

The Truth is Out There: Management by Walking Around

Patricia F. Katopol

Jason, the director of the engineering library at a large state university, took his lunch bag out of the department's fridge and went back to his office. Closing the door, he ate lunch, caught up on email, and checked to see if his amazon order had been delivered. Things had been pretty quiet lately, with no major complaints from staff and no fires to put out. Now that he thought about it, maybe it was too quiet – kind of like a silent toddler in another room. Jason shook off his concerns went back to his email, everything must be fine. At least no one had bothered him lately.

Meanwhile, Julie was commiserating with Tamika in the ladies' room, "It's okay here, but I don't feel like I get much support to be successful at my job. Some of our processes don't work as well as they should, but Jason seems happy with them. If he could only see what it's like to have to follow them. He just doesn't see how things have changed; how the old ways aren't as effective anymore. I went to a brown bag to hear Gail Wilkins, the director over at the science library, speak. What a difference! She recognized the issues we all face and talked about some staff initiatives they'd implemented there. I liked how she was up front about how some problems might not get resolved right away, but at least she was paying attention to her staff and not hiding out in her office." Tamika sighed, "Jason actually picked up something I suggested, but then he just instituted it without saying anything; like the new process just fell from the sky. He didn't take credit for it, but he didn't give me credit, either." Julie nodded, "I like how Gail runs her library. Jason's always in his office. He says he's available, but I always feel like I'm bothering him when I go in there, like I'm always complaining, but I'm not. I just want to talk about the work. I should be able to do that without feeling uncomfortable." Julie stepped closer to Tamika and whispered, "Don't say anything, but I applied for an opening in the science library. I hope I get it." Tamika knew Jason would be surprised if Julie left, but he would be the only one.

Management by Walking Around. One reason Jason doesn't know that Julie is on her way out is that he rarely leaves his office. He depends on staff to come to him with concerns; he doesn't go to them to see them as they work. This is a mistake. In the early 1980's, management gurus Tom Peters and Robert Waterman¹ used the term 'management by walking around' (MBWA)² to describe managers who got out of the office and onto the floor, talking to staff and getting a feel for how the work is actually done in the organization. Managers who did this received more information for problem-solving and got better results than those who stayed in their offices. In a way, MBWA is a variation on the system used in many organizations, where new managers rotate through each department to learn how things operate across the firm. Similarly, managers get a first-hand view of what is happening by walking around the organization. Doing so, they don't have to wait for problems and challenges to be brought to them, nor do they have to depend on another's perception of an issue. For example, you may

think you have excellent systems, only to learn as you walk around that staff have developed a number of workarounds because the systems are inadequate – workarounds that they haven't told you about. So, what does management by walking around look like?

As busy as you may be, you need to leave your office and get out among your staff. Don't set a schedule; you don't want people to change what they're doing because they know you're coming. Still, you should get out and about regularly. While it is useful to go to staff work areas, you can also visit them in other work spaces or in the break.

Your purpose here is to engage staff in conversation. You aren't walking around for your health (although that may be an added benefit). You are doing this to get information to help you make better managerial decisions and you do that by engaging staff in conversations about their work. Walking around also gives you the opportunity to gain insight into the people who make your organization the great place it is. It is especially beneficial if you don't see all of your staff every day. Check out where they work. Are there pictures of children or happy vacationers? Is there sports memorabilia or other indications of what the person likes to do when not at work? Or maybe there is an indication that maybe things aren't as they should be, such as medicines on the desk? Is somebody running a side business? It happens. As much as you want to use this time to talk to staff, before you launch into a deep conversation, try to gauge the person's demeanor. Maybe they are in the middle of something that takes all of their attention. Maybe it's just a bad day and they don't want to talk. It's all right to pass by for now; there will be other chances.

If, during your conversation, someone presents an idea that you don't think will work, thank them for their input and thinking of the organization, and tell them you will think about it. If you know it won't work, you still thank them, and then in private, tell them why it won't work so as not to embarrass them. By the way, please don't rebuff an idea by saying, "We've never done it like that before." Nobody needs to have their ideas dismissed out of hand just because they haven't been tried before. And, when you can use an idea, follow up with public attribution and praise.

Resist the urge to criticize. As you walk around more, you are apt to see mistakes or just things you would like to change, whether it is staff behavior or work processes. When you make comments while walking around, especially where other staff can hear, focus on what people are doing well or processes you need to learn more about, not where you think staff is failing. You may have to criticize or correct someone, but do it later, out of the presence of their co-workers. Remember, they have to work with these people every day; don't make their lives difficult. When people see you coming, they shouldn't be in fear that you will only say something negative. If things are not going as you'd like, think about how to solve the problem – staff may need additional training or you may need to hire new staff with different skills – not just about how you're going to criticize or complain.

