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Managing by Walking Around

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Abstract

{Excerpt} Management by walking around emphasizes the importance of interpersonal contact, open appreciation, and recognition. It is one of the most important ways to build civility and performance in the workplace.

The hallmarks of the modern organization are satellite offices, remote offices, home offices, virtual offices, hotelling facilities, and the electronic mail that underpins—and promotes—these. Today, knowledge workers receive few telephone calls and electronic mail is their communication vehicle of choice. (The use of videoconferencing is growing,too.) After all, why should they walk around if they can type, point, and click? At the receiving end, managers are known to collect more than 150 messages each day. Yet, as knowledge workers on the rise tote up electronic status, they also distance themselves from colleagues.

Managing by walking around was popularized by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in the early 1980s because it was (already then) felt that managers were becoming isolated from their subordinates. At Hewlett-Packard, where the approach was practiced from 1973, executives were encouraged to know their people, understand their work, and make themselves more visible and accessible. Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard's business philosophy, centered on deep respect for people and acknowledgment of their built-in desire to do a good job, had evolved into informal, decentralized management and relaxed, collegial communication styles. Theirs was the opposite of drive-by management.

Comments
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Managing by Walking Around

by Olivier Serrat

Management by walking around emphasizes the importance of interpersonal contact, open appreciation, and recognition. It is one of the most important ways to build civility and performance in the workplace.

Background

The hallmarks of the modern organization are satellite offices, remote offices, home offices, virtual offices, hotelling facilities, and the electronic mail that underpins—and promotes—these. Today, knowledge workers receive few telephone calls and electronic mail is their communication vehicle of choice. (The use of videoconferencing is growing, too.) After all, why should they walk around if they can type, point, and click? At the receiving end, managers are known to collect more than 150 messages each day. Yet, as knowledge workers on the rise tote up electronic status, they also distance themselves from colleagues.

Managing by walking around was popularized by Tom Peters[1] and Robert Waterman in the early 1980s because it was (already then) felt that managers were becoming isolated from their subordinates. At Hewlett-Packard, where the approach was practiced from 1973, executives were encouraged to know their people, understand their work, and make themselves more visible and accessible. Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard's business philosophy, centered on deep respect for people and acknowledgment of their built-in desire to do a good job, had evolved into informal, decentralized management and relaxed, collegial communication styles. Theirs was the opposite of drive-by management.

Rationale

The basic principle is that command-and-control is ineffective in modern organizations. Nothing is more instructive than seeing what actually transpires in the real world and learning from that. Management by walking around is a leadership technique that has stood the test of time and can be used by any manager. Except for virtual organizations[2]—and most of us still do not work through these even if we interface variously with them—face-to-

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[1] Peters saw managing by wandering around as the basis of leadership and excellence and called it the technology of the obvious.
[2] Virtual organizations are organized entities, whether corporate or charitable, that do not exist in any one central location but instead exist solely through the internet. There are social, psychological, ethical, and technical implications to the nature and rise of these, better discussed elsewhere.

face interaction remains a sure way to receive and give feedback wherever managers see staff regularly. Why? Because it is staff, not managers, who create an organization's products and deliver its services, and appreciation of that can only come from knowing what happens on the ground. Because people live to be part of something, and being intimately in touch opens up more lines of informal communication[3] and produces stronger team dynamics and performance. The human touch still works best.

> *If you wait for people to come to you, you'll only get small problems. You must go and find them. The big problems are where people don't realize they have one in the first place.*
>
> —W. Edwards Deming
>
> *A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world.*
>
> —John le Carré

Approach

Managing by walking around requires personal involvement, good listening skills, and the recognition that most people in an organization want to contribute to its success. It should not be forced and cannot be a charade. It works if you display sincerity and civility and are genuinely interested in staff and their work. Try to

1. Wander about as often as you can, but recurrently and preferably daily.
2. Relax as you make your rounds.
3. Share and invite good news.
4. Talk about family, hobbies, vacations, and sports.
5. Watch and listen without judgment.
6. Invite ideas and opinions to improve operations, products, services, etc.
7. Be responsive to problems and concerns.
8. Look out for staff doing something right, and give them public recognition.
9. Project the image of a coach and mentor, not that an inspector.
10. Give people on-the-spot help.
11. Use the opportunity to transmit the organization's values.
12. Swap value and legacy stories.
13. Share your dreams.
14. Have fun.

Benefits

Managing by walking around does not just cut through vertical lines of communication. It also

1. Builds trust and relationships.
2. Motivates staff by suggesting that management takes an active interest in people.
3. Encourages staff to achieve individual and collective goals.
4. Strengthens ability to drive cultural change for higher organizational performance.
5. Refreshes organizational values.
6. Makes work less formal.
7. Creates a healthy organization.

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[3] In high-performance organizations, the intensity of communications is unmistakable. It usually starts with an insistence on informality.

Further Reading

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For further information

Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries substantially reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than $2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than $1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

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Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.