Management by Walking Around
MWBA in a virtual world

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September 2011
**Introduction**

Management by Walking Around or MBWA as it is often called is one of the best-known and most enduring management techniques. The Hewlett-Packard Company, among others, built its phenomenal success on MBWA, and top management gurus like Tom Peters cite it as one of their favorites. By its nature, MBWA encourages project success by enhancing a manager’s capability to maintain both visibility and control of teams and their members, and thus opening the door for optimization.

Since the 1980s when MBWA first started to attract widespread attention, one thing has not changed: projects must succeed. However, the context in which those projects are accomplished has been transformed by increased sophistication and complexity, as well as the arrival in force of the virtual or distributed team. Some of the factors that made MBWA so effective are being challenged by an environment now structured over the Internet and often over varying time zones.

Can the benefits of Management by Walking Around now also be had in a virtual world? What do current tools or methods offer? And what, conceptually, should “Virtual World MBWA” look like, if it is to continue to bring the visibility, control and optimization of projects so crucial to good management?

In this white paper, we describe briefly the origins of MBWA, why and how it started; we then compare with solutions that organizations have been trying to overcome its limitations, and explore the likely features of a next generation, virtual world MBWA solution.

“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)

**History of MBWA**

Management by Walking Around is not the brainchild of any one company. As a management technique, its earliest appearance may have been in organizations like NASA. Similarities with Japanese management methods have also been remarked, notably Genchi Genbutsu, (meaning “Go and See”). Management consultants Tom Peters and Robert Waterman mention MBWA in their popular book, “In Search of Excellence”, in connection with the Hewlett-Packard Company.

a. **Why MBWA was started at HP**

MBWA was originally applied by William Hewlett and David Packard as a means of boosting morale within their company. After its initial success, they continued by embedding it into the culture of the enterprise. In 1980, when HP was a $1 billion company and a new entrant into the world of IT, Peters and Waterman interviewed then HP president John Young, who “explained that HP’s hallmark ‘MBWA’ was ‘more important than ever as we experience explosive growth.’ "

b. The conceptual purpose of MBWA

From simple morale booster, MBWA developed into a technique for checking with teams about the status of work in progress, by walking around a workplace, or workplaces, in an impromptu way. By randomly visiting different departments, the manager in charge can discover and fix problems earlier and more efficiently. Communication is spontaneous and bi-directional, and on-the-job coaching is also possible. These characteristics differentiate MBWA from remote management where only the problems reported by employees are dealt with, and often only within the structure of formal meetings. By initiating informal, unstructured contacts using MBWA, managers can gain in:

- **Visibility.** Identify early warning signs before a disaster strikes.
- **Control.** Clearly communicate what must be done and verify progress.
- **Optimization.** Ensure the use of best practices.

c. Impact of and quantitative results from MBWA

The positive impacts of Management by Walking Around for an organization as a whole include:

- **Knowledge of the business.** Managers understand better how the business is structured, which helps them to make better decisions.
- **Trust.** Informal encounters are also opportunities to build rapport and earn trust, making it easier to share information.
- **Morale.** Having managers who listen and who take a visible interest in a project is an important factor in team enthusiasm and individual team member job satisfaction.
- **Productivity.** Frequent interaction helps agreements to be respected and project stages to be completed on time.
- **Progress.** Informal encounters can generate many ideas for improvement, and encourage people to discuss and suggest such ideas.

At HP, the engineering background of Hewlett and Packard meant it was natural for them to want to measure the effects of MBWA.
In addition to teams working faster and more efficiently to generate better results, HP also saw that managers who more frequently engaged their teams were also re-evaluating decisions and reprioritizing risks and issues earlier in the project.

II. Limitations of MBWA

Effective as it is, Management by Walking Around also has its limitations. Some of them are inherent in the technique itself. As the section on the results from MBWA indicates for instance, morale improves as MBWA frequency increases, but only up to a certain point. After weekly contacts from managers, morale wanes slightly when contacts become even more frequent – a case of too much of a good thing becoming a bad thing. Other limitations arise when the attempt is made to transpose MBWA into a virtual environment.

a. MBWA requires managers to physically be on-site

MBWA relies on impromptu contacts between managers and employees. It also relies on a positive and sufficiently deep relationship being established. Both of these factors mean that face to face presence is optimal. Other methods such as phone conversations or even video-conferencing are suboptimal: they lack either the spontaneity; or the depth of relationship; or both.

In a world of distributed and virtual teams, travel time increases rapidly if managers are to be physically on site. As a consequence, managers become less efficient and productive in terms of results achieved compared to total time spent.

b. It is time consuming and labor intensive

Managers must portion out what is their most precious and scarcest resource – time. There is a certain minimum level of time that must be spent in MBWA with an individual person. Below this level MBWA is not effective. In fact, its results may then be more negative than positive: the individual may perceive management attention as being token, superficial and possibly insincere. This level is different for different individuals, and a manager must therefore also make the effort to estimate the time necessary for each spontaneous contact.

