

MANAGEMENT BY WALKING ABOUT (MBWA) – THE PROS AND CONS

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ABSTRACT

Management is the co-ordination of activities, operations and employees in an organisation to achieve a targeted goal. The concept of Management involves many things, which can be summarized into four broad categories – planning, organising, leading and controlling. Typically, these four are the functions of management. In order to carry out these management functions (listed above) in an organisation, a manager can choose to use a management practice or technique. For purposes of this journal, the focus will be on the practise of management by wandering about (MBWA).

INTRODUCTION

Management by wandering about, also known as management by walking around (MBWA), is a management practice that emphasizes the active presence and engagement of managers with their employees. Practised at Hewlett Packard in 1973 by Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard (Serrat, 2017), management by wandering about refers to a style of management where managers randomly walk around the organisation's premises in an unstructured manner. Tom Peters and Robert Waterman (1982) in their book 'In Search of Excellence' described management by walking around as 'Getting management out of the office' – They highlighted the importance of hands-on management and interaction with employees. MBWA involves managers regularly and purposefully walking around the workplace, interacting with employees, observing operations, and staying connected with the organization's pulse. The idea behind such a management technique is to encourage managers to concentrate on creating human relations, which are key to achieving high performance and developing work (Zaroug, 2018). Therefore, MBWA encourages informal conversations, builds relationships, and promotes open communication between managers and employees. By physically being present and visible in the workplace, managers can gain insights into daily operations, identify challenges or opportunities, address concerns, and maintain a sense of connection with their team members.

Management by walking around (MBWA) is very similar to Toyota Touche's system of 'Gemba Walks' (Womack 2011, Mann 2009), where managers regularly and randomly visit locations where work is performed and interact with the employees as they observe the production process. According to Micheal (2015), 'every gemba walk is a teaching experience'. As the manager is going to where the action is, he/she must see, observe and experience firsthand what is really happening in the organisation.

TAKING THE WALK

According to Micheal (2015), going on a gemba walk requires three basic steps;

Preparing for the walk – Before a manager goes on this walk, he/she must give thought to the purpose of the walk. It is not just a case of walking aimlessly. If possible, the manager can write down the purpose for the walk. The walk should be clear and meaningful. Preparation of the walk is more like the manager thinking of why he/she is going on this walk; where he/she will go; what will he/she do to find the facts; what will he/she observe and why.

Taking the walk - The manager embarks on the walk, with a clear plan of executing the walk. At this point the manager is at the centre of where the productivity happens. It is important for the manager to actively and attentively listen to his/her subordinates, then respectfully ask probing questions while observing the whole process.

Debrief the walk – The purpose of the walk is to get firsthand information and develop better solutions for challenges in a workplace. Once the walk is done, the manager will have taken note of all concerns, challenges and suggestions - it is now time to document these ideas for follow-up on the next gemba walk, assign a timeline for implementing agreed upon improvements and develop a follow-up plan to monitor implementation. After the walk, the manager should not just sit on the challenges observed, otherwise if that is the case, then MBWA is a waste of time and resources.

BENEFITS OF MBWA

Management by walking around (MBWA) has proven to be highly effective because of its various advantages. Among the benefits it brings when practiced, include :

Tucker and Singer (2013) noted in their research that as managers make frequent and random visits in the company, this management technique constantly allows them to have one on one personal interaction with the people they lead. This interaction with employees leads to improved communication, as it facilitates the exchange of information, ideas and feedback – fostering a better understanding.

Owing to this personal interaction between the manager and subordinates, barriers to communication with the subordinates are drastically reduced or eliminated (Christensen,2014). It can be said that this personal interaction helps managers to build trust, strengthen relationships and create a positive work environment.

When the employees see their manager walking around and interacting with them at all levels, this creates more of a human element rather than an authoritative element (Christensen,2014). Subordinates realise that after all their manager has got a human element of interaction as well. Additionally, regular interactions through MBWA make employees feel valued, heard, and recognized. This can easily lead to higher levels of engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction, ultimately improving productivity and employee retention.

By being physically present in the workplace where production happens, managers can identify and address concerning matters promptly (Martin et.al, 2014). They can observe operational challenges, bottlenecks, or potential areas for improvement and provide immediate support and guidance to employees, to improve areas with deficiencies.

By walking around the organisational premises, managers are able to spot firsthand whether the employees and projects are operating effectively or ineffectively (Womack, 2011). Gemba walks – as the Japanese call them, give managers firsthand experience of what goes on in the place where production happens.

