

Management by Walking Around

By Colm McCormack, February 2009.

Why Bother? Are You a Busy Fool?

Why should *you* bother to get up off your ass and regularly tour the building, the warehouse, the delivery and shipping area? Aren't you too busy? But that's the danger: not knowing what is going on in all areas of your business can see you too busy managing the wrong things: you become a "Busy Fool". You should, as often as you can and without indulging in irritating micro-management-style techniques, step over the filters and barriers that stand between you and the people on the ground. Your direct reports will often not want to tell you certain things at certain times. They will often deliver news in a certain way. Go and find out for yourself: see reality without the sugar-coating.

Check Your Motivation

Far too many people see the concept of managing by walking around as an excuse to catch people out, to strike fear into their workers, to convey a sense of *I'm watching you all the time and I know exactly what you're up to*. If this is your motivation – don't bother: you'll only make things worse.

The Heart of the Matter

At the heart of managing by walking around should be mental *not* physical exercise. It's not about letting others see you walking around. It should be an opportunity for you to observe, to ask questions, to listen to suggestions, to see

problems up close and personal. You should be there to help – those you are observing *and* yourself – or to at least convey a willingness to aid rather than hinder.

But How do I Get Started?

This is a very common question. Some managers have never managed by walking around before or they've been locked away in their offices for years and don't know how to get started. Some – if truth be told – have behaved like moody jerks for too long to suddenly become the nice guy without causing wide spread alarm among their employees.

One of the first things I tell managers to do is up the friendliness factor. Take the simple step of saying *Hi* whenever you pass employees. Don't bury your head in a file or start reading when you see them coming toward you in the corridor. And say *Hi* outside of work too. You might see them in the parking lot, in the Mall – wherever – just say hi and acknowledge their existence. At work, if they don't see you, simply say out loud, "Good morning everyone". That's all: nothing fancy. You're simply breaking the ice and getting them use to the idea you want to interact with them.

Don't Rush it

Second, be patient. It takes time to generate trust and to put yourself across as being trustworthy. Obviously the type of organizational culture in place

will have a huge bearing upon the speed at which people start to go along with you. The history between management and the workers, the current economic and business climate – and more – all determine how smooth and how fast things move for you.¹

Be Honest With Yourself and With Others

Third, be genuine. Why are you doing this - simply to get info to hang them with? Be careful here: there's a world of difference between manipulation and motivation. Employees will instantly spot you as a fraud if you are on the manipulation track. You *should* be doing this to ensure that what you hear from your direct reports is the actual truth, to show employees that they can offer feedback to you directly, and more.

Remember, we all have the inbuilt ability to sense when someone is crawling, kissing our ass, etc. These people make our skins crawl. Leave honesty and genuineness out of management by walking around and you'll simply make things worse: you'd be better off doing nothing.

Dance Around the Issues: Don't Come Straight to the Point

Fourth, ask everyday-type questions. Information will come to you over time. Don't rush it. If you hear a worker has a child who is sick, for example, or plays for a soccer team, ask

a polite question about that. Be friendly, be genuine, and after a period of time people will start talking. Use active listening. You will find discussions on Active Listening in the first book in the "[Just Manage It!](#)" series – *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others*.

Far too many managers start walking around and become frustrated when workers seem to be deliberately covering things up, staying silent, upping their work rate as the manager passes by. These are all signs it is far too early to expect valuable feedback and a clear sign that trust is absent. Get them talking about everyday things first. People need to buy into the manager *before* they'll buy into the concept of telling him/her what's actually going on and how it might be fixed.

Tying it all Together: Two Things I Hate in Life

There are two things I hate in life: being treated like a fool, and not knowing what is going on when everyone else does. Refusing to manage by walking around leaves you open to both of these.

As a manager you should face some important facts about business and organizational life: People don't always report everything; some are afraid of you; some are afraid how you will react; some don't want to be seen as the ones delivering the bad news; some just don't care. But the end result is the same: whether wittingly or otherwise, you end up looking like a fool if everyone on the shop or office floor knows what's going on but you're issuing crazy instructions that fly in the

¹ For in-depth discussion on the importance of Context and the factors to look for, see the first book in the series: *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others*. Go to: www.ColmMcCormack.com for further details.

face of what everyone else can see as the reality. Don't walk yourself into the position of looking like a fool simply because you didn't bother to take a few minutes each day to observe and interact with your workers. On this point, go to my website at www.ColmMcCormack.com and read the article on [All Blame Migrates](#). You'll also find it as the title to chapter 3 in the first book of the series: *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others*. The main idea behind that management principle is that the absence of any upfront effort on the part of the manager will see him later managing the demands and constraints

that flow from his choice to take the lazy way out: blame will migrate to that manager. It is the same here with managing by walking around: a little upfront effort on your part – while seemingly bothersome at the outset – has the potential to save you months of fire-fighting and backtracking. It will also save you from hearing half-truths and looking like a fool. It will save you from seeing too limited a range of choices, from making the wrong decisions, from laying down the welcome mat for failure.

When it comes to management, you know the line: NONE are so blind as those who [**will not see**].



Colm McCormack has lectured in Management, Strategic Management, and Leadership on MBA and continuing education programs. He has consulted for numerous companies and Mentored business owners. He is the author of the "**Just Manage It!**" series of Business & Management books. Visit www.ColmMcCormack.com to download FREE chapters, to view key concepts and models, and to purchase Books from the series.