

# Behavior Management by Walking Around

Randolph M. Boardman

*An emerging concept from the field of business is to manage organizations by wandering around and engaging staff and consumers in informal interactions. The author extends these ideas to settings serving children and youth.*

In the best seller, *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman (1982) introduced Management by Walking Around (MBWA) as an organizational philosophy for corporate executives. Hewlett-Packard advocated Management by Wandering Around as a major aspect of the HP Way. Getting managers out of their corporate offices was promoted as a leadership style intended for managers to connect with, communicate with, and relate to all levels of employees. Peters and Waterman went on to suggest that excellent companies were significantly different from less excellent companies, because they promoted such interactive, informal communication networks within their organizations.

Here we will revisit the strategies advocated via MBWA, examine major strands advanced within this leadership style, and extend these concepts beyond the corporate environment. Further, we will discuss Behavior Management by Walking Around (BMBWA), a model that may be used by staff who work within educational and youth care settings.

In *MBWA, A Checklist for Managers*, Reid (1999) identifies 20 ways to communicate with employees, including: give frequent and meaningful recognition for a job well done; interact on an informal basis; meet them on their own turf; ask for their opinions and listen with an open mind; listen 80% and talk 20%; ask what rumors they have heard; build bridges with those with whom you are uncomfortable; ask what is making them most and least satisfied; have lunch with them; and actively make a point of speaking to those you see each day.

Ashley (2002) discusses guidelines for implementing MBWA in business in *Taking Action*. His suggestions include: develop and stick to a schedule; contacts must be genuine and sincere; contacts should be conversational and involve two-way communication; give individual attention and be empathic; give your undivided attention; and personalize your interactions.

Jones (2003) indicates that MBWA was successful for leaders of Hewlett-Packard, PepsiCo, Disney, Wal-Mart, and 3M throughout the 1980s. In *Does MBWA Still Work?*, he suggests that the same strategies will still be effective in your organization today. The following were identified: remain open and responsive to questions and concerns; observe, listen, and let everyone see you do so; talk about their passions, hobbies, families, and other interests; spend an equal amount of time in all areas of your organization; and catch others doing something right and recognize them publicly.

In *Time For a Walk*, Babcock (2003) also indicates that Management by Walking Around is just as valid today as it was when introduced in the 1980s. He reports that with the advance in today's technology, such a need may be more imperative for executives than ever before.

Noting that some senior executives report receiving over 150 e-mails per day, he advocates that managers pry themselves and their staff away from their keyboards to find time to take a walk, to listen, and to learn.

Johnston (2003) discusses some adaptations of MBWA for schools. He cites one Florida principal who divides his school of 1300 students by floors between him and his assistants. Every classroom can be visited with this plan in 30 to 50 minutes. One teacher reports, "I never refer students out of my classroom anymore. I know I can handle things for 15 minutes, and then an administrator will be in the room." The principal reports that discipline referrals were reduced to near zero after implementing this plan.

## Reflecting on My School Days

I had the opportunity to spend 22 years as a school principal at a special education center, an elementary school, a junior high school, and a few high schools.

At a meeting with staff of one urban high school of about 1000 students, someone wondered out loud why I was always the staff member who was the first one on the scene of most of the recent student-to-student confrontations during passing periods and lunch. The team quickly concluded that every time a bell rang, I would stroll the halls, while they tended to remain in their offices. During lunch sessions, I was in the lunchroom, because that is where several hundred students were. My assistants determined it was time for them to walk more and sit less.

Teachers often complained that I was never in the office when they wanted to see me because I was always out with students. I took this as a healthy observation that I was doing my job, and not as a complaint. I was where I belonged, out and around my school. The most common compliment I received from the parent community was that their son or daughter knew who their principal was. One evening at 4:30 p.m., my administrative staff convened to decide which of us would be attending each of the six building activities scheduled for that evening. Ironically, one superintendent criticized me because I was "too close to the students." And what might be wrong with that picture?

I also advocated for parent conferences in the "frozen foods" section of the local grocery. Our weekly family shopping trips usually took hours. I was passionately committed that the first time I met a student at my school would not be in my office through a discipline referral.