Mann (2009) added that the purpose of the random and unstructured walks was to see problems in context – which leads to better problem resolution. The reason MBWA leads to better problem resolution, is because seeing problems in context improves a manager's understanding and appreciation of the problem – this empowers the manager to come up with better solutions to the problem. Therefore, MBWA improves decision making.

CONS OF MBWA

Like any other management technique, in spite of all the advantages and benefits MBWA may have, it has its own shortcomings and disadvantages. These include:

Management by walking around is defined as managers frequently visiting employees' workplaces, to interact with them and see what they are doing (Kassem, 2020). In many instances, some employees suspect this is an excuse for managers to overhear their conversations and even interfere with their work to some extent (Zaroug, 2018). Subordinates may often suspect that their managers are simply spying on them. Such a perception could however change when employees begin to see the advantages and benefits of this practice.

As a result of the frequent and informal visits to employees' workstations, subordinates can often feel like they are being micro-managed (Kassem, 2020). Employees can easily feel like they are being watched by their managers and this can negatively affect employees. It is important that a manager strikes the right balance in terms of frequency of visitations, being open and transparent about their reason for visitations and giving employees the freedom to perform their tasks to the best of their ability or else subordinates will tend to feel under the microscope and being under close scrutiny.

Zaroug (2018) further noted that MBWA when not conducted properly, could easily turn into a public relations exercise which can overshadow other functions. This would result in the walkarounds being detrimental - where managers come around, make a lot of noise, leave a dump on everyone, and then disappear (Martin et.al, 2014). This could lead to a toxic work environment.

Kassem (2020) opined that the biggest pitfall of MBWA revolves around the time-consuming nature of this management style. Having walks frequently takes a lot of time from the manager who has other responsibilities and tasks to carry out. The act of a manager walking from his/her office, going to where employees are working and interacting with them is a timely affair (which eats into the time a manager should be dedicating to other tasks within his/her work portfolio). Inadvertently, the random walks reduce the time a manager could use to perform other tasks.

Related to the time-consuming factor discussed above, Zaroug (2018) added that when managers walk around and interact with employees, not all conversations will give valuable yield. This makes the time-consuming aspect even more detrimental as considerable time and effort will have been wasted on conversations that are of no immediate benefit to the organisation.

Martin et.al (2014) emphasized the geographical limitation of MBWA by stating that a manager could only walk a distance within his/her geographical reach. Being human means that managers can only walk so much. For big organisations covering a relatively large geographical space, this could be a major challenge.

Christensen (2014) noted that getting to implement MBWA is difficult. There are so many things that should come right. To begin with, enough emphasis must be placed on having valuable conversations with employees otherwise some managers might just take this as time to 'wander around' (Kassem, 2020). As managers walk around and have conversations with the subordinates, they should not forget the key takeaway of MBWA – collect firsthand information on real situations. Besides, when managers have collected this valuable information, it is not time to sit on it – managers must use it to formulate management strategy which should result in better and improved problem-solving techniques.

The concept of MBWA relies heavily on the opinions of employees. This management style places focus on listening to employees because they have the closest view of the day-to-day operations of the business. Using the insights of employees can be very beneficial as it is based on real situations. However, according to Kassem (2020), in MBWA the focus on employee insights and opinions is overemphasized, potentially leading to the neglect of other stakeholder voices such as customers and producers.

MBWA may lead to distractions in a workplace (Serrat, 2017). Employees have to perform certain tasks within a given timeframe. When they have deadlines to meet, having a manager frequently come around to initiate unplanned conversations could distract employees, and take away their focus from their main tasks.

Tucker and Singer (2013) observed that the success of MBWA largely depends on its implementation and the manager possessing the right skill set. MBWA is premised on managers taking unstructured walks and interacting with people – striking random conversations with subordinates that will yield valuable results requires a manager to have excellent interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. If a manager has poor interpersonal skills, MBWA will fail.

CONCLUSION

Like any other technique Management by wandering (MBWA) has benefits and shortcomings. The rationale of use for any manager will depend on whether the positives outweigh the negatives in the manager's environment. It is not always a 'one size fits all' scenario as managers operate in different environments that require different management approaches. The key lies in a manager identifying what is best for their surrounding and organisational setup.

It is also worth noting that there are alternatives to MBWA, such as Management by Objectives (MBO).

Acknowledgment

This paper was inspired by a culture of management by walking around that has been adopted in the organisation I work for (in Lusaka - Zambia). There is a culture of taking weekly gemba walks around the business premises, which management believes is an effective way of managing the organisation. With several scholars having researched and written on this topic at length, I was encouraged to add my voice and do a paper on this topic that has become common practice in the business place today.

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