Benefits of MBWA. When staff know that management understands and appreciates their work, when problems are addressed quickly, and when staff know that management trusts

them to accomplish tasks as they see fit, rather than making them follow a rote process, a positive environment is created. This makes work life easier on staff and management alike. Telephone tag is avoided and time wasted waiting for an email response is reduced because there is constant communication – staff doesn't only hear from management when it sweeps down to blame people for doing something wrong. If the manager sees an issue while walking around, often it can be resolved on the spot. On the other hand, there are problems that require thought and consideration. That is fine; at least you have first-hand knowledge of the problem and input from people who deal with it directly. This is a good position to be in when it comes to problem-solving.

Another benefit of management by walking around is how it can support new hires as they become acclimated to the job. Whether they are recent library school graduates or experienced professionals, new hires have to learn how things are done in your organization. But here's the problem - jobs have learning curves. New employees may be afraid to come to you with problems because they don't want to appear to be inept or unfit for the job. However, there may be no one else to give them advice. The new person just has to get in the job and run with it. Even with training, there may be gaps that don't become apparent until new hires have been on the job for a while. It pays to keep in touch with new hires as they learn the ropes so that they don't stray too far from how you want them to perform. Managers may also want to be attuned to what new people say about their previous employer. Though you may be proud of your systems and not really interested in how things are done elsewhere, it may be useful to let them talk at least a little; you might get a fresh perspective on your organization's strengths and weaknesses. Informal time spent with new hires also gives managers the opportunity to talk about more than the tasks that make up the job and to communicate the organization's values, culture, and mission.

At this point, some of you may be saying, "This MBWA stuff is starting to look like work. I don't need to hang out with my staff. I have an open door policy. They know they can come to me." Many managers believe they have an open door policy. They say their staff is free to come in, discuss challenges, and receive feedback or a solution. Maybe in a perfect world. In real life, frequently open door policies don't work.³ A number of factors operate against staff sharing problems with you:

- Staff worry about your response to what they say. Will you blame them for the problem? Do you give off the vibe that all staff does is complain so that you turn off to what they say before they even say it? Did someone speak with you honestly and wind up getting punished for it in some way? Are people afraid of you as a person? Are they afraid for their jobs?
- Anonymity isn't all it's cracked up to be. If one has to be anonymous to speak the truth, what does that say about the climate of fear in the organization? And, depending on the issue, if an employee makes an 'anonymous' complaint, it's likely the manager will know who made it. So much for anonymity – and so much for staff being willing to make even anonymous complaints or comments, much less come into your office.

- Where are you? Employees are not likely to come through your open door if they have to make a special trip to find you in another wing or building. If possible, locate your office in the same area where most of your staff are located.
- What is your organization's culture? In the past, I've used a Harvard Business School case on management issues that may have contributed to the Columbia space shuttle disaster. The project director, Linda Ham, a high-level NASA manager, was said to have an open door policy. But interviewed employees found the policy to be problematic. She was the manager of a major project with a lot on her plate besides their 'minor' concerns; they didn't want to disturb her. Also, the NASA culture was similar to that of the military. This was comfortable for many employees because they were former military and knew how to function in that culture. They weren't going to bypass the chain of command to go to Ham, even when they knew she should be informed of their concerns. The expectation was that, having brought issues to supervisors, the supervisors would bring them to Ham, which didn't always happen. The point is, people will not ignore organizational culture, a culture in which they must function to keep their job, just to come to your open door.
- Is there anything else about your office that might inhibit people from coming to you? What does your office look like? Is it welcoming with a chair and table for guests or do you sit behind an intimidating desk with your visitor having to stand or sit in a low chair, like some kind of supplicant, in front of you? Is your office so cluttered with work documents that it looks like you are perpetually busy and that people should leave you left alone?

Conclusion. This management strategy takes time. Perhaps you don't have time, however, staying in your office isn't going to make things better and may even result in your spending more time putting out fires and problem-solving. Using MBWA will help you improve communication with staff, have better employee morale, and deal with small concerns before they become major problems because you will learn about them sooner. Management by walking around has the decided benefits of being cheap (as in free), easy to do, and an excellent way to obtain a lot of information that might otherwise remain hidden. Finally, some managers like to think their ideas and thoughts are the only ones that matter. Using MBWA should help managers realize that everyone has something valid to say about the work they do, whether they are degreed information professionals, student employees, paraprofessional staff, or volunteers.

Patricia F. Katopol (pkatopol@uiowa.edu) is Senior IRB Education & Compliance Specialist with the Human Subjects Office in the Harden Library for Health Science at the University of Iowa

Published: August 2018

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