

Management by Wandering Around (MBWA)

Staying in Touch with Your Team

Manage better by getting to know members of your team in their working environment.

Picture a boss in a lavish office with sumptuous leather furniture and wood-paneled walls. He's sitting behind a huge desk full of important work that needs his attention. He's far too busy to be concerned with anything outside his office walls: there's enough happening within!

This type of boss can be intimidating and unapproachable. Yet, this is a common scenario in many organizations.

What type of boss would you like to be? Do you want to be remote and bask in your own importance? Or do you want to know what's happening out there "in the trenches"?

As a boss, you can be admired for your wisdom, knowledge and expertise without being distant and disconnected.

If you build a wall around yourself, your team may not gain from your experience, and this can undermine problem solving and decision making. Being connected can be a major factor for success: The more connected you are, the better you can understand what motivates members of your team, analyze what's really going on, and find solutions that meet the needs of your people and your company.

Introducing MBWA

To get connected and stay connected, you need to walk around and talk to your team, work alongside them, ask questions, and be there to help when needed. This practice has been called Management By Wandering Around (or Management By Walking About) – MBWA for short.

William Hewlett and David Packard, founders of Hewlett Packard (HP), famously used this approach in their company. Tom Peters, in his wildly successful 1982 book, *In Search of Excellence*, included lessons learned from HP and other companies that used a similar style – and the term MBWA immediately became popular.

What MBWA Can Achieve

Since then, Management by Wandering Around has never really gone out of fashion. If you use MBWA, you can increase the following:

- **Approachability** – When your staff sees you as a person and not just a boss, they'll be more likely to tell you what's going on. You'll get the chance to learn about issues before they become problems.
- **Trust** – As your team gets to know you better, they'll trust you more. You'll be naturally inclined to share more information, and that will break down barriers to communication.
- **Business knowledge** – Getting out and learning what's happening on a daily basis can give you a better understanding of the functions and processes around you.
- **Accountability** – When you interact daily with your team, agreements you make with each other are much more likely to be completed. Everyone is more motivated to follow through, because you're seeing each other on a regular basis.
- **Morale** – People often feel better about their jobs and their organization when they have opportunities to be heard. MBWA makes those opportunities available.
- **Productivity** – Many creative ideas come from casual exchanges. MBWA promotes casual discussions, so people will more likely feel free to come to you with their ideas.

Despite its obvious benefits, use of MBWA has been hit-and-miss. To be successful, it takes more than simply strolling through your work area. MBWA isn't a "walk in the park": It's a determined and genuine effort to understand your staff, what they do, and what you can do to make their work more effective.

Don't just do MBWA because you feel it's an obligation – this probably won't work very well. You have to truly want to get to know your staff and operations, and you have to commit to following up concerns and seeking continuous improvement.

How to Implement MBWA

These "wandering around" tips can help you get started:

- **Relax** – People will sense your genuineness and casualness, and they'll respond accordingly. Stiff, formal conversation will probably lead to equally rigid responses.

- **Listen and observe more than you talk** – Use active listening with your staff. When people feel you're hearing them, you'll probably seem more sincere.
- **Ask for feedback and ideas** – Let everyone know that you want ideas to make things better. As the boss, people may think that your opinions and ideas are "right." So hold back from saying what you think – the goal is to see what others have to say.
- **Wander around equally** – Don't spend more time in one department or section than another. And don't always talk to the same people, or to people with certain ranks. You want to be approachable to everyone, regardless of job title or position.
- **Use the time for spontaneous recognition** – If you see something good, compliment the person. This is a perfect way to show your gratitude.
- **Hold meetings "out and about"** – Instead of having all your meetings in the boardroom or your office, meet with people in their work areas and "on their turf." This can put them more at ease. Communicate your expectations and needs so that everyone knows what you value.
- **Don't use this time to judge or critique** – This can make people nervous when you're around. If you see something that concerns you, talk to the person later, in private.
- **Answer questions openly and honestly** – If you don't know an answer, find out and then follow up. If you can't share something, say so. Telling half-truths can break down trust.
- **Communicate** – Share company goals, philosophy, values, and vision. Your "walk-arounds" are opportunities to mutually share information that helps everyone understand and do their jobs better.
- **Chat** – Effective organizations aren't all about work, work, and work. Build relationships. Learn the names of your staff's kids. Find out what they love to do or where they're going on vacation. Joke, laugh, and have fun. You may be surprised at how great it feels to relate on a personal level with the people in your office.
- **Don't overdo it** – Don't leave people feeling that you're always looking over their shoulders! Wander around often enough to get a good feel for what's going on, but not so often that your presence feels like a mundane distraction.

Key Points

Management by Wandering Around can be an effective and practical way to keep up with what's happening within your team and your organization.

Make the effort to get out and build relationships with your staff. This can pay off significantly with the information you'll gather and the trust you'll build. A team spirit can naturally develop when you show a genuine interest in your people and their work. It's also a great way to keep the company's vision alive at all levels. It's easy, economical, and a whole lot of fun!

Apply This to Your Life

How can you use Management by Wandering Around to help you achieve your leadership goals? Ask yourself the following:

- When was the last time you walked around your office or department? Why did you walk around? Were you looking for things that people were doing poorly or doing well? Were you using it as an opportunity to criticize or learn?
- Where do you usually hold your meetings? If you use your office or your boardroom, do you think your staff finds that intimidating?
- Do you know the first and last names of all your team members? This is a must. Better yet, you should learn the names of their spouses and kids.
- Do you know more about a small group of your staff vs. all staff, or more about one department vs. others? Why have you been focusing your attention on just those people? Do you think the rest of the staff sees this as favoritism?
- Do colleagues come to you with ideas? Think about the creativity and innovation you could tap into if they did.