Coaching and inculcating best practices, another part of MBWA, is also a time-consuming process, if it is to be done in a way that encourages employees to think for themselves and find solutions that are of benefit to the organization.

c. Executives do not have time to touch every person

Depending on the structure of the organization, executives will sooner or later run short of time as they try to apply MBWA at different levels of the organization. Invariably, there will be some selection of the employees who experience MBWA, if only because they are the first people the executive happens to meet. Not being able to apply MBWA evenly to the whole of the organization means that its direct benefits will not be experienced by all; and possibly that those who do not experience direct contacts with executives, or who experience less of them, will feel they are the targets of unjust exclusion and discrimination.
d. There is no system to record and measure this process

Although HP quantified the improvements attributed to MBWA, no standard system exists to gauge its effectiveness. Even if a manual system to record MBWA is possible, for example, with executives noting the different contacts they have during a working day, correlating these data to measurable, positive results may be difficult or not feasible. The numerous variables involved when MBWA is fully deployed complicate any analysis of effects on productivity or profitability, or on soft benefits such as employee job satisfaction. Surveys of a workforce might allow for some measurement of the receptivity of employees to MBWA as practiced in their organization, but no more.

Part of these issues stem from the random nature of MBWA. On-the-job coaching is an example. MBWA is not conceived to be systematic in its application of coaching: in fact, by definition, the reverse is true. There is no guarantee that an employee will benefit from any regular sequence of contacts with management, or even from any contact at all, making any measurement of effectiveness in this area a challenge.

III. Workarounds in use today for MBWA in a virtual world

Given the difficulties (dispersed employees, travel time, uneven or missing coverage) that the virtual world of today poses to MBWA, organizations have tried different workarounds with varying degrees of success.

a. Google Docs – working together to see real time work product

Tools such as Google Docs allow teams to work together from different geographical locations, producing documents and commenting on them. By the same token, managers and executives can also join in. The advantage is in the asynchronous nature of the interactions. Despite different time zones for example, executives can “visit” projects to add their own remarks. However, this asynchronicity also has its disadvantages. There is no real time contact, let alone face to face contact; yet at the same time an employee’s work is constantly exposed to the scrutiny of the executive, possibly robbing it of the spontaneity or constructive risk-taking that is often so beneficial to the progress of a project.

b. Skype and video conferencing

Skype with its Internet chat and phone functions brings back the real-time aspect, and to a certain extent the spontaneity if people mutually agree to leave Skype running on their PCs. It also has the advantage of letting individuals display information about themselves: a photo, a short description of who they are, what they do, and even what their general interests are. Additional information like this contributes to bringing back the informal, friendly nature of MBWA. Videoconferencing, for example, using the inbuilt cameras that many PC notebooks have nowadays and an Internet connection, is another way to recover some of the spontaneity. However, neither Skype nor videoconferencing facilitates the possibility of MBWA to move from an office to a corridor, or vice versa, or to make an informal but nevertheless effective contact at the coffee machine.
c. Project management software tools (e.g. Basecamp)

Structured project management is necessary, even when MBWA is being used. Web-based solutions like Basecamp bring advantages of central repositories for information, event scheduling and progress reports at predefined times – in other words, everything that MBWA does differently. Project management allows managers to control what is happening, but does not necessarily provide the visibility, insights or opportunities to optimize that MBWA can offer.

d. Quality assurance reviews on the mission critical projects

Quality assurance reviews, like project management, are necessary in any case, but do not replace MBWA. In such reviews, it is more difficult to find the opportunity for informal contacts, especially when the review is done with a team of individuals. The frequently formal nature of such reviews, and the fact that they are planned ahead of time, also remove the spontaneity of MBWA that lets employees benefit from constructive conversations with executives, and just as importantly, gives executives insights that may not be volunteered within the more rigid context of a formal review meeting.

IV. Conceptual solution to improve MBWA in a virtual world

Optimally, any virtual MBWA solution will maintain the benefits of MBWA, while overcoming its shortcomings in a virtual world. A virtual MBWA solution is also the opportunity to design a tool that incorporates the knowledge and best practices of project managers. This in-built intelligence can then be available for any manager or executive entering into a virtual MBWA contact.

a. Assess all projects with rapid, intelligent, Q/A reviews

Rapid Q/A reviews allow executives to bring in the beneficial informality of MBWA, while still working to a particular goal or process. To deal with the challenge of multiple projects and the need to optimize the use of the time of a manager or an executive, a constructive “cheat sheet” can be integrated to ask relevant questions and to probe areas which project team members themselves may have involuntarily ignored.

b. Allow managers to drill down into risk areas

An intelligent virtual MBWA tool will let managers drill down according to different criteria, such as the type of project, the phase of the project or the role responsibility. To verify the right standards are being observed and the right parameters tracked, checklists will be incorporated electronically for accessibility from any location. Analysis within the virtual MBWA tool of the current status of a project will allow managers to be prompted about which areas require particularly close attention.

c. Combine with existing one-to-one tools in use today

By using IT as the basis of a virtual MBWA tool or technique, there will be little or nothing that cannot be combined in terms of other IT tools, such as videoconferencing, chat or web phone calls. And of course, there will always be the option to be physically present at a site if circumstances allow it.
d. Manage and document process in a central repository

Although IT solutions cannot replace face to face contacts between human beings, they have the considerable advantage of allowing information to be centralized and secured for access only by those who have the required authority. Any supporting documents to Q/A review processes for example can also be stored with relevant change control mechanisms to ensure that everybody is working from the latest version.

Conclusion

Although a virtual world by definition limits possibilities of face to face contact, the other advantages of Management by Walking Around can be reproduced in a virtual MBWA tool. The conceptual solution shows how project managers and executives can continue to reap the benefits of visibility, control and optimization, even as teams expand and become more distributed. With this approach, the early operational insights that allow effective risk mitigation, and the increased likelihood of success that “traditional” MBWA brought will also be defining features of Management by Walking Around in a virtual world.

References:

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