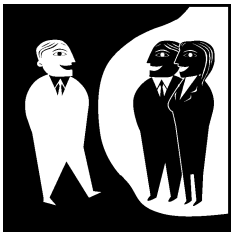
Proposition 35
Managing by Walking Around

In a Word 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, hoteling 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

[1]Peters saw managing by wandering around as the basis of leadership and excellence and called it the technology of the obvious.

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O. Serrat, *Knowledge Solutions*, DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-0983-9_35

was practiced from 1973, executives were encouraged to know their people, understand their work, and at the same time make themselves more visible and accessible. Hewlett and Packard's (1995) 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-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.

Approach

> *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

[2]Virtual organizations are organized entities, whether corporate or charitable, that does 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.

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

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 staff 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.

Reference

Packard D (1995) The HP way: how Bill Hewlett and I built our company. HarperCollins Publishers

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