is managing by wandering around still relevant?

by Terrie M. Buckner

As administrators, sometimes we let ourselves get locked into the ‘front end’ of our buildings. There are phone calls to take, emails to answer, payments to post, and events to plan. It’s easy to find the day coming to a close and we haven’t even taken time to grab lunch or venture beyond the lobby of the building. Recently I recommended to a center administrator that she take the time to walk around her building and experience some of what her staff and families experience as they wind their way through the building to the classroom. She was quick to point out that she hadn’t seen the ‘back end’ of her building in weeks because she had so much to contend with in her front office. When I inquired about what was keeping her in her office so much she said, “Today I have nearly 100 e-mails to sort through, on-line food orders to place, a newsletter to write, a slow Internet connection, a parent complaint, and staff issues to deal with. I will never get out of this office today.” I couldn’t help thinking to myself, “How on earth can you manage a child care program from your office?” I remembered my days as a director and my favorite part of the day was always taking a stroll around the center to gather hugs from the children in each classroom and touch base with every employee in my building. I think they called it MBWA in my undergraduate business program — “Management By Wandering Around.”

Is the MBWA method of management from the ‘80s still relevant today? I remembered reading in Tom Peters’ book, In Search of Excellence (1984) about how Walt Disney had a way of showing up unexpectedly to test his rides and personally experience what guests at Disneyland experienced. He didn’t stop there; he also went behind the scenes to talk with the support staff who kept things running. If Walt Disney were here today in this fast paced world full of e-mail and the Internet, would he still be able to find the time to walk around his theme park and test the Disney experience? Would he still find time to personally talk to his people and to his customers? In this era of the “www.” is there still room for “MBWA?”

The temptation is for the administrator to stay in the office and imagine that she or he has a hold on reality. The truth is, from the front office you are distanced from the details and somewhat out of touch with your people and customers. You only get a shadow picture of reality and what is truly happening in the hallways and classrooms of your center. Remote from the details, you miss an opportunity to see the interactions between an anxious first-time mom dropping off her crying child and a teacher’s open arms welcoming him to the classroom. You don’t see your newest hire agree to give a child his medicine without reminding dad to fill out the medication form. You...
don’t see the staff member with a child in the military quietly weeping as she rocks someone else’s child. The reality of these events and interactions fill in the details of the picture of your center.

Management by Wandering Around requires more than just making personal contact. It also requires that managers constantly monitor their customers’ experience. One way to do this is to use your five senses: Stand quietly and get in touch with your senses, what do you hear, see, feel, smell, and taste? Is it pleasing to the senses? The five senses test provides much more detail than the shadow picture from the office ever can. We learn through our senses and this provides the better picture, the details of what the experience is really like. In the shadow picture you don’t see where the tape has pulled paint off the walls and you need to have some touch-up work done. You don’t smell lunch being made, or hear the frustration in a teacher’s voice. Disney never delegated this responsibility.

The idea behind the MBWA philosophy is quite simple. Effective managers know what is happening in their organizations; they are ‘in touch’ with the staff, customers, and the workplace. Rather than isolating themselves in an office away from the people, managers purposefully and consciously make time to wander through their organizations to talk with others and to discover things that might help improve the organization’s operations (Patterson, 2007). In the 1980s it was discovered that companies that engage and interact with employees and customers are more successful than those with isolated management (Linowes, 2004). It is this practice that makes leadership more effective in many well run organizations, both large and small. It encourages top managers, to be out of their offices, working on building relationships, motivating and keeping in touch with the activities of the organization.

Here are a few tips to assist you as you Manage By Wandering Around:

- Do it to everyone, including parents and support staff . . . it shows you value every customer and employee and their contribution to your program.
- Wander around often, even daily if you can, but at the very least once a week. It reveals your interest in your people and your clients, and it says you don’t consider yourself ‘too good’ to spend time with them.
- Vary the time that you walk around so you experience all parts of the day.
- Relax as you make your rounds; people will reflect your feelings and actions.
- Remain open and responsive to questions and concerns.
- Observe and listen and let everyone see you do it.
- Make certain your visits are spontaneous and unplanned.
- Talk with employees about their passions, whether it is family, hobbies, vacations, or sports.
- Ask for suggestions to improve operations, service, and care.
- Try to spend an equal amount of time in all areas of your program including the kitchen and the bus.
- Catch your employees doing something right and recognize them publicly.
- Convey the image of a coach, not an inspector.
- Encourage your employees to show you how the real work gets done; try it yourself — read a story, serve a snack, or change a diaper.
- Be available for impromptu discussions.
- Bring good news — give them the good news, increase their confidence, and brighten their outlook.

The idea is that as administrators begin talking to individuals, they learn about problems and concerns first hand. At the same time they should teach employees new methods to manage particular problems, and deal with customer concerns quickly and efficiently. The communication goes both ways.

Being out and about you hear and see things you otherwise wouldn’t hear or see. Being out and about prompts you to ask questions and listen to answers, improving your communication and listening skills. Managers begin obtaining better information and making better decisions. Staff and managers begin working as teams and performance improves (Welch, 2006). Many problems won’t go away with a first effort, but being out and about with your people allows you to get their input and you will find yourself
following up and addressing problems and testing solutions (Gleeson, 2003).

MBWA does not propose that managers wander around aimlessly without purpose, but rather hunt for and enjoy chatting with the people who make up the organization. The idea is not to micro-manage; but to nurture informal communication, build trust and relationships as the manager’s knowledge about workings of their program increases. Managers can convey their expectations in daily, informal meetings. It allows the manager to communicate organizational values and philosophy at a personal level which helps build trust and relationships (Linowes, 2004).

At first, employees may suspect it is an excuse for the administrator to spy on them or interfere in some way. This suspicion usually fades if the ‘walkabouts’ occur regularly and if everyone can see the benefits. They learn first hand what is expected and required of them and what they can do to be successful. In addition, they get a real sense of ‘how they are doing’ at this point in time. Informal conversations become the basis for trust building with regular customers as they get to know the administrator. This lets them know there is someone in management who cares about their experience with the organization, cares about them as a person, and cares about their child. MBWA has been found to be particularly helpful when an organization-wide change has occurred, for instance after a policy change that has the potential to affect both staff and customers (Liff, 2007).

As to my original question, “Is MBWA still relevant in today’s child care programs?” “Yes.” We still need administrators to experience their programs first hand, to be close to the details. What does it smell like, sound like, look like, feel like, and how did lunch taste today? Why didn’t the children eat the chicken and rice the new cook made? What is it like to request your child be given medication for the first time? We still need administrators to build trusting relationships with their staff and customers. We need that anxious first-time mom to hear directly from the center administrator that she was just in her child’s classroom and he is finger painting with his new friends. The director needs to know her infant teacher’s youngest son was just sent overseas by the military. I imagine if Walt Disney were here, he would know all of this and even more.

**References**


