to be developed which leads to a more responsive and flexible business culture and one that has a robust approach to growth and change.

In order to implement MBWA, the manager must embrace the concept of a flexible and relaxed relationship with staff. The details of the method that MBWA promotes is summed up nicely in the title, management by walking around. It suggests that instead of only meeting with employees at scheduled times in formal settings away from other employees or in a staff meeting where the agenda is published in advance, many opportunities for employees to talk to management are encouraged. When the supervisor or manager walks freely amongst the employees throughout their work day, the opportunity to ask questions and to interact about new ideas the employees are considering is frequent. From those unscheduled and frequent visits as the manager walks from cubicle to cubicle, great concepts can be birthed which can then be nurtured into new product ideas or novel solutions to problems.

However, if the relationship between management and employee is formal, based on fear or intimidation or not otherwise grounded in warmth and friendship, the MBWA system will go from a powerful method of collaborative problem solving to a tremendous nightmare for everybody. You don't want your employees dreading your "drop in" visits and seeing their productivity drop as you enter their work space because they are so concerned with impressing and serving management that they dislike your arrival in their world. It is amazing how quickly a network of employees can detect and set up an early warning system when the manager is walking around so everybody "gets ready" for what they perceive will be an unpleasant sudden visit by management.

To avoid this, the supervisor should in other ways foster a relaxed relationship

with staff. The employee must feel free to discuss issues and questions openly with management without fear of being scoffed at, mocked, belittled or punished. Many a company has generated a "HP Way" concept that comes out of the human resources department that amounts to little more than color posters on the wall and a suggestion box but nothing changes in the corporate culture or how each manager interacts with the staff. Employees are quick to notice the hypocrisy of such a program and the result is management because an object of ridicule instead of inspiration.

By making your visits enjoyable, a welcome experience and one where the employee doesn't fear your arrival, you can expect outstanding results from the MBWA method. And you will know you have achieved true change in your corporate culture when not only do you walk around to visit employees but employees "drop in" on you by walking around if for no other reason than to share a joke or a donut. That is an ideal setting for team work and proactive problem solving.

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