## Might I Suggest BMBWA?

You and your staff can easily incorporate the simple strategies offered by Reid for employees, with your students, residents, or youth at your facility. What if all interactions at your facility between staff and those you serve were intended to accomplish the goals that Ashley advocates? Again, Jones' thoughts make sense for working with major corporations and their employees; what about with all care staff and youth? Johnston seems to suggest evidence that visible and accessible school administrators have had positive impact on discipline issues. What impact might this have on building relationships, improving climate, and preventing confrontational or potential crisis situations?

A few lessons from the corporate culture for managers and their employees with Management by Walking Around can apply to youth care. What might Behavior Management by Walking Around look like at your facility? At your school, group home, or youth care center, imagine if your staff could commit to the following MBWA concepts when interacting with the youth entrusted to their care.

Using Reid's checklist, the following interpretation may apply to youth:

- Give frequent and meaningful recognition to youth.
- Interact on an informal basis with youth.
- Meet youth on their turf.
- Listen 80% of the time to youth and talk 20% of the time.
- Ask youth what rumors they have heard.
- Build bridges with those youth with whom you are uncomfortable.
- Ask youth what is making them the most and least satisfied.
- Have lunch with youth.
- Make a point of speaking and listening to each youth you see every day.

Secondly, I would offer these adaptations to Ashley's guidelines as they may apply to youth:

- Develop and stick to a schedule of talking with youth in your facility.
- Make contacts with youth genuine and sincere.

- Contacts with youth should be conversational and two-way.
- Give individual and empathic attention to youth.
- Give youth your undivided attention.
- Personalize your interactions with youth.

And lastly, Jones shared successful strategies for companies like Hewlett-Packard, 3M, and Disney. If they were to serve youth, they might look like this:

- Remain open and responsive to questions and concerns of youth.
- Observe youth, listen to youth, and let everyone see you do so.
- Talk to youth about their passions, families, hobbies, and interests.
- Spend an equal amount of time with youth in all areas of your facility.
- Catch young people doing something right and recognize them for it.

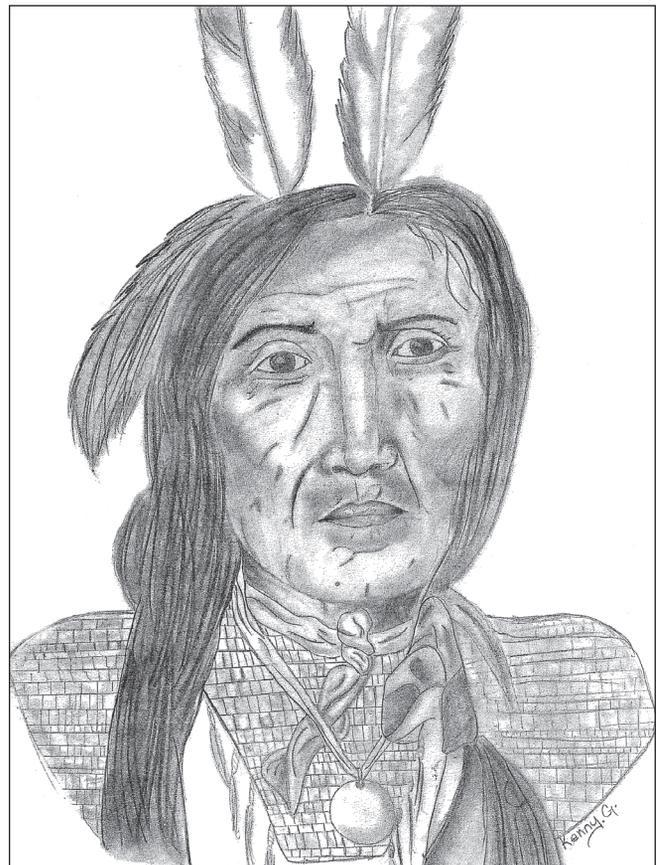
Behavior Management by Walking Around would encourage interactions at your setting based on relationship and not on control, intimidation, or regulation. We are teachers, group home staff, and youth care workers, not coercive despots.

When you finish reading this article, close down your computer for a while and take a walk. Walk around, talk to, and listen to the young people in your facility today. I am confident that Behavior Management by Walking Around may have a positive impact on the quality of care you provide to youth.

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